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## Bonding and Bridging

Schools open doors for students by building social capital

by LAURA PAPPANO

*Students from Benjamin Franklin Intermediate School in a financial apprenticeship class at Goldman Sachs in San Francisco. (Citizen Schools)*

Three years ago, J. Michael Wyss, a cell biology professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, entered G. W. Carver High School and derailed Curtis Jones' life plan. Wyss, who is also the director of the university's Center for Community OutReach Development, needed an intern for a research project. Even though he already had 80 applications in hand for 20 spots, he hoped to give the opportunity to a student outside the usual network that feeds top science students to university labs.

"One of the teachers said, 'There is someone who is on no one's radar screen,'" Wyss recalls. Biology teacher Vashone Todd put him in touch with Jones, a junior who ranked second in his class. Sure enough, Jones was envisioning a future more in line with expectations in his North Birmingham neighborhood, where nearly one in three households lives below the poverty line. "I told myself I would do some type of manual labor," says Jones, "like factory work."

It took serious pushing from Todd for Jones to consider the research internship opportunity. Without knowing any scientists personally, Jones says, "I was not sure I would be able to function in that kind of environment."

What's striking about Jones' experience—his project, "Does a Protein Behave Similarly When Expressed in Different Cell Lines?" earned a top prize at the 2007 Central Alabama Regional Science and Engineering Fair and an invitation to the Intel International Fair—is how this key connection set him on a completely new life course. Today, he is a junior at West Point, the United States Military Academy, with plans to become a chemical engineer.

### More Than What You Know

Education reform and the quest for equity have centered on content: What must kids learn? There is growing realization, however, that success depends on more than what kids know. Increasingly, school leaders are talking about "social capital" as a key ingredient in broadening opportunities, making classroom work relevant, and laying a foundation for college. In the plainest sense, they are speaking about the social advantages that provide middle-class students a blueprint for success.

School leaders say building social capital—helping students forge connections while developing people skills, polish, and savvy about how things work in the professional world—can give students a vision of possibility for their future and the confidence to try new things. This is not just about raising test scores, but about changing lives.

The concept of social capital has been around for decades but has been most popularly discussed among academics since the 1980s. The late French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu and the late American sociologist James S. Coleman are oft-cited sources who frame social capital as the function of social structures that produce, enforce, and replicate advantage for some groups and individuals. Rather than being a single, fixed entity, they say, social capital represents the interaction of multiple forces, including circles of trust, class norms, and organizational (even professional) connections.

### Limited Networks

Critics point to education reform's shortfalls and note the failure of leaders to recognize social circumstances that may limit reform agendas.

"Benchmarks are nice, but the reality is that in schools, we've got to do more than improve kids' test-taking ability," says Mark E. LaGory, professor and chair of the sociology department at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. "Those who are very poor tend not to have the kind of social networks that bridge them to other sets of resources in society. Unless kids are exposed to new ideas, new values, new opportunities, they will never get out of the situations they find themselves in."

Several studies tracking social connections among poor students and families demonstrate how limited networks can narrow opportunities. For example, a 1998 study by Xavier de Souza Briggs, associate professor of sociology and urban planning at the MIT School of Architecture who is on a 2-year leave to serve as associate director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, followed 132 low-income African American and Latino teens and found that more than one-quarter of the teens could not think of a single adult in their lives outside their households who would be a good source of job information.

Research has also revealed different types of networks. A 2003 study by Erin McNamara Horvat, associate professor of urban education at Temple University, and colleagues identified class-based differences in parent networks. The study of 88 third and fourth graders and their families showed that among middle-class families, networks were built around children's activities, while among working-class and poor families, networks were rooted in kinship ties. The authors observed that, "middle-class parents, largely as a result of their network ties, have considerably greater resources at their disposal," particularly when dealing with problems at school. For example, middle-class parents may know psychologists who can give formal or informal advice.

The research also showed that for all families, a child's out-of-school activities were the key to building parent connections. But while middle-class children on average participated in five such activities, working-class children participated in three, and poor children in just under two. In an interview, Horvat also noted that school practices such as the failure to publish family directories can work against the creation of parent-to-parent connections by making it harder for parents and students to make contacts outside of school.

### **Two Kinds of Connections**

Within the broader concept of social capital, sociologists describe "bonding" and "bridging" as two primary types of connection-making activities. Bonding describes friendship, family, and community ties, including people who can provide logistical and emotional support; bridging is about reaching out to involve people and organizations that can provide access to different networks. It was Curtis Jones' close relationship with his biology teacher, Todd, for example, which finally convinced him to try the science internship. Todd also provided the bridge by recommending Jones for Wyss' internship.

Like Todd, teachers and principals interested in helping students build social capital must first recognize the limited scope of their students' experiences. It wasn't until Barbara Fillhart, principal of the Sligh Middle School in Tampa, Florida, went to install desktop computers in students' homes as part of a corporate-sponsored program that she got a glimpse of her pupils' home lives. "You listen to kids and you understand they are poor, but to go into their homes and see how they live—this is not like any of us who are working," she says.

Just talking about college, she realized, would not make students consider it an attainable goal. So she started having staff post the names and mascots of their alma maters outside their classrooms. She organized trips to visit local universities and made every Monday "college day" for dressing in clothes with college names and colors.

Michael J. Boraz, assistant principal at Kenwood Academy High School in Chicago, says one of their key bridging activities is with the school's own alumni—and not the superstars. "The biggest thing is when the kids who were knuckleheads when they were here come back and talk about their college experience," says Boraz. "The kids know who was trying to be cool and not doing what they should be doing. They have their own social capital. When those kids come back and say, 'Yeah, college is where it's at. You can do it because I did.' That has a lot of impact."

### **Expose, Teach, Experience**

Schools with active approaches to building social capital tend to include three elements: exposure, explicit teaching, and experience. Exposure connects students to people with new views, backgrounds, and ideas. Explicit teaching spells out and models for students precisely what they need to fit into a different learning and working environment. And the experience piece gives students a chance to practice those skills.

Efforts to build social capital look different in different schools and can range from homegrown programs and clubs to more formal partnerships and ongoing apprenticeships with community organizations and businesses.

Two years ago, principal James Parrish III of Benjamin Franklin Intermediate School in Daly City, California, began partnering with Citizen Schools, a nonprofit that uses afterschool "apprenticeships" to connect students with citizens who teach real-life skills—and the social expectations to go with them. "Having our inner-city youth exposed to corporate America at one of its highest levels is an incredible experience," says Parrish, describing students in a finance apprenticeship who meet weekly with wealth management experts at Goldman Sachs in San Francisco.

Last year, the Franklin Middle Magnet School in Tampa, Florida, partnered with The First Tee, a national program with a curriculum that explicitly teaches personal skills, from how to properly shake hands to strategies for handling setbacks. In addition, principal Joseph Brown says the school now partners with a local metal-fabricating company, which pairs its management team and sales force with students for a golf tournament, giving students the chance to practice social and athletic skills.

The school, whose focus is on law and criminal justice, also partners with a local bar association and law firms so students meet

regularly with volunteer lawyers and visit local courtrooms. Brown says one trip, in which students met with an African American federal appellate court judge, made a particular impression. "He shared that he never knew his dad, and his mother was a maid at a hotel," recalls Brown. "He said, 'I grew up dirt poor, and look at me, I'm a federal judge.'"

At the Center for Community OutReach Development, what began as a \$500,000 investment to give public school students access to new career paths to the region's biomedical industry is now a grand partnership with a budget of \$3.5 million, which includes bringing 6,000 middle and high school students to a state-of-the-art lab for hands-on research. As Wyss sees it, the initiative is less a progressive deployment of resources than a thrust at survival. "The old labor jobs that simply didn't require education are gone," he says. "We won't be competitive if we don't do something."

Jones looks at it a bit differently. "Whenever I come home, I kind of look back at what would have happened," he said while on summer leave. "If the people looking out for me weren't there, I don't think I would be on this track right now."

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Citizen Schools at Ben Franklin Intermediate School, Daly City, CA: [www.citizenschools.org/california/ben.cfm](http://www.citizenschools.org/california/ben.cfm)

J. S. Coleman. "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital." *American Journal of Sociology* 94 supplement (1988): S95–S120.

X. De Souza Briggs. "Brown Kids in White Suburbs: Housing Mobility and the Many Faces of Social Capital." *Housing Policy Debate* 9, no. 1 (1998): 177-221. Available online in PDF at: [www.mi.vt.edu/data/files/hpd\\_9\(1\)/hpd\\_9\(1\)\\_briggs.pdf](http://www.mi.vt.edu/data/files/hpd_9(1)/hpd_9(1)_briggs.pdf)

Kenwood Academy High School, Chicago, IL: [www.kenwoodacademy.org](http://www.kenwoodacademy.org)

E. McNamara Horvat, E. B. Weininger, and A. Lareau. "From Social Ties to Social Capital: Class Differences in the Relations Between Schools and Parent Networks." *American Educational Research Journal* 40, no. 2 (2003): 319–351.

Sligh Middle School, Tampa, FL: <http://sligh.mysdhc.org>

The First Tee: [www.thefirsttee.org](http://www.thefirsttee.org)

University of Alabama at Birmingham Center for Community Outreach Development (CORD): [www.uab.edu/uasom/research/html/cord.htm](http://www.uab.edu/uasom/research/html/cord.htm)

