

## CHAPTER 6

**Social Capital**

**A Cross-Cutting Factor**

“...there is enormous value in what economists call social capital. It’s a professor’s term, but the concept is pretty simple: The networks of people and institutions around us have real economic value. They connect us to the right people, ensure that we have opportunities, and impart valuable information. Without them, we’re going it alone.”

J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*

It is not lost on us that most of the determinants and recommendations in this document were already known. Some might say that we haven’t revealed anything new. That may be true to a degree, but we believe we’ve demonstrated that the innovation of our findings is in:

- Reflecting upon our history in an authentic way,
- Acknowledging the complexity of working with human beings free to choose their own paths,
- Identifying the need to look at the connectivity between the determinants,
- Encouraging solutions that address both systemic and individual challenges, and
- Wrapping the determinants in cross-cutting influences, one of which has already been addressed (the impact of segregation).

Just as the Task Force learned early on that segregation cuts across all the determinants, we were reminded along the way that social capital also carries tremendous power to influence outcomes in each of the areas. During one of our community sessions, a young adult used a phrase that stuck with us. He acknowledged his role in a checkered high school experience and said he thought he had until the 11th grade to get serious about his studies; however, the young man then paused and said he wished he had a “life navigator” starting in middle school. He wanted someone who could walk beside him to ensure that his aspirations and dreams were connected to tangible actions and results. To echo the quote in *Hillbilly Elegy*; without a life navigator, he felt like he was going it alone. In fact, we heard people describe a similar idea so many times that we believe having a life navigator could be the “secret sauce” that most reports and programs tend to gloss over.

### Social Capital

Social capital refers to networks, connections, and access to people who produce information, resources and opportunities. As it is often said, “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” People with ample social capital are typically paid better and promoted more often and at younger ages. They are also more likely to obtain loans, get capital for starting a business, and build successful businesses and careers.

Social capital can take on a number of different forms: bonding social capital exists within families or peer groups; linking social capital connects people to information and resources beyond their immediate circle; and bridging social capital refers to social networks between groups representing diverse interests. Each is equally important.

So, what might life navigators do? In the simplest terms, their primary role would be to take the “vague hopes” of a young person and help turn them into “active aspirations.” In a 2014 article entitled “Vague Hopes, Active Aspirations and Equality”, Brookings Institution scholar Richard Reeves identified a distinction between a strongly grounded aspiration, one towards which an individual is actively working, and a general aspiration that has little impact on a person’s conduct. He defines the two as:

“ An **active aspiration** is a goal or set of goals toward which a person is consciously and deliberately working. It likely requires investing time, energy and other resources; but also requires the ability to resist or defer gratification.

A **vague hope** consists of a loosely stated goal or set of goals, largely untethered from current activities and decision-making. A teenager may hope for a college degree, but doesn't really work at school, investigate colleges, research financial aid packages, or in some cases, even apply.”

He summarizes by stating:

“ Opportunities and aspirations develop in tandem, interacting with each other in both directions. There is no cultural gap in terms of overall aspirations in life. Most people want similar things: a worthwhile job, a stable family, a good education. A class gap is, however, visible in active aspirations: visible, realizable goals animating the formulation of plans and development of time, energy and skills.”

Throughout our community conversations, almost every person who talked about his or her trajectory from poverty to middle class or above could trace that ascent back to one person—or at most a handful of people—who helped him or her develop goals and aspirations, but also provided a tangible pathway towards achieving them. Many times it was a parent or caregiver, but more often it was someone from a very different background who provided knowledge about and access to other networks: coach, teacher, employer, youth director, etc. Invariably, this new relationship brought about the revelation that children and youth who grow up in low-opportunity neighborhoods are often playing on an uneven playing field when compared to those in higher-opportunity areas.

Mr. Reeves identifies three explanations for why an individual may end up with lower aspirations without exposure to and assistance from people in different groups:

#### 1. **Beyond my reach**

The mistaken belief that the goal is beyond their reach.

#### 2. **Not for people like me**

Individuals may inherit or adopt values, preferences, and norms from others that place a lower weight on particular goals.

#### 3. **Never knew about it**

A person might not have an active aspiration simply because of ignorance of the object of the aspiration or the pathway towards it.

Mr. Reeves identifies a fourth reason for low aspirations: “Don't want it”, but notes that this should not trouble us, because people want different things from life. If someone makes an informed decision to opt out, that is okay.<sup>xxxv</sup>

## Life Navigators

Social capital was the one intangible factor that children and youth identified during our community sessions as most important to them. While it is difficult to quantify and measure, **increasing social capital and access to life navigators could be one of the most impactful strategies and should be interwoven into all of the other determinants.**

Robert Putnam eloquently illustrates in his book, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, how children growing up in poverty typically have extremely low levels of social capital. They often have considerable bonding social capital—relationships with people in their families, neighborhoods, or schools who are in similar circumstances to them. However, linking and bridging social capital are less prevalent. Thus, their knowledge across lines of difference and how social systems operate may be limited to what they experience in immediate circles.

To further bolster our recommendations, research indicates that the consistent, enduring presence of a caring adult in a young person's life can be the difference between staying in school or dropping out, making healthy decisions or engaging in risky behaviors, and realizing one's potential or failing to achieve one's dreams. According to Putnam's research, poor children typically lack the informal mentoring relationships more common among their affluent peers. The most effective mentoring relationships for lower-income young adults appear to be those that are formal, long-term, and use best-practice approaches to training mentors. Putnam's research reveals that while 64 percent of affluent children have mentoring relationships beyond their extended family, nearly two-thirds of children from low-income backgrounds do not. The Task Force unanimously agrees that all children should have “Life Navigators”, mentors and sponsors capable of cultivating social capital and developing tangible pathways to opportunity in their lives.

We also believe our community should expand the traditional concept of social capital to address an even bigger issue illuminated during the protests of September 2016. In addition to concerns about policing, many people interviewed wanted to let community leaders know that they do not feel valued or respected. In the words of some residents, they feel as though their ability to contribute to the future of the community is not seriously considered. One of the most poignant examples of this was when a nine-year-old girl mustered all her courage and told the Charlotte City Council after the recent protests that she wasn't sure if decision makers cared about her life or the life of her neighbors. We believe these sentiments present a powerful opportunity to change this perception by fostering a "culture of caring" across Mecklenburg county.

We have not identified a "program" to develop a culture of caring, but perhaps that is the point.

**A community's culture can't be prescribed or commanded by a group or entity; it must be an authentic representation of who we are. The culture of caring must be demonstrated through our actions, decisions and investments.**

As an example, what if every house of faith and civic organization used economic opportunity as the lens for its work? Or, what if every elected body, foundation, employer, institution or organization asked one simple question before making significant decisions: "How will this decision impact the opportunity trajectory of our children, youth and families?" Once we have used this lens, the actions we take will tangibly demonstrate the level of our commitment—one way or the other.

## Task Force Strategy U

**Ensure all children, youth and families have relationships in the community which:**

- Connect them to opportunities, information and resources
- Broaden their horizons about what's possible in their lives
- Assist in navigating through unexpected crises to stay on track
- Offer tangible pathways toward achieving their aspirations
- Demonstrate to every child, youth, and family that their contribution is vital to the success of our community.

## Key Recommendations

1. Support an expectation that beginning in 7th grade, all students have access to a Life Navigator or other supportive adult to help expose, navigate, and connect them to career, educational, and life opportunities.
2. Develop and execute a focused strategy to build, train, and coordinate an "army" of community volunteers committed to connecting more children, youth and families to knowledge, resources and opportunities.
3. Leverage relationships developed through the above and elsewhere to help young people and families build social capital and increase access to new networks.
4. Build on and expand efforts promoted through the 2014 Cultural Vision Plan for Charlotte-Mecklenburg, which focuses on connecting people and strengthening communities by using arts and culture to create pathways and bridges.
5. Encourage all sectors to use economic opportunity as a lens for their decision making.

## Implementation Tactics and Policy Considerations

- Research and evaluate local, regional and national models to develop the Life Navigator concept. Examples to explore include Kauffman Scholars and the Posse Foundation.
- Coordinate efforts by alumni organizations, civic/social groups, houses of faith, businesses, neighborhood associations, schools, etc. to have their members/employees engage young people through programs that create exposure and relationships.
- Encourage faith-based and civic organizations to use economic opportunity as a lens to rethink and expand their community support and outreach efforts to maximize network building opportunities for those with more limited bridging relationships.
- Ramp up efforts of the staff and boards of cultural arts organizations to go into diverse areas of the community to build relationships, listen to what people say they need and want, and develop new strategies and programs to reach more diverse groups and communities.
- Train "gatekeepers" in social service agencies, houses of faith, and other organizations to share information and better connect families, children, and youth to resources and opportunities in the community.
- Explore ways to visibly demonstrate a "Culture of Caring" by asking, "How will this decision impact the opportunity trajectory for all children, youth and families?" prior to significant decision making.

**Chapter 7**  
**What's Next for the Report and Community**

→ ([https://leadingonopportunity.org/report/chapter-7/](#))



**Chapter 5**  
**Child and Family Stability**

([https://leadingonopportunity.org/report/chapter-5/](#))

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