CULTIVATING CONNECTIONS

The Current State of Social Capital in College and Career Pathways

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INTRODUCTION

Social capital—or, simply put, "who we know"—can unlock doors to new opportunities. When embedded within education-to-workforce pathways, tools and strategies for helping students develop their social capital can ensure they are better positioned to turn their academic and technical skills into good jobs, more training, and better opportunities. Getting students connected to key individuals can help them understand their postsecondary and career options, prepare for the requirements and expectations of their chosen occupation, and access employment. **Relationships matter.** Growing students' network means expanding their access to information, tapping them into systems of influence, strengthening their own identity and sense of self, and providing them with informal signals and credentials they can add to their formal qualifications and experiences. <u>Research shows</u> that more than half of all jobs are acquired through personal connections, making this an equity imperative for students from backgrounds who have been historically underrepresented in high-wage, high demand fields that lead to economic mobility.

Social capital has not been a major priority within our educational system despite growing recognition that it is a critical ingredient within pathways for opening doors to good jobs. Increasing numbers of organizations across the country acknowledge the importance of equipping students with the knowledge, skills, confidence, and opportunities to strengthen and expand relationships and networks that can help them achieve their postsecondary and career goals. However, an informed and targeted ecosystem strategy is still missing to shape the field and more swiftly and effectively embed social capital development into our education systems.

Education Strategy Group (ESG) has spent over ten years working with states and communities to strengthen and scale demand-driven pathways that lead to high-value postsecondary opportunities. While our work has always and will continue to focus on helping students develop sought-after knowledge and skills while earning credentials with labor market currency, we have increasingly realized the complementary value and importance of building relationships and networks to help students capitalize on their qualifications to land good jobs. Yet, in our experience, an explicit focus on social capital development is often absent in pathways efforts.

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To shape our work to support states and communities in effectively embedding social capital development policies and practices systemically within their pathways, ESG sought to better understand the depth and breadth of social capital work already underway across the country. We conducted a landscape scan to provide deeper insight into how national, state, and local-level education organizations are defining, and the extent to which they are incorporating, social capital development into their day-to-day work with students.

We used several research methodologies - desk research, surveys, and interviews – to help paint a more comprehensive picture of the current landscape of social capital within education-to-workforce pathways. First, our team spent several months conducting desk research, scanning organizational and field artifacts to help us identify influential educational leaders and establish a greater understanding of their work, including how extensively social capital was a priority. Second, we developed and released a demand analysis survey meant to establish a baseline for how these national and community-based organizations, as well as state education agencies (SEAs) and local districts, prioritize social capital in their work and what interest there is in additional support and resources. A total of 63 organizations - representing state agencies, local school districts, national organizations, and local or regional intermediaries - responded to the survey.

Finally, we conducted more than a dozen interviews with key leaders in the field to glean deeper insight into the successes and challenges they have faced in this work and where they, as experts, see the potential for scaling and accelerating the integration of social capital into the field.

Some of our findings confirmed what we had learned through two years of work helping communities across the U.S. integrate social capital more explicitly and intentionally into their pathways. This included the fact that many SEAs, school districts, and education organizations already have strategies they believe will result in greater social capital for their students, such as work-based learning and career advising programs. Supporting all students' network development, however, faces a range of barriers to equitable scaling, including a lack of consistent vision and goals, few resources available to support turn-key implementation, an inability to measure progress or hold leaders accountable, and concerns about funding and staff capacity. Education leaders are compelled by the realities of what this means for students and are interested in additional support in this space. Other findings gave us new insights into the current state of the field and future opportunities for this work. We highlight several of these in the text that follows.

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Our research demonstrates that the use of social capital development as an explicit and purposeful priority of education-to-workforce pathways is just emerging in the field. This is evident in at least two ways: (1) social capital lacks consistent terminology and definition, and (2) there is limited confidence in social capital expertise by organizational leaders.

Our discussions with organizational leaders revealed inconsistent or imprecise use of the term "social capital," even among organizations who claim it as a core component of their mission. In some cases, organizations adopt alternative terms in an attempt to use language that better resonates with their different audiences. For example, a representative from a national network of career academies, stated:

"We just call it connections because that tends to resonate more with students than the term social capital. We're really trying to hone in on not making it feel like a transactional relationship, helping students understand how they can also give back to that network...It feels more authentic than just the 'taking' part of it."

The best choice in terminology is often the one that most resonates with an intended audience, however, supporting the establishment and use of a common language would be helpful in enabling the field to move together in this space, given the varied terminology organizations currently use.

> **62% of respondents indicated limited confidence that their staff can incorporate social capital development into their current work with students**

Terminology aside, our survey of the organizations in the field revealed other indicators of nascency, especially for local and state-level organizations. First, nearly 40 percent of state agencies or intermediaries reported that social capital was "minimally established" in their organizations, suggesting that social capital has not yet reached a high degree of embeddedness or standardization. Second, the majority of respondents across the board (62 percent) indicated limited confidence that their staff is prepared to incorporate social capital development into their current work with students. These findings highlight a need for organizational capacity-building to successfully carry out social capital development work.

The field continues to need support making measurement an essential component in any social capital work. Only about a third of survey respondents indicated that they use social capital as a measure of programmatic success. Furthermore, in our interviews, organizations - including those that indicated that they use social capital as an outcome measure - shared that they want to think and learn more about how to measure and track social capital, with many acknowledging that they currently use proxies for social capital development, including questions on surveys only tangentially related to social capital, such as general soft skills and industry certification numbers. This allows them to keep data collection centered on items to which they already have access that can be collected uniformly and relatively easy across students.

For example, one organization that connects students to internship opportunities attempts to track their alumni but the idea of gathering unique social capital metrics for the large number of students they serve seems daunting.

Only about a third of survey respondents indicated that they use social capital as a measure of programmatic success.

They shared:

"We don't have the capacity to just follow each and every student of ours. So the kind of data that we do collect is around college enrollment data for our students. We also use Salesforce to track anytime we get students actually reaching out to let us know that they now work at X, Y, and Z career. We try to track all that. But no, I would not say that we specifically gather data on social capital. I can't even necessarily imagine what it looks like to be able to quantify social capital for a mass amount of students."

Several organizations also believed that there was limited funding available for social capital work directly related to funders' desire for measurable outcomes. A survey respondent representing a national organization focused on mentoring wrote:

"There is a lack of funding because the concept [of social capital] is not easily measured because we are talking about something that is not transactional, but transformative. If we had a way of measuring it, buy-in and dollars would come faster."

This response suggests a belief that philanthropy and other resource-granting entities should creatively consider, include, and incentivize established and recognized social capital measurements that can be correlated with longer-term student outcomes.

Our research surfaced both an appreciation for virtual tools and platforms helping connect students and educators to professionals in the field for the purposes of advising, mentorship, or career exploration and apprehension about their widespread use. This was often in the context of the unclear role of technology and artificial intelligence in making opportunities available for more students. An increase in the presence of digital platforms in the postsecondary readiness and social capital arenas indicates a growing demand among organizations and students for virtual tools that allow them to do this work at scale, whether due to limited staffing capacity or a need for connections beyond who is already available within their communities.

Three-fourths of respondents who indicated that they wanted additional social capital-related resources and support asked for tools to help students understand their own social capital, while 39 percent were interested in a comprehensive curriculum to scaffold student social capital learning.

Some organizations named concerns about these tools potentially serving as a replacement for what they see as necessary face-to-face time for developing important relationships, as well as concerns around student safety.

A representative from an organization helping students build the skill sets needed to land a job or internship explained:

"Our 14+ years of research and student data collection reveals there is significantly more value to students when social capital is created by students' proactive efforts in reaching out to professionals versus when students are paired or connected via technology or a personal introduction."

39% of respondents were interested in a comprehensive curriculum to scaffold student social capital learning

The role of technology will be an ongoing conversation as education works to balance the need for tools necessary for scaling and the importance of direct and personal connection, particularly for helping students build social capital.

Survey results reveal a resounding "Yes!" to the idea of more resources and support related to student social capital development, but education leaders worry about social capital seen as "one more thing" on the plate of educators. Indeed, organizations repeatedly cited lack of buy-in from different educational stakeholders (including teachers) as a potential barrier that could keep social capital from becoming a greater priority. As an interview respondent representing a regional pathways intermediary explained:

"One challenge is helping leadership understand how a structured and intentional focus on relationship development will support the achievement of multiple academic and career goals. With limited time and resources, leaders need to see any proposed programming as adding value, not work."

When asked how social capital might be made a greater priority in the education ecosystem, many interviewees shared that alignment and integration is the way to go. One interviewee, representing a career academies network, spoke to the importance of collaboration, sharing:

"I would love to see the field work together in more ways that we can incorporate social capital and thread it into programs or activities that already exist."

Providing a tangible example of what this might look like, the American School Counseling Association recommended a crosswalk of social capital frameworks and strategies with their existing standards to ensure counselors see that this is an enhancement to the work and not an addition.

We also interviewed several intermediaries that served as site leads in our previous social capital work. There was notable alignment in their perspective that scale could only be achieved through embedding social capital into communities' existing priorities and frameworks. As one former site lead shared:

"Social capital [development] has to be built into existing models. If we approach this as another new initiative, we're going to fail. Educators are so overwhelmed by what's already on their plate. Any initiative that sounds like it's going to be an add on to current duties will be met with frustration and anger. It's going to need a lot of money and staffing and it will have a harder time making it. In the initial stages, we need to build it into what we have, and show them that this is just part of the work that they should be doing and what they should be thinking about, 'why the social capital work is essential and necessary for student success.'"
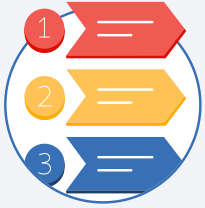
A transformation of the system will require a coordinated reimagining of the role of social capital within educational systems and strong leadership to do so. We used information from across all three research methods to identify a number of organizational types we considered "system architects" based on the extent to which they are well-positioned for elevating social capital into the national discourse around education-to-workforce pathways. A number of factors contributed to the development of this list, including (1) Where respondents get their information about social capital; (2) what widely-adopted and well-respected frameworks and resources already exist, and (3) opportunity areas discovered in our research.

Considering these factors, we identified the types of organizations needed to build momentum in the field and leverage existing structures to quickly and effectively integrate social capital into pathways.

We recommend that these organizations represent:
- Advising/Counseling
- Work-based Learning
- Mentoring
- Career and Technical Education (CTE)
- College and Career Access Organizations
- National Pathways Organizations
- Academia
- Independent Research Institutions
- Charter Management Organizations
- Virtual Platforms and Tools
- Networks of Educational Leaders at all Levels
- State Education Agencies (SEAs)
- Local Education Agencies (LEAs)

There are leaders across these distinct sectors that bring necessary expertise, influence, and reach that will be required to bring social capital to the forefront in national efforts to prepare students for college and career.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATION LEADERS

As recognition of the need to prioritize social capital within our postsecondary preparation systems continues to increase, our findings support a number of early actions that education leaders can take to begin to make the development and strengthening of student relationships and networks a more explicit feature of their pathways.

- Given the robust discussions on measurement, education leaders should **assess how and where social capital currently shows up in their work**. Where do they currently create space and opportunity for students to strengthen or build relationships and how might these be enhanced with a more intentional social capital lens?

- With the evolving conversation around the role of technology, education leaders should **reflect on the virtual tools and platforms they utilize to support their work to build student social capital**. How might they balance virtual experiences with in-person or direct opportunities for relationship-building to both achieve scale and maintain quality?

- To start to align social capital with existing systems, education leaders should **invite industry and community partners into this conversation** to establish common understanding and goals around social capital and identify the opportunities to leverage the frameworks that already exist within their communities.

- Finally, education leaders can **start to develop their plan for building, strengthening, and mobilizing students' social capital**. Visit our Cultivating Connections site to learn more about our social capital implementation framework.

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WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

Organizations across the country recognize the value and importance of social capital in their students' college and career trajectories and are incorporating, to varying degrees, strategies they believe will facilitate growth in student networks and relationships. There are exciting initiatives that the field can look to as models for how to begin to name and measure social capital as a key outcome for their students. However, it's clear that there is a need for greater national leadership to build a common vision, develop strategies, provide resources, and offer models to support quality social capital implementation. This will be foundational to broadening the current understanding of social capital development, establish social capital as a key component of pathways work, amplify the importance of social capital within national conversations, and provide guidance for scaling this work across the educational ecosystem.

As we continue to prioritize social capital within pathways, ESG will be convening experts to continue to improve an implementation framework developed through our on-the-ground work with communities and develop an integration strategy to allow for greater alignment across the various components of high-quality pathways.

We are also conducting deeper research on technology and AI and the role each plays within this space, heeding both the excitement and caution we heard from the field. Finally, we are sharpening our tools to better support more communities and organizations in making social capital an intentional priority in the work to prepare students for college and career.

What are you doing to support students in expanding the power of their networks? Let us know! To learn more about the next phase of our work, please contact us at **impact@edstrategy.org**.

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