

YOUTH AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

To each generation of adults, the phrase “America’s youth” evokes powerful and contradictory images. On the one hand, we might think of the Columbine High School shooters and gangbangers, couch potatoes, video game addicts, slouches and slackers. But we are just as likely to see soccer players, software entrepreneurs, environmental activists, hip-hop artists, Scouts, and workers in the family business. Whether good or bad, the prevailing images or stereotypes of young people often say as much about the communities in which youths are coming of age as about the young people themselves.

Adult society all too frequently overlooks young people, except when they get into trouble. Young people want what everyone else wants: affiliation, community, solidarity, respect, success, and opportunity. Whether those needs are provided by gangs – or conversely by schools, houses of worship, and sports leagues – is up to us as a society. And the choice we make has short- and long-term ramifications. The nature of the social capital available to young people influences how well they learn, the odds that they will attend college, whether they commit crimes, and the likelihood that they will do drugs or commit suicide. In a nation that prides itself on constant reinvention, young people represent the promise of a stronger America, and their well-being is a leading indicator of the long-term health of our communities. As our young people go, so goes our nation.

Because young people embody our hopes and carry out our dreams, they and the organizations of which they are a part must be at the center of efforts to rebuild social capital. In this chapter, we focus on those young people between the ages of 10 and 21, because they are old enough to understand civic obligations but still young enough to be forming civic habits. Young people have a role as targets of community-building work and as active leaders and participants in it. Just as we don’t expect adult proficiency in any field without years of practice, we cannot expect young people to create a better community without first having learned the skills and *habits of the heart* necessary to civic engagement. Sadly, however, children and teenagers are too rarely included in American civic life, either in decision-making or contributing roles. American youth-focused institutions, such as schools and after-school programs, are not generally designed to solicit young people’s input on issues of governance, program development, or problem solving. This lapse translates into thousands of squandered opportunities to prepare the next generation of social capitalists. It will take a major shift in attitude and practice to create a lifelong pathway of civic engagement.

Role of Schools, Youth Organizations, and Families in Building Social Capital

Most American young people are embedded in three types of communities: school, extracurricular groups (which include religious communities, clubs and sports leagues, and informal communities of friends), and the family. It is in these three categories of places that young people meet and associate with the most important people in their lives: parents, siblings, friends, coaches, teachers, and mentors. And it is in these places that young people learn what is expected of them and what to expect from others, especially adults. In short, it is in these places that young people learn powerful lessons, both good and bad, about the role of the individual in

society. These three communities all create and depend on social capital and depend upon it. A school, for example, teaches about public affairs and provides a springboard for volunteering in the community; at the same time, how well the school performs these educational and civic functions depends crucially on the involvement and cooperation of parents and community organizations.

Schools and Social Capital. Schools encourage civic engagement in myriad ways. First, and most obviously, schools teach the basic skills necessary to participate in civic life: reading, writing, public speaking, teamwork, and project organizing. Research going back more than a half-century has consistently found a strong, direct relationship between education and civic participation. A higher level of education, more than income or any other characteristic, affects the likelihood of participating in civic affairs. More education equals more participation. Second, schools are where students learn how American democracy works. In the classroom, children learn (or should) about the people and structures that make up our federal system of government and about the various ways – such as voting – that citizens are expected to contribute and exercise influence. Third, children participate in a peer culture at school that profoundly shapes their values and relationships. Fourth, schools sponsor programs that provide hands-on training in civic participation. Besides the traditional array of student-run clubs (debate society, student government, Spanish club, and so forth), schools in record numbers are sponsoring programs to link students to their communities. Roughly half of all public elementary, middle, and high schools require students to participate in community service,¹ and the fraction of religious schools requiring service may be higher. School-based “service-learning” programs provide students with a role in improving the wider community while frequently asking them to reflect on their experience.

Extracurricular Activities and Social Capital. When they aren’t in class, young people often are interacting with friends, teammates, fellow club members, and co-workers. Young people’s social universe increasingly mirrors that of adults. It is a community of choice, rather than circumstance. As young people seem to grow up faster and more independently than their parents did, we as a society need to pay attention to the lessons propagated by these communities of choice. We need to ask tough questions. Is the youth hockey program teaching a social-capital-friendly ethic of teamwork, or a destructive ethic of winning-at-all-costs? Is the after-school job teaching responsibility and building community – or is it merely providing cash to fuel a selfish materialism? Are “virtual” friends in Internet chat rooms offering the same benefits as friends in face-to-face organizations? The truth is, we know far more about the quantity of youthful engagement than we know about its quality.

Families and Social Capital. The American family is an important incubator of social capital. It is in families that young people ideally learn to share, cooperate, and contribute to a common good. Families are, in a sense, small communities in which norms of reciprocity and responsibility are most firmly inculcated. Families – whether traditional, non-traditional, blended, or extended – also provide powerful role models. Having parents who participate is one of the best indicators of whether a young person will go on to vote, join community groups, or otherwise participate in the community.

Trends in Youth Engagement

Much as parents love their children, the older generation always has viewed the younger generation with a mix of hope and alarm. On the one hand, adults hope their children will improve upon the society they have inherited. On the other hand, each generation of young people seems all too willing to discard tradition, embrace individualism, and chart its own course. How well the younger generation lives up to the expectations of its parents, or to its own goals, is a question to which every generation, sooner or later, turns its attention.

With respect to the present generation of young people, sometimes written off as a group of apathetic “slackers” the reality is slightly better than the perception. On the positive side, young adults today are more likely to volunteer than were young adults at any time over the past 25 years. Both the fraction of adults under 30 who volunteer and the average number of times they volunteer per year have increased significantly over the past generation.² A recent study showed that, in just three years, the percentage of high-school-aged volunteers increased by 10%, to 55% of all students.³ This service ethic needs to be nurtured and used as the foundation for other forms of social capital and civic engagement.

On the negative side, by every other indicator of civic-mindedness, the younger generation is providing little cause for hope. Just like their parents, young adults are tuning out of civic affairs. Not only do today’s young adults participate less than older adults, but the younger set also participates far less than did its same-age counterparts 10 or 20 years ago.

Consider some sobering findings. Every year since the mid-1960s, the University of California at Los Angeles has surveyed a nationally representative sample of college freshmen to gauge their values and priorities. In the mid-1960s, these young adults were significantly more interested in keeping up-to-date with politics than they were in making money. Today, those priorities are dramatically reversed. Roughly three-quarters of college freshmen in the late 1990s said that being “very well-off financially” is a “very important” personal goal; by contrast, fewer than one-third rated as “very important” such civic-minded activities as keeping up with politics, being involved in community action, or helping to clean up the environment. Young adults have also become much less likely to trust other people, less likely to support charities, less likely to vote (and less likely to feel guilty about avoiding the polls), less likely to attend community meetings, less likely to attend houses of worship, and less likely to keep up with public affairs.⁴ There are many theories for why the younger generation has dropped out of civic life: the rise in entertainment technology, such as television, video games, and computers; the selfish values allegedly perpetuated by Boomer parents; the perception that America is humming along and so we can turn our attention to private pursuits; and so forth. There may be truth to these explanations, among others. But, whatever the reason for their apathy, we cannot ignore the fact that young people are a reflection of who we are as a society and a portent of where we are headed. These youthful indicators should dampen our optimism about increased youth volunteering.

Further, it is not merely civic indicators that are down. Young people are far less likely to seek and find social capital in informal settings, such as in the family home or the neighborhood, than were young people a generation ago. Surveys show that the major forms of family togetherness

are all in decline. Most notably, the family meal is quickly becoming a thing of the past. In the past decade or two, surveys of both parents and kids have revealed a steady decline of more than one third in the frequency with which families eat dinner together. As political scientist Robert Putnam has noted: “Since the evening meal has been a communal experience in virtually all societies for a very long time, the fact that it has visibly diminished in the course of a single generation in our country is remarkable evidence of how rapidly our social connectedness has been changing.”⁵ The end of the family meal is only one of many ominous indicators. Among families with children aged 8 to 17, there has been a drop of roughly 20-30% over just 20 years in the fraction of people who vacation together as a family, watch TV together, attend religious services together, and “just sit and talk” together.⁶ Indeed, sociologists have found recently that the average American teenager spends more time alone than with family and friends.⁷

Perhaps as a result of this social isolation, the rates of unhappiness, malaise, depression, and even suicide have increased dramatically among young people.⁸ Although suicide has steadily declined among people over 45, it has increased dramatically among people under 35. People born and raised in the 1970s and 1980s were three to four times as likely to commit suicide as were people who came of age in the 1950s.⁹ That is not to say that all the news is so dire. In part because of increased prosperity and better public education programs, children’s lives have improved in many ways. Compared to a decade ago, young people are less likely to live in poverty (although a fifth still do), less likely to become teenage parents, less likely to be involved in crime or to go hungry; and they are more likely to be enrolled in early-education programs and to get immunized. Doing things *for* our children has risen, even as doing things *with* them has declined. It is less clear whether these positive indicators will lead to similar improvements in these children’s sense of wellbeing and incorporation into community and civic life.

It will not be simple to reverse the generational downturn in civic engagement and social capital. Television and computer technology play a vital role in modern life, and they are here to stay. Likewise, there is little reason to believe that families will, or should, return to the domestic patterns of the 1950s, which drove many women to despair and gave rise to what Betty Friedan labeled “the problem that has no name.”¹⁰ The challenge to those concerned about dwindling social capital is to embrace the technological and social changes that have brought so much good in recent years, while finding new ways to create social-capital-rich environments for young people in spite of, and ideally because of, these changes. Again, the answer likely will come once we face up to the mismatch between what we expect of young people and the institutions that exist to help them fulfill their promise. As a society, we need to take a serious look at ways to increase the incentives for creating youth-oriented social capital and to remove the disincentives.

Promising Initiatives to Engage Young People

If we are to see a broad grassroots movement to reengage America, it will vitally involve today’s young people. Fortunately, the groundwork is being laid for precisely such involvement. With financial help from government and private philanthropy, a small cadre of visionaries has created and sustained a new set of organizations that are recruiting tens of thousands of young people in service to their communities, and in the process are instilling civic skills and an ethic of social responsibility. The community service movement, as the leaders refer to it, began with a few entrepreneurial service corps in the late-1970s and first half of the 1980s. The movement picked

up momentum in the early 1990s, with the passage of the federal legislation that created the highly successful AmeriCorps program, a domestic Peace Corps offering young adults a modest stipend and tuition benefit in exchange for a year's service to the community.

The AmeriCorps program, which engages more than 40,000 young people each year in 1,000 programs nationwide, has helped to make community service “hip.” The program has also provided organizational and psychic solidarity to 150,000 (and counting) of the nation's most civic-minded young people. Besides the effects on young people, the program has provided financial stability to youth-service corps and fueled the creation of state community-service commissions, which distribute much of the AmeriCorps funds.

Both with and without AmeriCorps money, national non-profit organizations have provided the infrastructure to keep the youth-service movement alive. Among the strongest of these organizations are service corps such as City Year, Public Allies, YouthBuild USA and the local and state members of the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps; groups that promote college-based volunteering, such as the Campus Outreach Opportunity League and the Campus Compact; traditional youth organizations, such as 4-H Clubs, Boys and Girls Clubs, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts; established non-profits that are shoring up their youth components, such as the Urban League and the American Red Cross; newer organizations that train teens for civic work, such as Youth on Board (which places young people on the governing boards of non-profit groups) and Magic Me (which places middle-school students in service to elderly and mentally disabled people); and umbrella groups like Youth Service America that helped conceptualize, mobilize, and shepherd this growing movement. Reaching audiences in the millions, organizations like 4-H are expanding and retooling their practices to engage suburban young people, while the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts are finding ways to appeal to inner-city teens or immigrants.

Alongside the community service movement are scores of other efforts, private and often informal, that have also found innovative ways to build social capital among young people. In many urban areas, for example, young people have organized poetry slams and hip-hop freestyle sessions, set up entrepreneurial youth mini-malls, and built skateboarding parks. In the suburbs, youth soccer has soared in popularity. On television, the video station MTV has covered politics and urged youth participation through campaigns such as Rock the Vote and Choose or Lose.

Challenges to Increasing Youth Engagement

School- and community-based service corps have demonstrated the potential for civic engagement of young people from all socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the practice of taking young people seriously has not yet become standard operating procedure in schools, community organizations, or politics. Instead, the scattered efforts of visionaries who see young people as resources have run up against the assumption, valid or not, that young people are too cynical, materialistic, and apathetic to want to make a difference, or the misperception that young people are too inexperienced, uninformed or unwise to be consulted on issues affecting them.

Re-engaging young people will involve surmounting several formidable challenges. First, leaders will have to make a compelling case – running contrary to everything young people think they know – that participation actually does matter. Leaders will have to provide tangible evidence that, contrary to popular assumption, American democracy still does respond to the wishes of its citizens. The members of the Saguario Seminar believe that young people’s impulse to tune out is based at least in part on a reasonable assessment of democracy’s shortcomings. The challenge to adults and young people is to create opportunities for consequential participation. Second, to capture the fleeting attention of the TV-and-video-game generation, entrepreneurs will have to create or alter organizations so that participation is not only meaningful in the long term but also gratifying and fun in the short term. Endless meetings governed by Robert’s Rules of Order are unlikely to hold the attention of Generations X and Y, whose members are inexorably drawn to incoming e-mails and new episodes of “Friends.” Third, we will need to train a new cohort of adults who value and foster meaningful contributions by young people. Finally, creating social-capital-rich communities for young people necessarily entails grappling with the transformation of families and the challenges facing both schools and houses of worship, which were the stalwart youth communities of old.

Principles of Building Social Capital Among Young People

While all youth engagement opportunities are important, some are better than others at creating meaningful, lasting patterns of civic engagement. The best opportunities for young people to contribute generally abide by three principles.

Principle 1: Respect Young People. Successful efforts to engage young people will treat them with dignity and laud their achievements.

Principle 2: Provide Meaningful Engagement. Programs and organizations ought to address significant problems or passions in young people’s lives, and preferably in the larger community in which they live. In addition, these efforts must allow young people to provide consequential input into decision-making and to produce tangible solutions or products – as opposed to offering meaningless exercises.

Principle 3: Inculcate Civic Values. Successful youth-engagement efforts will be grounded in practices that enhance young people’s development, through high expectations, sustained by adult support and a peer group with explicitly positive values.

Recommendations for Building Social Capital Among Young People

We offer 13 recommendations for increasing social capital and civic engagement among young people. We have organized those recommendations around the three categories of institutions that are most influential in young people's lives: schools, community organizations, and families.

Schools. We urge that schools and school boards fund community service-learning opportunities for all middle- and high-school students, create smaller “schools within schools”, offer a broad array of extracurricular activities, start more programs to re-connect out-of-school youths with educational and community institutions, and expand civics education. We also ask schools to provide for active student government that has a say in some aspects of school operations.

Community Organizations. We endorse a generalized strategy to promote youth engagement outside the school walls, including expanding intergenerational mentoring programs, increasing funding for AmeriCorps, creating new ways to involve young people in running community organizations, and providing tangible rewards for service.

Families. We urge adults to turn off the television and redouble their efforts to connect with their children and to help their children connect with the community. Because an ethic of civic obligation is fading with the World War II generation, we especially urge adults to link young adults with older people. Such relationships would benefit members of all generations.

Recommendations for Building Social Capital in Schools

Any effort to re-engage young people must begin with the schools. The typical American young person spends seven to eight hours a day at school, longer if extracurricular sports practices and club meetings are involved. Most young people spend more waking hours with schoolmates than with parents. For many young people, the most influential mentor is a teacher, and these relationships, forged at a key time in a young person's development, can have effects that last a lifetime. In short, schools are a vitally important community.

Education perennially ranks among Americans' top concerns. Legions of experts and experiments are devoted to reforming and restructuring our nation's schools. Education policy is a contentious issue, in America at large and among the Saguro Seminar participants, as well. We are not united about the wisdom of numerous educational strategies, including taxpayer-financed vouchers for private schooling and the creation of charter schools. We are pleased, however, to see that debates over these reforms have called attention to the vital importance of parental involvement in schools and in education policy discussions. Schools cannot create social capital for students without the cooperation and involvement of parents.

Schools are communities, but they are communities at risk. We need to reform education not only to improve students' grasp of the “three R's”, or powers of analysis and reasoning, but also to teach norms of responsibility, trust, and reciprocity. Toward that end, we recommend the following 13 recommendations for making educational communities even stronger.

Recommendation 1: Require Community Service of All Students. Each year, more and more schools require students to fulfill a set number of hours of community service as a condition of graduation. In some cases, the requirements are city- or state-wide. In 1993, for example, Maryland became the first state to require service of all public high school students. A growing body of academic research suggests that these programs not only help students learn, but also bolster values and practices necessary to build social capital. Service-learning programs have been found to increase students' sense of social responsibility, compassion, tolerance, and belonging to a broader community.¹¹ Studies also have found that positive outcomes are more likely the longer the student participates. In light of these powerful and consistent findings, we urge every elementary, middle and high school in America to require all students to participate in community service – not only during one year (as is common practice today) but during *every* year students are in school. Because community service programs will backfire if students can't see tangible benefits from their work, we urge that schools take these programs seriously by allotting money and staff hours to finding meaningful and well-run service programs, rather than leaving it up to individual students to find opportunities on their own. We further urge that community service be built into courses to the fullest extent possible, with structured time for students to reflect on their experiences. Often, community service allows students to meet people unlike themselves, such as seniors or poor single moms, and thus offers an excellent means of furthering our principle of building “bridging” social capital.

Recommendation 2: Create Smaller Schools. Gigantic, impersonal high schools, especially urban schools, both reflect and exacerbate the society-wide disappearance of caring communities. In big-city and suburban schools, overworked teachers have unsupervised students, and both feel powerless to affect their immediate environment. An ethic of trust, participation, and mutual responsibility is difficult to instill in such settings. To create the conditions for civic engagement to flourish, schools must be radically restructured as mini-communities, in which people know and trust each other. Engaging in problem-solving and program development together will reverse the sense of isolation and powerlessness and create communities in which students can learn and practice civic behavior.

Over the past decade, innovators have sought to create educational spaces in which students, teachers, and parents address issues together, help each other learn, and collectively take an interest in the world around them.¹² These efforts go by various names, such as “community schools” and “charter schools.” Smaller schools have numerous advantages over their large, impersonal counterparts. Although small schools can be autocratic, face-to-face deliberative democracy is the far more likely norm of operation. Smaller classes diminish the emphasis an individual teacher must place on control and discipline and increase the potential for learning and interaction. Smaller schools also reduce the principal's reliance on rules and discipline, allowing him or her to focus on relationships, curriculum development, teacher training, and community involvement. In the finest tradition of small towns, small schools also are less likely than large schools to let students fall through the cracks, and are more likely to maintain high expectations for young people. It is in this sort of environment that students can most easily assume leadership and decision-making roles.¹³ We call on citizens to ask their local school boards to create smaller schools within schools. Resources on how to do this are available from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and the Coalition of Essential Schools at Brown University in Providence, R.I.¹⁴

Recommendation 3: Restore Extracurricular Activities. Extracurricular activities are a vitally important source of social capital for many young people. It is in these activities where young people make friends and have repeated, face-to-face interactions with others, often in pursuit of a common goal, such as producing a school play or winning a ballgame. Besides providing the psychic benefits of solidarity and commitment, extracurricular activities teach valuable civic skills, such as public speaking, teamwork, and organization. Powerful and growing evidence shows that the maxim “as the twig is bent, so grows the tree,” applies to involvement in youth extracurricular activities. In keeping with our “Recycling” principle, these activities strongly increase the odds of civic and political participation as an adult.¹⁵ Extracurricular activities also further the “C2C” principle because they provide a forum for students to help one another in pursuit of a common goal, with minimal interference from adult “experts.”

Yet, for all these programs’ documented good, school spending on extracurricular activities has dropped over the last several decades. For example, in New York City, funding for sports materials, equipment and supplies has fallen by nearly 20% in real terms since 1990.¹⁶ Likewise, school orchestras are far less likely to be found in junior high schools and high schools than they were a generation ago.¹⁷ Affluent communities have tried to make up for these losses by relying on parents to organize and run events and to finance them through specially created foundations and booster clubs. While we applaud parental involvement, parents, no matter how committed, are unlikely to be able to fulfill the organizational and financial role that schools used to assume. This is especially true of low-income communities, where parents lack the discretionary time and money to sustain sports leagues and school bands. Because extracurricular activities have benefits far beyond the individual children involved, we recommend a society-wide commitment to revitalizing them.

First, the federal and state governments should direct additional resources into these after-school enrichment activities. Special attention should be focused on creating these opportunities where they are least available, and on creating organizations that span racial, religious, ideological, class, and gender divides. Every dollar spent on extracurricular activities yields social and economic benefits down the line. Young people who participate will be more likely to stay in school, stay out of trouble, work well with diverse individuals, go to college, get a good job, and support the nation through taxes and civic leadership.

Second, the nation needs a public-education campaign that encourages citizens to get involved in helping to organize and volunteer for after-school programs, especially in low-income neighborhoods. For example, professionals might be urged to help Citizen Schools, which offer after-school apprenticeships in everything from Web design to music-writing to carpentry. Parents need to play an active role, not only in volunteering for after-school programs, but also in encouraging young people to find enjoyment in collective activities. Parental exhortations do matter. In a 1989 People For the American Way survey, for example, fully 45% of uninvolved young people said they had not engaged in community service because their parents had not encouraged it, and 42% said that no one asks young people to get involved or shows them how to do it.¹⁸

Recommendation 4: Make “Civics” Relevant. We need to invest substantially in all three legs of civics education: creating civic *skills*, imparting civic *knowledge*, and developing civic *values*. Research shows that civic skills and civic knowledge are strong determinants of later civic participation; and while they can be learned by experience, both civic skills and knowledge (but especially knowledge) can be taught.¹⁹ Civic-literacy programs provide young people with the knowledge and skills they need to be active citizens – and to have influence in community affairs. We need to reverse the gradual disappearance of civics from the standard curriculum of American high schools over the last several decades.

To increase both the quality and quantity of civic education in America is the mission of groups like the National Alliance for Civic Education and the American Political Science Association’s Task Force on Civic Education for the Next Century, and we endorse their activities. In the interim, teachers can build action into civics courses. Rather than simply learning how a bill becomes law, imagine a South Central Los Angeles high-school civics instructor working with students to bring about a change they see as important (for example, getting lights for a neighborhood basketball court, or trying to get a liquor store moved out of the neighborhood). Education by Design, based at Antioch New England Graduate School, has a “Learning by Real Problems” approach that is now used to teach civic skills in more than 400 schools in New York and New England. KidsVoting USA teaches young people about the political process and enables them to cast mock ballots recorded with their parents.²⁰ Schools might also work with civic organizations to carry out voter registration drives, something that can happen in every city and town in America. Even if schools don’t offer civics as a separate course, they can teach civic skills and impart political knowledge in other courses (such as history and social studies) and work with community groups to run after-school programs in which young people learn to be stewards of American democracy. In sum, we need both bottom-up innovation and a top-down push from all segments of society to ensure more and higher- quality civics programs for young citizens.

Recommendation 5: Reconnect and Re-engage School Dropouts. Almost one in every eleven students nation-wide dropped out of high school in 1997. This is more common among the poor. Among children of families in the bottom 20% of the income scale, about one in every seven 10th-12th graders (about 13%) dropped out of school in 1995.²¹ There were 1.2 million out-of-school, unemployed youths aged 16-24 in 1998.²² In light of these staggering figures, it is important to make sure that strategies to build social capital among young people do not assume that they always can be found at the schoolhouse. Nor should we assume that only those in schools are capable of civic engagement. In fact, civic engagement can be a critical motivating force for bringing young people who have dropped out of school back to a productive educational and occupational track.

Most high-school dropouts who fail to find good jobs eventually further their education by earning a GED and/or by enrolling in a training program, community college, or four-year university. If they discover through this process that they are being taken seriously as potential leaders, their confidence and determination grow. This is one of the secrets to the success of youth service corps that target at-risk populations. These programs attract and hold dropouts by

combining education, job training, and the opportunity to do visible community work that enhances their self-worth and motivation to aim higher. Rather than being trained for low-wage, dead-end jobs in which obedience is the primary value, these young people are trained for visible roles as spokespeople, thinkers, organizers, and citizen activists. Recently, the Department of Housing and Urban Development received 2,200 applications from organizations wanting to run YouthBuild programs, which teach civic values and construction skills to young adults, while they build low-income housing and obtain their GEDs or high school diplomas. The interest in YouthBuild only hints at the demand and capacity at the local level for programs to re-engage hard-to-reach young people.

These programs would grow faster with better funding. Some national foundations have directed their grant making toward strategies that treat low-income young people as service providers rather than as service recipients. For example, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation systematically funds national organizations that support young people in leadership roles, community service, and civic engagement. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation is devoting all its resources to youth development, with a special emphasis on disadvantaged young people. The Ford Foundation has announced an initiative to foster youth leadership. More foundations need to take up this approach, and the federal and state governments should follow suit with dedicated streams of funds to help reconnect lost young people to the mainstream of civic and economic life.

Recommendations for Building Social Capital in Community Organizations

For good or bad, young people are far less tethered to home and hearth than they were in the past. More than ever before, young people have jobs in the community, drive their own cars, have access to global communications media, and expect to move out of state after high school. As young people become more independent, they increasingly find their communities of meaning outside the structures of school and family. For that reason, it is incumbent on government and non-profit organizations alike to create safe spaces for young people to learn about and fulfill responsibilities to others. More than ever, leaders need to incorporate young people into the broader community. Such efforts can take many forms. Here are some recommended approaches.

Recommendation 6: Foster Intergenerational Mentoring. As a society, we generally have more leisure time than our predecessors did, even though it seems like the reverse is true. One young adult told the Saguaro Seminar that more American adults need to consider themselves a “Batman” in search of a “Robin” – thus extending mentoring relationships from the comic book to real life. Batman, he noted, saves Robin from danger and encourages Robin to learn from his mistakes. Mentoring is clearly a concept that is catching on; the question is how to expand and improve these relationships.²³ Small schools are one method, as discussed. Another idea is for mentor organizations actively to recruit retirees, whose numbers are burgeoning and whose commitment to creating social capital is well documented. These people not only can impart a sense of civic responsibility but also provide practical advice on everything from starting a small business to resolving disputes among peers. Intergenerational mentoring also clearly furthers our “Bridging” principle.

Recommendation 7: Support the Community Service Movement. We wholeheartedly endorse a nationwide commitment to community service. Community service should be well-funded, well-publicized, well-organized and well-designed to make a tangible difference. Among us, we are divided on the question of whether all Americans should be required to perform a year or more of national service, whether in the military or domestic voluntary activity. However, we heartily endorse an expansion of non-mandatory programs such as AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps, and Learn & Serve America.

Grants made through these programs should span multiple sectors and be both accountable and entrepreneurial. For example, the current infrastructure for national and community service, created first under the Bush Administration and expanded under the Clinton Administration, provides a healthy mix of national direction, state autonomy, and local initiative. It was built on a foundation laid by grassroots community groups and national non-profits. It allows for states to create their own plans for extending the service ethic through all sectors of society. It allows national non-profits to spread outstanding models across state lines. The model has allowed federal, state, and local agencies to capitalize on their respective comparative advantage to forge a working partnership whose benefits have not yet been fully realized.

Recommendation 8: Put Young People on Community Boards and Councils. Not all forms of community service need be supported with government dollars. The ethic of involving young people as resources and contributors could be spread much more broadly at little or no cost. Adults need only make room for eager young participants: employers might provide more opportunities for young people to shadow adults at work; mayors and governors can establish youth councils to advise policymakers on issues affecting young people; and elected officials can permit young people to fill official participant or observer roles on state and local commissions. School systems and police departments can similarly establish youth advisory groups. Already, Youth on Board trains organizations to place young people on non-profit and governmental boards, and there are at least a half dozen national foundations that have supported youth-led philanthropy programs.²⁴

Recommendation 9: Recognize the Capacity of Adolescents and the Circumstances that Support their Contributions. Each generation produces scores of extraordinary young people who take on an enormous social challenge and succeed beyond all expectation. Recently, for example, Craig Kielburger, a Canadian student shocked by child slavery in the developing world, created an international organization to eliminate it. Ashley Black, an 11-year old New Jersey resident, in 1992 successfully mobilized her community and eventually the state legislature to ban the importation of hate video games. Many of us remember Maine's Samantha Smith, who in 1982 reached out to Soviet Premier Yuri Andropov to end the nuclear arms race and build a bridge for peace.

Such examples should be widely publicized to encourage young people to make a difference, especially since young people are influenced by what the media praise. As one trainee at a job-and-service program remarked, "When my friends from the street saw me pick up my hammer and school books, they thought I had gone soft and square. When they saw me on television making a speech, they thought I was hip and wanted to know how they could participate."

Some recognition already occurs. The Reebok Human Rights Award, the Points of Light volunteer awards, the Do Something Brick Awards, and the Prudential Spirit of Community Awards all bring attention to exceptional service. Awards programs also help adults see the importance of youth contributions and to envision the kinds of contributions that best help adolescents develop. Every school, community, and institution should honor young people who make a contribution through service or civic engagement.

Recommendation 10: Make Contributions Count. Contributions could be made to count in some more concrete ways by, for example, easing access to scholarships or jobs. This could be done through “youth resumés,” which, in addition to academic achievement, spotlight community contributions. Businesses might give hiring preference to young people with resumés demonstrating significant experience gained through service to others. Strategies of this kind are in place in the United Kingdom (where they are called Records of Achievement) and are similar to America’s Career Passport idea of the 1970s. They ultimately depend on private and public sector employers’ rewarding the young people who have these experiences.

Recommendation 11: Recognize Contributors and Their Supporters. Opportunities for youth connection and contribution are unlikely without sustained adult facilitation. While some adults already grasp the importance of youth contribution and work to provide avenues for it, their roles and work are largely unrecognized. Thus, there are benefits to raising the profile and prestige of the adults who make youth engagement possible. In doing so, the best practices can be distilled and circulated, enabling these more skilled practitioners to mentor or coach less experienced counterparts and highlighting ways to overcome some of the typical frailties in these endeavors (such as recruiting, training, and retaining staff).

Recommendation 12: Strengthen Intermediary Organizations. As part of a concerted strategy to support young people’s contributions, we need to distinguish between what should be done nationally and what should be locally organized. The local opportunities can be facilitated through a network of intermediary organizations that can both strengthen community-based youth organizations and connect these organizations to schools. There are already a number of national intermediary organizations that provide training and technical assistance to groups involving young people in community service or civic engagement. The number could be expanded and existing ones strengthened.

These intermediary organizations have already found ways to surmount many of the thorniest problems. For example, YouthBuild USA has taught adults to overcome their ingrained skepticism and habits of control and to engage young people in leadership roles. City Year, a Boston-based community service corps with affiliates around the country, has creatively brought public attention and awareness to the role of young people in community service. Youth Service America, a national organization that promotes youth engagement, has a solid track record of supporting young entrepreneurs who are starting youth-run national organizations. The National Crime Prevention Council, through its Youth As Resources program, has taught young people how to practice philanthropy by making grants to local groups. We need to find ways to expand the reach of these and other intermediary organizations.

Recommendation for Building Social Capital in Families

The family is a vital source of social capital. Many young people look to family members for trusting, lasting, and mutually reinforcing relationships. Parents set examples and limits, and parents raise hopes and create opportunities. Family members provide links to the broader community and serve as role models of good (or bad) citizenship. To the extent that family bonds fray, social capital is gravely at risk. American families face many challenges that were virtually unknown one or two generations ago. We believe that most besieged parents are doing their best, and (as parents ourselves) we would not presume to imply that there are easy answers to the difficulties of maintaining a modern family.

Recommendation 13: Revive “Family Time.” Understanding the pressures on today’s families, we nonetheless implore parents and their children to ponder ways to improve and increase their time together. Turn off the television and play a board game instead. Volunteer together. Research and write a family history together. Schedule three nights a week when everyone is expected to sit down to dinner together.

In many ways, parental stresses notwithstanding, building social capital in families may be easier than in any other realm. The payoff to young people is certain to be profound and lasting.

Concluding Thoughts

Never has there been a better time to re-engage children and young adults at all levels of our social institutions. Young people are disaffected, yet at the same time they are eager to find meaningful ways to participate in their schools and communities. The success of community-service corps dramatizes this yearning. What these programs have at their root is youth participation in decision-making, in service, and in public life. These programs showcase young people as contributors and thinkers in all their living contexts – families, religious communities, schools, non-profits, neighborhoods, and government bodies. As has been amply demonstrated, young people have good ideas for improving the quality of life and solving problems. When adults listen and respond thoughtfully to these ideas, and implement them where possible in partnership with young people, the result is stronger families, better schools, more effective programs, and more harmonious communities. When people are taught an ethic of meaningful service at an early age, they will live out that ethic throughout their lives. The groundwork has been laid for a bold, broad national investment in the social capital of our young people. The challenge now is for each of us as private individuals and as leaders of institutions to build on this promising foundation.

NOTES:

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System (FRSS), "National Student Service-Learning and Community Service Survey," FRSS 71, 1999, cited in NCES, "Service-Learning and Community Service in K-12 Public Schools," September 1999, p. 8.

² Kristin A. Goss, "Volunteering and the Long Civic Generation." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 28 (4), December 1999, 378-415.

³ Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, "Special Indicator Finds High School Volunteerism Up 10 Percent" (at <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/new/releases/americasfinds.htm>).

⁴ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), pp. 260-261.

⁵ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, pp. 100-101.

⁶ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, p. 101.

⁷ Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson, *The Ambitious Generation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 192.

⁸ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, pp. 262-264.

⁹ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, p. 262.

¹⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963), Chapter 1.

¹¹ For a summary of the research, see Kristin A. Goss, "Community Service Learning: Prevalence and Program Effects." Unpublished ms. August 1997.

¹² One of the most successful experiments in transforming large schools was carried out by District Superintendent Anthony Alvarado in the East Harlem section of New York City during the 1970s. Each elementary school and junior high was divided into several schools. Directors for these schools were chosen from among teachers who offered proposals for innovative schools. The small schools had different curricular emphases and philosophies of learning. Parents chose which school they wanted their children to attend. Within a few years, the energy from innovation was flowing, and the students' academic scores had risen dramatically. Before the restructuring, East Harlem District 4 was the worst of the 32 New York City school districts with only 16% of children reading "at grade level." By 1987, after more than a decade of restructuring, the district was 15th out of 32 districts, and 63% of students were at grade reading level. [See Sy Fliegel, *Miracle in East Harlem: The Fight for Choice in Public Education* (New York: Times Books, 1993), pp. 3-4]. East Harlem soon became a flagship for the school-choice movement.

¹³ Educational researchers are finding that schools where democracy is practiced are places where faculty engagement, student engagement, and student academic achievement all coalesce. The Coalition of Essential Schools has latched onto the importance of these relationships. The more than 1,000 schools and 24 regional support centers in this network commit to 10 basic principles of education stemming from the research of TheodoreSizer, but implement these principles differently.

¹⁴ See <http://www.aisr.brown.edu> and <http://www.essentialschools.org>

¹⁵ Michael Hanks, “Youth, Voluntary Associations, and Political Socialization,” *Social Forces* 60 (1981), 211-23; Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 423-442, 449, 452; Paul Allen Beck and M. Kent Jennings, “Pathways to Participation,” *American Political Science Review*, 76 (1), March 1982, 94-108; David Ziblatt, “High School Extracurricular Activities and Political Socialization,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 361 (1965): 20-31; and John Wilson and Thomas Janoski, “The Contribution of Religion to Volunteer Work,” *Sociology of Religion* 56 (Summer 1995), 137-152, esp. p. 148. A study by Nicholas Zill, Christin Winquist Nord, and Laura Spencer Loomis – “Adolescent Time Use, Risky Behavior, and Outcomes: An Analysis of National Data” (at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/cyp/xstimuse.htm>) – shows that participation in most extracurricular activities is associated with reduced levels of risky behavior (smoking, drug use, binge drinking, teen parenthood, arrest), controlling for other student and parental factors.

¹⁶ Kirk Johnson, “For New York, 25-Year Losing Streak,” *New York Times*, 13 January 1999.

¹⁷ MENC: The National Association for Music Education reports that the percentage of high schools with orchestras was halved from 69.5% in 1962 to 32% in 1989, and the percentage of junior high schools with orchestras plummeted from 66.7% in 1962 to 16.7% in 1989. By 1996, only 13.9% of *all* schools offered orchestra (see <http://www.menc.org/publication/press/menc.html>). This trend is especially discouraging given what the NEA has learned from surveys – that lifelong musical habits are usually acquired in youth.

¹⁸ People For the American Way, *Democracy’s Next Generation: A Study of Youth and Teachers* (Washington, D.C. 1989), pp. 56, 59.

¹⁹ See, for example, “A Selected Review of Trends and Influences of Civic Participation,” Center for the Study of Political Psychology, University of Minnesota, 1997, p. 6.

²⁰ Discussions of current events in class, as well as participation in mock elections, increase civic knowledge. And some recent research suggests that certain types of civics education programs can increase not only kids’ civic involvement, but also that of their parents. In a study of KidsVoting USA, researchers found that when young people discuss politics at home, they increase their parents’ political knowledge. See Michael McDevitt and Steven H. Chaffee, “Second Chance Political Socialization: ‘Trickle-Up’ Effects of Children on Parents,” in *Engaging the Public: How Government and the Media Can Reinvigorate American Democracy*, ed. T.J. Johnson, C.E. Hays, and S.P. Hays (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998). The study also found that, when kids have the opportunity to cast “mock ballots” on election day, their parents are more likely to go to the polls.

²¹ “No. 303: High School Dropouts by Age, Race, and Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1997,” *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (1999) (at www.census.gov/prod/www/statistical-abstract-us.html).

²² “Table 656: School Enrollment and Labor Force Status: 1980 and 1998,” in *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (1999) (at www.census.gov/prod/www/statistical-abstract-us.html).

²³ See Carla Herrera, Cynthia L. Sipe, and Wendy S. McClanahan, with Amy J.A. Arbreton and Sarah K. Pepper, *Mentoring School-Aged Children: Relationship Development in Community-Based and School-Based Programs* (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, April 2000). Also see Jean Baldwin Grossman, ed., *Contemporary Issues in Mentoring* (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, April 2000), which

discuss the preconditions for effective mentoring programs and barriers to increased mentoring. Both reports are available online (at <http://www.ppv.org>).

²⁴ One of the oldest systematic youth-led philanthropy programs in the country is the Michigan Community Foundation's Youth Project, supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The foundation has provided matching funds to more than 60 community foundations across Michigan so that each can create a Youth Advisory Council to influence some portions of the foundations' grant making.