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Book Review – Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community

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Bowling Alone is *not* a self-help book on a well-known sport. It is instead, a helpful book on one of the most far-reaching aspects of our lives in the United States today: the collapse, as author Robert D. Putnam expresses it, of American community.

While some of Putnam's conclusions may appear obvious to those who are involved in charitable or civic organizations, to see it laid out so clearly is somewhat shocking and ominous for the future.

The issues raised by ***Bowling Alone*** have been highlighted by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving and its executive director, Michael Bangser, since the spring. The Foundation sponsored a large luncheon last June, where Putnam spoke about his book and the issues it raised, attended by hundreds of members of the Hartford community. Since then, the Foundation has encouraged groups to consider how Putnam's ideas may be addressed at local levels.

Putnam's central premise is that Americans have become increasingly disconnected from other members of the community over the last 25 years. He explains the concept of "social capital," which "refers to connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." He believes that social capital is closely related to "social virtue" and that when there are dense networks of reciprocal relations, society, and the individuals in that society, seems to thrive.

He provides hard evidence that, whether measuring political, civic, religious, club or almost any other indicia of "connectedness," American participation has fallen, even after having risen substantially at the beginning and middle of the 20th Century. He provides many graphs describing the fall in numbers and percentage of eligible people in such well-known groups as the League of Women Voters, NAACP, American Legion and even professional associations. He argues that the fall has taken place not only in terms of numbers of members, but very often in actual participation in some of these groups.

He looks for reasons in such obvious areas as scarcity of time and demands for families to earn more income. However, he states that the available evidence suggests that busyness, economic distress, the pressures associated with two-career families and urban sprawl (and commuting time are only modest parts of the explanation for declining social connectedness, though together, they certainly add up to somewhere over 20 percent of the reason for the change. However, by Putnam's "guesstimate," television and its "electronic cousins" appear to be the "ringleaders" in the move away from socially connecting —a ccounting for perhaps 25 percent of the decline.

Generational change, that is, the "slow, steady, and ineluctable replacement of the long civic generation by their less involved children and grandchildren" may account for as much as half of the decline.

What does all of this have to do with the work of boards of education and superintendents of schools?

In one word, lots.

In his chapter on civic participation, Putnam discusses one of the most important organizations tying schools to parents: the PTA. He states that "parental participation in parent-teacher groups of all sorts suffered a substantial decline in the decades after 1960. One need not romanticize PTA meetings of the 1950s to recognize that many Americans nowadays are less involved with their kids' education." This effect has impact on issues such as shared decisionmaking and other attempts to involve parents in their children's education.

In examining political participation, he writes: "since the mid-1960's… despite the rapid rise in levels

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of education Americans have become perhaps 10-15 percent less likely to voice our views publicly by running for office… 15-20 percent less interested in politics and public affairs, roughly 25 percent less likely to vote, roughly 35 percent less likely to attend public meetings… and roughly 40 percent less engaged in… political and civic organizations of all sorts. We remain, in short, reasonably well-informed spectators of public affairs, but many fewer of us actually partake in the game."

Putnam emphasizes studies that show that less social capital leads to less educational success. He states that "precisely what many high-achieving suburban school districts have in abundance is social capital, which is educationally more important than financial capital. Conversely, where social connectedness is lacking, schools work less well, no matter how affluent the community… One of the areas in which America's diminished stock of social capital is likely to have most damaging consequences is the quality of education (both in school and outside) that our children receive."

Interestingly, he uses Connecticut as an example of a state with more than average amount of social capital, although we only rank 17th out of all of the states. Using statistics, he argues that for a state like North Carolina, with less social capital than Connecticut, to see educational outcomes similar to ours, it would have to do much more than just use traditional educational reforms— like lowering class size.

According to Putnam, the "potential leverage offered by social capital is surprisingly great compared to more conventional approaches." For example, he states that the "beneficial effects of social capital persist even after accounting for a host of other factors that might affect state educational success—racial composition, affluence, economic inequality, adult educational levels, poverty rates, educational spending, teachers' salaries, class size, family structure" and other factors.

Where do we go from here?

Putnam does not leave us without recommendations, though this is a particularly brief part of the book. In order to create, or recreate, social capital, he urges us to develop "new structures and policies (public and private) to facilitate renewed civic engagement." He argues that it is up to both collective and individual initiative to do this and examines six spheres that deserve "special attention" in efforts to reengage. He starts with education and suggests that we must find ways to raise the level of civic engagement. He asserts that we can do this through developing and expanding community service programs, encouraging more participation in extracurricular activities and asking youth to "invent powerful and enticing ways of increasing civic engagement".

Bowling Alone certainly does not provide many the answers to the issues spawned by a lack of social capital. But like the canary in the mine, it alerts us to the dangers of a society without sufficient connectedness.

At a time when we are examining how to measure student achievement by other than test scores, it is worthwhile to think about the value of helping students prepare to rebuild the tight webs of connectedness that are so positive for all in our society. While Connecticut may be higher than other states in social capital, many areas of our state lack this characteristic. Finding ways to increase participation in civic and other activities will pay a dividend for all our children and for institutions such as boards of education.