

[making it happen]

BUILDING “Social Capital” THROUGH ADVOCACY, ALLIANCES & FORUMS

BY PAUL T. HILL

Policymakers have devoted considerable attention to the issue of public schools and financial capital. However, “social capital”—the resources of public involvement and public support—can have a major impact on the kind of learning environments that exist in these schools. Yet, only a relatively small number of researchers and activists have explored the dynamic of social capital and attempted to examine ways in which public school systems can build—or sacrifice—public involvement and support.

The connection that parents and the public feel to schools is not to a universal set of schools that covers all four corners of a school district, but to individual schools that their children attend or that are a focal point of the very neighborhoods in which they live. Communities are more likely to build social capital for education when these schools are adapted to the needs and values of the people they serve.

Local education funds (LEFs), by the nature of the work they do, have learned quickly what others have taken so long to comprehend—that parents and the public feel connected to schools by shared values and interests, and by a common mission. Too often, however, the politics of decisionmaking around contentious issues, such as whether to teach “phonics” or “whole language” or how to teach sex education, often pit different value systems against one another. The typical outcome presumes winners and losers. Whether the battle is played out at the school board or at some other forum, the resulting struggle is sure to be a source of great acrimony that both drives a fault line through communities and, even worse, siphons energy from broader initiatives to improve public education. Worst of all, when a parent feels alienated from the decisions that determine what kind of learning environment exists for his or her child, a large measure of social capital is lost.

How can LEFs and other community groups and school districts work together to ensure community oversight of schools in a way that is not so intrusive that it denies parents the ability to realize their most basic values and aspirations?

LEFs can help communities design options—choices among schools—that reflect a full range of interests and values held by parents and other local stakeholders. While state standards and other means to measure progress and hold schools accountable must remain just as integral to school reform efforts as they are today, we need to establish a public school system in which a district becomes a portfolio of schools that address and appeal to a broad range of public needs and interests.

How can LEFs encourage this kind of change? By acting as a thoughtful, moderating force—both as a “convener” that doesn’t get trapped by ideology, and also as a builder of productive alliances that respect the LEFs’ advocacy role.

While every organization talks about building alliances, the essential value of forging these links is sometimes forgotten. For LEFs, the value of an alliance lies in sharing certain interests with a school board or superintendent and working to advance those interests without remaining silent about their differences over other issues.

If an LEF were to masquerade honest concerns, it would reduce public engagement to public relations. On the other hand, it is also important for LEFs to avoid becoming part of a hardened opposition that challenges school authorities in a knee-jerk fashion. Neither approach to alliances is tenable because each is likely to alienate potential LEF allies, such as foundations and the business community. In fact, business leaders are much more likely to lend their support and resources to an LEF that shows that it is capable of both supporting what works and critiquing what does not.

Stepping past the political and partisan land mines takes a certain amount of savvy and experience. But I believe that most LEFs have the capacity to find the proper balance and act as supportive critics and advocates for change. My experience with LEFs on the West Coast suggests this is already happening.

LEFs must also act as convening and mediating institutions to sort out political issues and address common problems that affect broad constituencies. By

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creating forums for honest and broad consultation with their communities about important issues, LEFs can address highly charged and controversial issues that political institutions such as school boards typically stumble over. The racial achievement gap is one issue that school boards and interest groups do not seem to be able to address constructively. LEFs can provide forums for discussion of action alternatives and their pros and cons, rather than about assignment of blame.

Likewise, LEFs can act as conveners to identify ways in which parents and the public feel disconnected from their schools and what can be done about it. For example, the Portland (OR) Schools Foundation under the leadership of Cynthia Guyer has brought people from the school system, civic institutions, the business community, higher education, and foundations into a serious dialogue about what the community wants from its schools and how these goals can be accomplished.

The Portland LEF has been very honest—basically, saying they’re not getting the student outcomes they’d like to and asking where they should go from here. They have identified the right problems and set up some specific task forces to try to tackle these issues.

Balancing the need for democratic oversight with the need for diverse schools that meet different needs is not an easy task. In the future, LEFs will need to assume the roles of alliance builder and convener and think broadly about how to create schools—including new kinds of schools that emerge from new connections with community resources such as museums, libraries, orchestras, and corporations—that meet needs in the service of young people. I feel confident that LEFs can help move us closer to this reality and, by so doing, help save and restore the social capital that is essential for public education to succeed.

Paul Hill, a research professor at the University of Washington’s Graduate School of Public Affairs, also directs the Center on Reinventing Public Education, which helps communities adopt alternative governance systems for public K-12 education. His recent work has focused on the reform of public elementary and secondary education, urging that public schools be operated by independent organizations under contract with public school boards, rather than by government bureaucracies. He currently leads studies of school choice plans, charter schools, and school accountability.

