



A CAPITAL IDEA

Communities are built from two sources of capital—one economic (money) and the other social (participation). Of the two, social capital is more fundamental. If social capital is lacking, communities turn inward, individuals isolate themselves from each other, distrust rules, and little common good can be achieved. Economic decline usually follows. Simply pouring money into the community doesn't help; it's a little like pouring water on desert sand—it sinks rapidly out of sight.

On the other hand, communities with high participation can attract capital, which further multiplies through their collective efforts. Bottom line: A community's economic success depends on high participation. Face-to-face interaction, joint concerns, and common needs build bonds and weave the fabric of social capital that others can build upon. Each group achievement enriches others. Social capital tends to build upon itself.

A city with a successful downtown, a winning sports team, a thriving arts community, and growing suburbs and schools, is a place where citizens meet and know each other, where they volunteer for local causes and charities—where there's a high level of trust. This type of city attracts more jobs and amenities because it's a good place to live and work.

Robert Putnam, a professor at Harvard University and an advisor to *The American Promise*, has noted that communities can usually trace their success to a tradition or habit of social cooperation. Where networks of trust and habits of working cooperatively exist, favors and funds are exchanged readily, and a common outlook and achievements are possible. Putnam found a high correlation of social capital with choral groups and other group activi-

ties that bridge economic, social, race, neighborhood, and occupation barriers. Does harmony in the rehearsal hall extend to the whole community?

BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

If social capital makes our communities strong, how do we build social capital? Professor Benjamin Barber of the Walt Whitman Center at Rutgers University observes that trust is the key. First, distrust must be broken down or eliminated. People must be willing to work together and be able to count on each other. Next, step mechanisms must be created that bring people together and allow them to achieve success together: a ball park, a carousel, an ambulance service, a campaign against graffiti. Collective action begets social capital, but it must be visible to others as well as the group. Then they can join in. Economic capital is not far behind: investing in such a place makes sense.

A VOLUNTEER SOCIETY

As Alexis de Tocqueville noted more than 150 years ago, America is a nation of associations. Americans are eager to volunteer for this cause or that, for charity, culture, education, self-help, to preserve the town clock or develop a theater company for the disabled. This massive nonprofit sector is unique to the United States. In the rest of the world, hospitals, museums, charities, and the like are government-funded and managed.

In our diverse, immigrant society, perhaps it's a measure of our luck that from our beginnings as a nation and democracy volunteering has been a way of life—until recently. Since the 1970s, measures of our social capital have begun to show a decline. For instance, while the number of bowlers is increasing, the number of



bowling leagues has declined 40 percent. PTA membership is down. Red Cross membership has fallen 61 percent since 1970. Churchgoing is down as well. (On the increase are organizations such as the American Association of Retired Persons, groups of dues-paying members who rarely, if ever, meet face-to-face.)

According to Robert Putnam, this decline in social capital is the most serious problem facing us as a nation. How shall we respond? Should the government shoulder the responsibility of solving this problem? Or, should we—can we—return to the do-it-yourself spirit noted by de Tocqueville?

CLASSROOM SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital is critical to young people; in no small measure, it determines their chances in life. Economists Ann Case and Lawrence Katz have shown that, regardless of race, inner-city youth who live in neighborhoods that are blessed with high levels of social capital (church attendance, club activity, etc.) are more likely to finish school, have a job, and avoid drugs and crime.

Young people build social capital of their own through cliques and gangs as well as through the camaraderie of bands, clubs, and sports teams. Gangs and cliques band together against a common enemy, and trust is limited to the inner circle. On the other hand, school clubs extend trust and cohesion and contribute to the social capital of the entire community.

What makes one school good and another great? Great students? Great teachers? Great administration? Strong parent support? Or, to put it another way, high social capital—trust and cooperation that's invested in the school.

YOUR OWN SCHOOL/COMMUNITY SOCIAL CAPITAL AUDIT



Have your students conduct a schoolwide social capital audit.

Step 1

Have students survey each other as well as administrators, teachers, parents, and community agencies and ask: What do you contribute to our school that doesn't involve money? How often, over the course of a month, do you contribute to the school?

Step 2

Have students compile lists of contributions for each subgroup: students helping others, helping in office; teachers meeting students after hours, calling students at home; parents organizing a car wash for band, driving on field trips; administrators enlisting business support for schools.

Step 3

As a class, analyze and discuss the differences among subgroups. Discuss the range and variety of contributions to the school. Could the school manage without these contributions?

Step 4

If you had to hire people to do the jobs that volunteers do, what would it cost? What is this "social capital" worth in dollars and cents?