

Have You Checked Your Social Capital Lately? The Keystone Project

by *Eric C. Smith*

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Public institutions, including public schools, depend on reserves of capital not only to survive, but also to prosper. It goes without saying that adequate financial reserves and well-trained staff are critical to quality schools. If a school district has adequate funding and well-trained, experienced staff, what more is needed? Unfortunately, intense pressures for dollars and quality staff have allowed us to develop a 'blind spot' when it comes to what constitutes 'capital' assets. As educators, we have bought into the popular notion that more money solves all problems. Government, media, boards of education, and interest groups have narrowed their definition of capital to include only 'budget development' and the dollars that feed those budgets. We have become a society that equates quality with a one-on-one relationship with the dollar. The argument we use to convince the public to provide our needed funding is to say, "Support us financially, then we will make your schools great."

This statement -- send us your money, then we will be great -- is what social capital and the Keystone Project is all about. However, the message of social capital is just the opposite. Social capital would say, "We are working hard to build great schools, now send us your money." In other words, a reserve of social capital is needed before the public will support education, not after. Translated further, we can say with some certainty that:

- a public institution that enjoys high levels of social capital is more likely to be better supported financially;
- social capital is a commodity that can and should be addressed as a priority equal to that of financial and human capital; and
- the building of social capital needs to precede the building of financial and human capital.

Building social capital is the gateway through which financial and human capital is created. Consider this example. *Business owner A contacts the school about having students come in to visit her business to learn about modern accounting techniques. Teacher A responds immediately, and a program is established. The teacher gets a new resource to help his students, the students get real life experiences, and the business owner feels great that she was able to contribute to the students' education.* Do not, however, forget the ultimate beneficiary of this exchange, the community. The community benefits from students who are well educated and who have a much stronger sense of how accounting is practiced in today's world.

Now run this scene forward a year. The school district seeks additional funding for new classrooms. The business owner gladly supports the increased funding and, perhaps, is even

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willing to help with the campaign. This is a classic example of how social capital can contribute to the financial bottom line of a school district. It also is easy to see that a reverse example, one that diminishes social capital, has the opposite affect on financial capital. *The business owner contacts teacher A about students visiting her office. Teacher A ignores the request. The next year, the business owner not only does not vote for increased school support, she campaigns against it.*

Examples of the strength of social capital are everywhere. Social capital is built when schools network with community organizations, when school-community partnership programs provide lifelong learning opportunities for citizens, when the community is asked to help as volunteers, or when community residents feel that school board members and administrators are handling their money wisely. There are thousands of experiences, programs, connections, and trust-building opportunities that can either build or destroy a school district's social capital. Building social capital is an everyday reality.

If what we say about the importance of social capital is true, the obvious question becomes, "Is it possible for a school district, or any organization, to increase its social capital?" The answer is yes. This ability to increase social capital is the reason why the Keystone Project was created. The Keystone Project serves as a 'road map' for educators to use in creating strong, lasting connections between schools and the communities they serve. Keystone serves a very useful purpose by helping define the process as well as providing district-specific workshops, training, and planning and assessment activities. Information about the Keystone Project and its program to assist local school districts with workshops and leadership training activities can be found at www.keystone-community.org. This web site also provides links to important organizations that have a good track record in helping school districts and communities strengthen school-community partnerships.

The name 'keystone' is an important symbol for this effort. The keystone is the stone that keeps the arch from falling. Most ancient arches were built without mortar or fastening devices, yet have supported great weight for hundreds of years. Travelers to France and Italy still can see the massive aqueducts built by Romans two thousand years ago. To visualize the arch as a model for building social capital, one side of the arch is the school district; the other side is the community. At the top is the keystone, which represents a school district's social capital. As resources from the community flow through this arch to the schools, these resources must pass through this 'keystone' of social capital. In turn, services of the school (education of youth) return as a benefit to the community. This ebb and flow of resources and services between school and community is constantly regulated by the district's level of social capital (trust, connections, networks, reciprocal relationships, commitment to mutual benefit) that is present between school and community.

The Keystone model draws primarily from three important sources. One is the theory and practice of Community Education, the second is John Gardner's work on community renewal, and third is the writings and work of social capital. Community Education provides excellent experience and resources on how a school district can develop policy and a district structure that allow for maximum collaboration between school and community. A sound Community Education structure addresses issues of leadership, open use of facilities by the community,

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lifelong learning, and inter-agency collaboration. John Gardner and his contributions to community renewal came from a lifetime of service that many consider unparalleled in modern times. Regarded by many as one of America's greatest statesmen, John Gardner served as Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under the Johnson administration, was the founder of Common Cause, and served as chairperson of the National Urban Coalition and the National Civic League. Those interested in his writings and work can contact the National Civic League.

Even in the 1980s, Gardner saw the trends emerging in our communities that spoke of diversity, change, and individual freedom. He was correct in saying that we should acknowledge and honor our past with its many homogenous communities (race, religion, culture), but we need to move on. As we reflect on these changes, we realize Gardner was not just talking about our cities. In Elaine Johnson's article about Marshalltown, Iowa, she notes the increase in the Hispanic population from approximately 3 percent in 1993 to more than 25 percent in 2003. In the communities, both large and small, with which I have worked, these demographic trends are the norm, not the exception.

In Gardner's dialog with the Mott Foundation leadership network in 1994, he cited important 'attributes' of a modern community. His first attribute, that of 'wholeness incorporating diversity,' sets the tone for all the others. In our communities, we must see diversity as an opportunity, not a problem. We must find ways to celebrate community. Moreover, we must find ways to ensure opportunity for all to participate. Gardner would say that a community program should not be organized unless it can be shown that all residents have an opportunity to participate.

The third major contribution to the Keystone Project is, of course, social capital. The article in this journal by Todd Berry presents a great overview of social capital. For those interested in learning more about social capital, the best single source of information is the book, *Bowling Alone*, by Robert Putnam (2000).

The value of the Keystone project is its holistic approach to defining school-community partnerships. It helps educators and communities define important questions. What must a school district do to increase its social capital? What are the policies that need to be in place that encourage stronger school-community partnerships? Are there school-community partnership programs that build social capital? What type of training is needed to help educators and community residents understand the currency of social capital (person-to-person connections, networking, and trust building)? Finally, how can a school district assess its current level of social capital and begin to build higher levels of social capital? School districts that take on the challenge to build stronger partnerships between school and community are taking on a lifestyle, not developing a program. School districts that enjoy high levels of social capital see this much more as a way they do business than as a specific public relations strategy. Schools are a critical part of the life of our communities. This journey is important, not only to the quality of our schools, but to the quality of our communities.

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Dr. Eric C. Smith is a lifelong community educator. Dr. Smith was director of Community Education in a small town in central Michigan for four years before becoming a Mott Fellow in Flint, Michigan, in 1973. After graduating with his doctorate in educational leadership from Western Michigan University, Dr. Smith became the first director of the Mankato State University (MN) Community Education Center. From there, he became Wisconsin's first state department coordinator for Community Education, serving in that position from 1977-1990. In 1993, he received NCEA's State Association Leadership Award. Currently, Dr. Smith continues his work in Community Education and in designing and developing the Keystone Project.