

Why relationships—not money—are the key to improving schools

October 25 2018, by Jeff Grabmeier



Larkmead School. Credit: CC-BY-SA-2.5,2.0,1.0

Strong relationships between teachers, parents and students at schools has more impact on improving student learning than does financial support, new research shows.

Social capital is the name scientists give to the network of relationships between school officials, teachers, parents and the community that builds trust and norms promoting academic achievement.

The study found that [social capital](#) had a three- to five-times larger effect than financial capital on reading and [math scores](#) in Michigan

schools.

"When we talk about why some schools perform better than others, differences in the amount of money they have to spend is often assumed to be an explanation," said Roger Goddard, co-author of the study and Novice G. Fawcett Chair and professor of educational administration at The Ohio State University.

"We found that money is certainly important. But this study also shows that social capital deserves a larger role in our thinking about cost-effective ways to support students, especially the most vulnerable."

Goddard conducted the research with Serena Salloum of Ball State University and Dan Berebitsky of Southern Methodist University. The study appears online in the *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* and will be published in a future print edition.

The study involved 5,003 students and their teachers in 78 randomly selected public elementary schools in Michigan. The sample is representative of the demographics of all elementary schools in the state.

Teachers completed a questionnaire that measured levels of social capital in their schools. They rated how much they agreed with statements like "Parent involvement supports learning here," "Teachers in this school trust their students" and "Community involvement facilitates learning here."

State data on instructional expenditures per pupil was used to measure financial capital at each [school](#).

Finally, the researchers used [student](#) performance on state-mandated fourth-grade reading and mathematics tests to measure student learning.

Results showed that on average schools that spent more money did have better test scores than those that spent less. But the effect of social capital was three times larger than financial capital on math scores and five times larger on reading scores.

"Social capital was not only more important to learning than instructional expenditures, but also more important than the schools' poverty, ethnic makeup or prior achievement," Goddard said.

While social capital tended to go down in schools as poverty levels increased, it wasn't a major decrease.

"We could see from our data that more than half of the social capital that schools have access to has nothing to do with the level of poverty in the communities they serve," he said.

"Our results really speak to the importance and the practicality of building social capital in high-poverty neighborhoods where they need it the most."

The study also found that the money spent on student learning was not associated with levels of social capital in schools. That means schools can't "buy" social capital just by spending more money. Social relationships require a different kind of investment, Goddard said.

The study can't answer how to cultivate social capital in schools. But Goddard has some ideas.

One is for schools to do more to help teachers work together.

"Research shows that the more teachers collaborate, the more they work together on instructional improvement, the higher the [test scores](#) of their students. That's because collaborative work builds social capital that

provides students with access to valuable support," he said.

Building connections to the community is important, too. School-based mentoring programs that connect children to adults in the community is one idea.

"Sustained interactions over time focused on children's learning and effective teaching practice are the best way for people to build trust and build networks that are at the heart of social capital," Goddard said.

"We need intentional effort by schools to build social capital. We can't leave it to chance."

More information: Serena J. Salloum et al, Resources, Learning, and Policy: The Relative Effects of Social and Financial Capital on Student Learning in Schools, *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/10824669.2018.1496023](https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2018.1496023)

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