



Building Social Capital | Mini Case Study

Boston

“Supporting students' identities is really hard work. And it must be done with both skill and care. I feel like I learned that, again and again [in this project]. It's not plug and play work if we're aiming for transformation of individual lives, but also of systems..., I'm stepping away thinking much more about the power of strong, integrated and aligned partnerships to support [this] work in schools.”

— A Boston team member on the long-term impact of social capital, if done right

The Context

The Boston social capital team was made up of representatives from four organizations: EdVestors, a school improvement organization dedicated to system-level impact to advance equitable, meaningful education in Boston; Boston Public Schools (BPS), a diverse school system of more than 54,000 students across 125 schools; Apprentice Learning, a non-profit that works directly with schools and employers to provide real-world work experiences for middle-grade youth; and Mass Mentoring Partnership, a non-profit that works to ensure that every young person in the state has access to quality mentoring relationships.

Together, the team helped drive two distinct pilots. The first was led by Apprentice Learning through a partnership with Dearborn STEM Academy. The pilot integrated social capital tools and resources into the preparation and support delivered to 8th graders during their apprenticeship assignments. The second was at Edison K-8 through a partnership with Transformative Mentoring, a BPS initiative that connects students to mentors within their school and aligns with the district's implementation of MyCAP (My Career and Academic Plan), the Massachusetts framework for Individual Learning Plans. Over the course of several months, the team at Edison delivered social capital units to the students participating in their Transformative Mentoring program.

The Learning

- **Bring an anti-racist lens to social capital development**

A major priority for the team was ensuring that social capital conversations, materials, tools, and resources did not suggest (explicitly or implicitly, to both young people and adults) that students were lacking in relationships or that their networks and experiences held no value. Continuously centering the lived experiences of the district's most vulnerable students – including Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, emerging multilingual learners, queer and trans students, and students from economically disinvested communities – with an emphasis on asset-forward language led to robust and necessary conversations about framing and preparing the adults for meeting students where they are. The team continues to discuss how to best ensure that everyone involved in this work – from district leaders to community partners to teachers – approaches this from a perspective that recognizes and celebrates the unique contribution that each student brings to their communities.

- **Avoid assumptions about who and what students know or do not know**

The team often reflected on the assumptions that adults can make about what students know or don't know and the impact of those assumptions. Students are the experts of their own networks and while the term “social capital” might be new to them, the idea that relationships carry value is not. Being open to learning from young people and leaning into what they know helped the adults delivering the pilot to ground the work in experiences that students found meaningful, which in turn activated learning. The team also discovered that assumptions about who students have in their lives – whether in materials used or in planned discussions – could inadvertently be triggering, especially if students are being asked to share with classmates.

- **Prioritize language that better resonates with your students**

The term “social capital” can seem jargony or may connote, for some people, a transactional, or inauthentic relationship. The Boston team recognized the value in engaging students in the ideas of social capital but questioned the utility of sticking to the terminology. For example, in their pilot, Apprentice Learning chose to frame initial social capital conversations by asking students

about their “team.” Who are the people that are rooting for them? The ones that are on their bench? Who do they currently have on their team and who do they need? This language better resonated with the students and was more consistent with the programming being delivered by the Apprentice Learning staff.

- **Adapt existing resources to be more accessible for diverse learners**

The team at Edison K-8 noted how some of the resources and social capital concepts did not translate well to different student populations, such as emerging multilingual learners (historically referred to as “English Language Learners”) or those with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). They spent a great deal of time taking existing resources and templates and modifying them to better engage students in their Transformative Mentoring spaces. This included adding videos, rethinking the language that was used, and incorporating examples and activities that were more relevant to their students. They also took into account the different teaching styles of the mentors leading the classes and allowed flexibility in how the content was delivered.

- **Engage teachers to generate critical feedback on how resources could be used**

The team incorporated social capital units into the Transformative Mentoring program at Edison. Through this pilot, they were able to gather a great deal of feedback from teachers on what conversations and resources (e.g., relationship mapping, networking exercises) resonated with students and which fell flat. The Boston team also opted to host a focus group for other teachers delivering the Transformative Mentoring curriculum in their schools to gather additional feedback on the materials. Engaging teachers, from schools that might have looked very different from Edison, provided insights into what these educators would use in their own classrooms, what was missing from the existing resources, and what improvements might be made to current materials. It also served as a way to preview for teachers outside the pilot the potential resources that could be added to the Transformative Mentoring curriculum.

- **Invite other stakeholders into the social capital conversation**

Apprentice Learning had a regular communication cadence with its worksite partners - the people and organizations that mentored their 8th grade apprentices. As part of this pilot, they expanded their weekly email to include partnering schools and families to keep them more informed and to invite them to engage in social capital-oriented conversations with their students. Each week, the AL team would include several prompts meant to help the worksite partners, schools, and families (and others on the listserve) have deeper conversations with the apprentices. This was a reciprocal practice that helped mentors and their apprentices get to know their students better, build a stronger connection, and identify additional opportunities for them.