BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

WHY SCHOOL REFORM HAS FAILED AND WHAT PARENTS NEED TO DO

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SIMON & SCHUSTER

New York London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore

SIMON & SCHUSTER
Rockefeller Center
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Designed by Jennifer Ann Daddio

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Steinberg, Laurence D., date.
Beyond the classroom : why school reform has failed and what parents need to do /
Laurence Steinberg, with B. Bradford Brown and Sanford M. Dornbusch.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. High school students—United States—Social conditions—Longitudinal studies.
2. Academic achievement—United States—Longitudinal studies. 3. Home and school—
United States—Longitudinal studies. 4. High school students—United States—
Attitudes—Longitudinal studies. I. Brown, B. Bradford (Benson Bradford), date.
II. Dornbusch, Sanford M. III. Title.
LC205.S74 1996
370.19'342'09794—dc20 96-3662 CIP
ISBN 0-684-80008-X

EIGHT

The Power of Peers

Parents play a central role in influencing their child's development and education, but by the time children have reached the later years of elementary school, friends have taken on tremendous importance in their school life. In order to understand the full complement of influences on school performance and engagement, especially during the adolescent years—and in order to understand the causes of America's achievement problem—we need to look closely at the roles played by peers. Indeed, our research indicates that peers shape student achievement patterns in profound ways, and that in many respects friends are more powerful influences than family members are. For a large number of adolescents, peers—not parents—are the chief determinants of how intensely they are invested in school and how much effort they devote to their education.

THE SOCIAL WORLD OF ADOLESCENCE

In our research, we devoted countless hours to investigating and describing the social world of adolescence. This expenditure of time and energy was necessary because studying peer influences on adolescent behavior entails

much more than studying the influence of the adolescent's close friends. The close friends a young person has, while significant influences in a young person's life, are only a small part of the total complex of peer influence.

The adolescent's social world can be drawn as three concentric circles. In the innermost circle are the youngster's one or two *best friends*. These are the other children with whom the child spends most of his or her free time—at lunch, during free periods, and so on. If you are the parent of a child between the ages of ten and sixteen, take a moment and think about the children who are your child's best friends. These are the children whom your child greets first on arriving at school, and they are also the children whom your child sees last before leaving school at the end of the day. When the telephone rings for your child on a weekday evening or weekend afternoon, more often than not it is one of these pals.

Best friends comprise the inner circle of the social map of adolescence. In the next circle out are the youngsters who are members of the adolescent's *clique*. These adolescents are also the child's friends, but their friendships are not nearly as intimate as are the ones the child has with his or her closest companions, and these relationships may fluctuate in importance from week to week. At any one time, an adolescent's clique usually will have somewhere between six and ten members. Clique members will sit at the same tables in the school cafeteria, hang around with each other during recess, and interact with each other as they travel to and from class and school. These are the children whose names typically pop up in the stories children share with their parents about the events of the school day.

The third circle in the map of adolescent peer relations is composed of the adolescent's *crowd*. The adolescent's crowd is made up of like-minded individuals who share certain features in common with each other but who are not necessarily each other's friends. Indeed, it is possible for adolescents to be members of the same crowd without really knowing each other well at all. This is because adolescents are members of the same crowd by virtue of their common interests, attitudes, and preferred activities, not because of their relationships with each other. What crowd members have in common is not intimacy, but shared identity. But even though crowd members do not share the intimacy of close friends, they influence each other in important ways. An adolescent may not talk much about the members of his or her crowd,

but, as you will read, crowd members greatly influence each other nevertheless.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PEER CROWDS

When adults tend to think of peer influences on adolescent behavior, they tend to think mainly about influences within the innermost circle (best friends), secondarily about influences in the middle circle (the clique), and only marginally, if at all, about influences in the outermost circle (the crowd). This is quite reasonable, since we might expect that individuals will be most influenced by the people with whom they are closest, and least affected by people with whom they share little intimacy. Of course, it is true that during adolescence, as during other periods of life, best friends influence each other's behavior a good deal. But during adolescence, peer influence operates within cliques and crowds in extremely important ways, and adults should probably pay more attention than they do to the ways in which adolescents are influenced by these groups of friends.

It is especially easy to underestimate the power of the adolescent crowd, because its influence is transmitted in less direct, and more subtle, ways than is the influence of the adolescents' close friends or clique. Close friends and clique members influence each other in adolescence much as they influence each other in childhood or adulthood: by providing models whose behavior can be copied ("I'm dressing this way because Jamie looks so cool when she dresses this way"); by rewarding or punishing certain actions, thereby increasing (or decreasing) the likelihood of our repeating them ("I'm never wearing this again because Luke laughed at me"); and by exerting direct pressure to behave one way or another ("Jessie told me I just had to wear this shirt to the party"). Crowds, in contrast, are less common in adulthood, and their influence is less familiar to adults.

Because crowd members do not necessarily know each other personally, they don't influence each other directly—through modeling, reinforcement, or coercion. Crowd members influence each other indirectly, through establishing norms and standards that the members feel they must adhere to. Once the adolescent has identified with a particular crowd, the crowd's standards become internalized, incorporated into his or her own sense of self. As

a consequence, adhering to the norms and standards of the crowd does not feel to the adolescent like succumbing to peer pressure; it feels more like an expression of his or her own identity.

Adults do not understand this distinction very well. When we think of "peer pressure," we tend to envision an adolescent being coerced by friends to engage in a certain behavior ("Come on, just try this cigarette"), in the company of friends who model a specific action and then wait to be imitated ("Everyone is doing it"), or who actively reward or punish the adolescent for behaving in a given way ("You're not really wearing *that*!"). To be sure, such instances of active peer pressure do indeed occur in the daily lives of teenagers. But much of the peer pressure experienced by adolescents is not this active—nor is it necessarily experienced as pressure—although it is no less powerful in its own way than the more active forms.

PEER PRESSURE PEAKS IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE

The less secure we are about our own identity and our own decision-making abilities, the more we are influenced by others' opinions. But the salience of the crowd as an influence on our behavior declines as we become adults. Because adolescence is a time when individuals often have questions about their identity and their ability to function independently, it is inherently a time of heightened vulnerability to the influence of others. While adults are not immune to pressure from their peers, they are significantly less susceptible to it than adolescents are.

In our research, we have been able to chart changes in individuals' susceptibility to peer pressure as they move into and through adolescence. In several different studies, we have found that vulnerability to peer pressure—that is, how easily swayed a person is by the demands of his or her friends—rises as children become teenagers, peaks sometime around eighth or ninth grade, and then begins to decline as individuals move through high school. There is a specific period in development, then—roughly from age twelve through sixteen—when individuals are easily influenced by their peers. And it is during this time that peers begin to play an enormously important role in influencing achievement.

It is especially interesting to juxtapose the developmental course of peer

pressure, with its power peaking in early adolescence, with what we know about the developmental course of parental involvement in schooling. As noted in the last chapter, national studies of American families show that parental involvement drops off precipitously between elementary and secondary school—precisely at the time when youngsters' susceptibility to peer influence is rapidly rising. Moreover, our evidence indicates that this sort of parental disengagement is not limited to school matters, but affects a whole range of issues, including monitoring and regulating the child's relationships with friends, the child's use of leisure time, and the child's choice of activities. To the extent that diminished involvement in their children's lives renders parents' influence less powerful, the door is opened for peers to step in and exert a significant impact on each other's behavior—including their behavior in school. And this is precisely what happens between the sixth and tenth grades. At this point, in fact, children's achievement is more easily influenced by their peers than at any other time in their school career.

SHOULD ADULTS PANIC?

When adults are told that young adolescents are highly susceptible to the influence of friends—and, in fact, that friends may be more potent sources of influence than parents—their first reaction is almost always tinged with anxiety and fear. The stereotype of the adolescent peer group portrays it as an influence that inevitably affects teenagers for the worse—that tempts them into trouble, steers them away from the endeavors that adults value, and coerces them to engage in risky or illicit activities.

In reality, this view of the adolescent's social world is far too simplistic. True, there are peers who encourage their friends to be sexually active or to experiment with drugs, and there are some who cajole their classmates into cutting class or skipping school. But research tells us that there are also teenagers who put pressure on their friends to stay away from drugs, remain committed to school, and refrain from sex, and that these peers can be just as powerful in their influence on other teenagers as peers who are trying to steer other students in the wrong direction. In other words, although peer pressure in early adolescence is a given, *harmful* peer pressure is not.

Friends can influence each other's school performance positively or neg-

atively. As adults suspect, an adolescent whose friends disparage school success will be steered away from scholastic achievement. All other things being equal, a B student whose friends are C students or who are alienated from school, will usually see his or her own grades decline over time as a result of associating with these less academically oriented peers. But, by the same token, an adolescent whose friends value doing well in school will benefit by his or her contact with these peers. That is, a B student whose friends are A students will improve his or her school performance over time as a result of these friendships. Although all adolescents will be influenced by their friends, the specific direction of influence depends on who one's friends are and what they value. Because of this, it is not enough to discuss peer pressure in the abstract—as if it were a monolithic negative influence on adolescents' behavior. We must also know the climate of an adolescent's peer crowd, the characteristics of his or her close friends, and the values held by the members of his or her clique.

Identifying an adolescent's close friends and clique mates is simple enough; we can just ask teenagers to tell us who their best friends are and whom they hang around with. But what about the more amorphous peer crowds? How do we identify the crowds that influence youngsters' behavior?

In order to answer this question in our research, we organized, in each school, a series of small "focus groups" composed of students who represented a cross section of the student body. In these focus groups, we asked students to talk about the main crowds in their school and to identify students who were exemplary members of each of the crowds.

Although we conducted our research in different parts of the country and in very different sorts of schools, we found striking similarities in the types of crowds that were identified in each school. Let's look for a moment at this part of adolescent society.

THE ADOLESCENT SOCIETY

All schools have crowds that emphasize social status, socializing and popularity, although in most schools this group of the socially elite is divided into two somewhat different crowds: "populars" (popularity-conscious students who have a moderately strong commitment to academic achievement but

report moderate involvement in delinquent behavior and illicit drug use) and "jocks" (who are quite similar to "populars," but less academically oriented, and not as involved in drug use—except for alcohol, which they often use to excess). Counterbalanced against these elite crowds are one or more alienated crowds—which are referred to by students as "druggies," "burnouts," "greasers," and the like. Along with heavy involvement in drug use and delinquent activities, members of these crowds tend to be inattentive to schoolwork and often hostile toward teachers and other school personnel. Finally, nearly all schools have a large, amorphous crowd, consisting of "average," "normal," or "in-between" students who do not distinguish themselves in any particular area—including school performance.

In addition to these elite, alienated, and average crowds, schools also typically have at least one group of high achievers—so-called "brains" or "intellectuals"—students who thrive on academics, forge close relations with school staff, and avoid drugs and deviant activities. Most schools also feature a very small, socially inept crowd—"loners" or "nerds," as they are often called—whose members are generally low in social status and, consequently, self-esteem.

Although the names of these crowds may vary from school to school, or region to region (e.g., "populars" might be called "preppies," "stuck-ups," or "socies"; "druggies" might be called "freaks" or "stoners"), as far as we can tell, their existence is ubiquitous, at least within public schools. In racially mixed schools, we also find crowds that are defined primarily by ethnicity, and only secondarily by other attributes. For example, some schools have crowds that are characterized by students only as being composed of Black students, or Vietnamese students, or Mexican students, and so on.

Once we had assembled a list of crowds for each of the schools we were studying, we attempted to locate each student in the crowd structure of his or her school. In order to do this, we asked adolescents in each school to classify *other* students, rather than themselves, in the school's crowds. We interviewed several pairs of students in each school and asked them to tell us which crowd each of their classmates was a part of (we prompted them with class lists or yearbook pictures). By repeating this exercise across numerous pairs of raters, we were able to identify most students' crowd affiliation. Although most teenagers say that they themselves are unclassifiable, adoles-

cents have surprisingly little difficulty in identifying which group (or groups) their classmates belong to.

THE PREVAILING NORM: GETTING BY

With this social map in mind, then, what did our study tell us about the peer norms and standards operative within the typical American school? Let's begin by looking at the most common crowds found in American schools and what they stand for. As you will see, there isn't much of a place in the typical American high school for students whose primary concern is academic excellence.

The popularity-conscious, socially elite crowds, whose concerns tend to revolve around socializing, dating, and maintaining social status among friends, account for approximately 20 percent of students in a typical high school. Students in these crowds may do well enough to get by without getting into academic trouble, but they rarely strive for scholastic excellence—most of their grades are B's. Another 20 percent of students belong to one or more of the alienated crowds, where identities are centered around drugs, drinking, delinquency, or defiance; these students are openly hostile to academics—on average, they earn C's. About 30 percent of students describe themselves as "average"—not especially opposed to academic pursuits, but not exactly striving for success, either; like those in the social crowds, their grades hover around straight B's. And between 10 and 15 percent of students belong to a crowd defined by ethnicity, although this figure varies considerably from school to school, depending on the school's ethnic composition. The extent to which members of ethnically defined peer crowds are invested in academics depends largely on the particular ethnic group in question, as I'll explain later in this chapter.

What about the explicitly academically oriented crowds—the "brains," the "intellectuals," and so on? Despite the fact that these students are enrolled in more difficult, more demanding courses—many of them take honors and advanced-placement courses—they maintain an A– average in school grades. But whereas some 70 percent of students belong to one of the solid-B, popularity-conscious elites, one of the low-achieving, alienated crowds, or to the large mass of "average" students, *less than 5 percent of all*

students are members of a high-achieving crowd that defines itself mainly on the basis of academic excellence.

Not only is there little room in most schools for the academically oriented, there is substantial peer pressure on students to underachieve. Adults might think that virtually all teenagers would rather do well in school than do poorly, but our studies suggest that this is not necessarily the case. To be sure, the prevailing expectation among American teenagers is that one ought to avoid failing in school and do what it takes to graduate. But our surveys indicate that among American teenagers, there is widespread peer pressure not to do *too* well. For example:

- Although most adolescents say that their friends believe that it is important to graduate from high school (73%) and to go to college (46%), fewer (32%) say that their friends think it is important to get good grades or to go to "one of the best colleges in the U.S." (20%). Nearly as many (16%) say that their friends think it is important that they be "willing to party."
- One out of every six students deliberately hides his or her intelligence and interest in doing well while in class because they are "worried what their friends might think." One in five students say their friends make fun of people who try to do well in school.
- More than one-half of all students say they almost never discuss their schoolwork with their friends. More than one-quarter say they have never studied with their friends. Only one in five has studied with his or her friends more than five times during the past school year.
- We asked the adolescents in our survey to tell us which crowd their friends belonged to and which crowd they'd most like to be a part of. When asked which crowd they would most like to belong to, five times as many students say the "populars" or "jocks" as say the "brains." Three times as many say they would rather be "partyers" or "druggies" than "brains." Of all of the crowds, the "brains" were least happy with who they are—nearly half wished they were in a different crowd.

PEER INFLUENCES ON ACHIEVEMENT

Although the prevailing norm in most high schools is, evidently, to "get by without showing off," there are pockets within each school in which aca-

demic achievement is admired, and others in which it is actively discouraged. These cliques and crowds that define a youngster's social world are significant influences on the child's academic performance, because each crowd has its particular set of normative standards and expectations for achievement and behavior in school, and because adolescents attempt to conform to the norms and expectations of their friends. As a consequence, an individual student's school performance will depend in large measure on which crowd the student belongs to, and what that crowd's expectations are for behavior in school. Simply put, given several adolescents of equal scholastic ability, those who are members of intellectual cliques and crowds will achieve more in school than those who are members of the socially elite cliques and crowds, and both groups of adolescents will outperform those who are members of alienated crowds.

This seems reasonable enough, of course—it is hardly surprising that members of academically oriented crowds do best in school and members of alienated crowds do worst. Perhaps it is merely that students who *choose* to associate with brainy classmates are themselves more academically inclined, whereas those that select friends from the alienated crowds are themselves less oriented toward school. After all, it is not as if adolescents are *placed* within different peer groups. How can we be certain that friendships really *affect* students' school performance, rather than simply *reflect* it. Do friends really influence each other—is it really a case of "the company they keep"—or is it simply that "birds of a feather flock together"?

By tracking students over a three-year period, we were able to see how they were doing in school at the beginning of the time period, which friends they were spending time with, and whether their school performance and behavior changed over time as a result. By comparing the academic careers of students who began high school with equivalent grades, but who had different sorts of friends during the school years, we were able to see whether the type of friends that adolescents have actually makes a difference in their school performance.

The answer is that it most certainly does, especially in two areas: academic performance and delinquency. Youngsters whose friends were more academically oriented—that is, whose friends had higher grades, spent more time on homework, had higher educational aspirations, and who were more involved in extracurricular activities—did better over the course of high

school than students who began school with similar records but who had less academically oriented friends. Similarly, students whose friends were more delinquent—who used more drugs and alcohol and who had more conduct problems—developed more problems themselves over time than did adolescents who began the study with the same behavior profile but who had friends who were less delinquent.

These findings tell us, then, that parents have legitimate reason to be concerned about the qualities and values of their children's friends, especially during early adolescence, when susceptibility to peer influence runs strong. There is also reason to be concerned about the characteristics of the crowd to which an adolescent belongs, since our study found that this influence matters, too. All other things being equal, adolescents who are members of more academically oriented crowds do better in school than other students, whereas those who are members of more alienated crowds do worse and are more likely to get into trouble.

How large a difference do friends make? In one set of analyses, we were able to contrast the influence of best friends with the influence of parents on two important outcomes: the grades in school that the adolescent was getting, and the adolescent's amount of drug and alcohol use. Remember from the previous two chapters that we had found consistent evidence that adolescents from authoritative homes performed better in school and were less involved in problem behavior than their peers. How does the "power of authoritative parenting" stack up in comparison to the "power of the peer group"? *At least by high school, the influence of friends on school performance and drug use is more substantial than the influence of parents' practices at home.* Parents may influence their children's long-term educational plans, but when it comes to day-to-day influences on schooling—whether students attend class, how much time they spend on homework, how hard they try in school, and the grades they bring home—friends are more influential than parents.

The realization that, by high school, peers play as great a role—if not greater—in influencing student achievement and behavior as parents do led us to ask two important questions: First, how do students end up in the crowds to which they belong? Second, does the power of the peer group help explain the consistent ethnic differences in achievement we observed in our

study? In other words, is the superior achievement of Asian students, and the inferior achievement of Black and Latino students, due to differences in the peers these youngsters hang out with?

Let's begin by looking at the first question: How do students end up in a specific niche within the adolescent society?

HOW ADOLESCENTS SORT THEMSELVES INTO CROWDS

What is the sorting process through which some adolescents become part of the "brain" crowd and others become "jocks"? What makes some students become "partyers" and others "druggies"? Why do adolescents end up with the particular circle of friends they have?

The results of our study point to three sets of forces that determine in which crowd an adolescent will end up: (1) the adolescent's personality and interests, which in part are determined by the way the student has been raised by his or her parents; (2) the types of peer crowds available to that student in his or her particular school; and (3) the tactics that parents use to "manage" their child's friendships. In describing how these three sets of forces work together, I have found it helpful to use a sort of astronautical metaphor that has three main parts: the launch, the territory, and the navigational plan.

THE LAUNCH

The first set of factors—the child's personality and interests—refers to the general direction in which the child is "launched" as parents prepare to send the youngster on a journey through adolescence. When the child is six or seven, adolescence seems a distant destination, but parents are already "aiming" the child toward certain goals—even if they themselves are not fully aware of what they are doing. As a result of this goal-setting, during the early elementary school years, a sort of "launch trajectory" is established for the child, especially with regard to school matters. Launching the child on a certain trajectory does not guarantee that he or she will reach a particular destination, but it does point the child in a general direction.

At one extreme are children who are launched on a route that is headed in the general direction of educational excellence, instilled with values that

stress scholastic success, and who are expected to make school achievement a top priority. In the child's upbringing, traits like perseverance, achievement motivation, and responsibility are emphasized, and parents put into place high standards for achievement. At the other extreme are children whose launch trajectory does not aim the child toward school success. The child may be aimed toward a different goal or, more likely, toward no specific goal at all. Socialization in these households may be overly permissive or inconsistent, and parental expectations and performance standards are unclear. Between these two extremes are other trajectories, which vary in the degree to which they point the child toward school success and in the strength and importance of schooling as an activity.

THE TERRITORY

Because peers play such an important role in influencing children's day-to-day behaviors once they reach adolescence, the territory into which a child is launched—that is, the particular types of peers and peer crowds he or she is likely to run into—is as important as the launch trajectory on which the child is initially placed. Once a child becomes involved with a certain group of friends, these peers begin to have an effect on his or her behavior. To continue the astronautical metaphor, we can think of peer crowds as sorts of "planets" toward which the child is launched. Once a child ends up in the "orbit" of a given peer group, the power of that group keeps the child within its orbit and encourages the child to adopt a certain set of behaviors and outlooks. The longer a child orbits around a certain group of friends, the tighter the rein the group has on the child's behavior, and the more established that behavior pattern becomes.

We saw this quite clearly when we looked at adolescent drug use. The most important determinant of an adolescent's initial experimentation with drugs—primarily alcohol and marijuana—is the home environment. Specifically, adolescents are more likely to begin drinking and experiment with marijuana when they come from households that are exceptionally permissive or in which the parents are disengaged, and they are less likely to experiment with these substances when their parents are authoritative. This is not very surprising. But it is the peer group, and not the home environment, that determines whether an adolescent will progress from experimentation

with drugs to regular use. Adolescent "experimenters" who had drug-using friends were far more likely to become regular users than were "experimenters" whose friends were not using alcohol or other drugs. In other words, parental permissiveness or disengagement may launch an adolescent in the direction of drug-using peer groups, but whether drug use becomes a part of the adolescent's regular pattern of behavior depends largely on the peer group that he or she joins. An adolescent from a permissive family who does not connect with a drug-using peer group is unlikely to get into trouble with drugs, despite the permissive home environment.

We can apply the same logic to understanding the dual roles of parents and peers in school achievement. Parents may launch their child on an academic trajectory, but if there is no academically oriented crowd for that student to connect up with, the launching will have little effect. On the other hand, if there are *only* academically oriented peer crowds in a given setting, what parents do at home, in terms of the trajectory they launch their child on, will make relatively less difference, since their child will likely end up in a crowd that emphasizes school success anyway.

To a certain extent, then, the impact of the home environment on the adolescent's behavior will depend to a large measure on the peer groups that inhabit the adolescent's social world. Knowing this helps us understand why the impact of parents on their children's achievement, while significant, is not all-powerful. Parents may socialize a child in a certain direction, but whether that socialization will be successful—that is, whether the adolescent will actually reach the desired goal—will also depend on the peer influences he or she encounters during the journey. This, in turn, will depend on which peers are available for the child to associate with, and how the adolescent navigates among the different circles of classmates within his or her school.

NAVIGATING THROUGH THE ADOLESCENT SOCIETY

Although it is true that parents have less of a *direct* effect on their children during adolescence than during childhood, our studies show that parents can have a powerful *indirect* effect by steering the child toward some peer groups and away from others. Through such piloting, parents can exert some control over the types of peers their child spends time with and, consequently, over the peer influences to which their child is exposed.

There are two chief ways in which parents do this. One way is by attempting to exert some control over the child's choice of friends and out-of-school activities. This, of course, is difficult once the child has entered adolescence, but it is not impossible. Indeed, in contrast to the widely held view that there is little parents can do when it comes to influencing their child's choice of friends, we find in our research that families vary a great deal in the extent to which parents monitor and regulate their child's friendships. More important, parents who exercise greater control over which peers their children spend time with have children who do better in school and who are less likely to get into trouble.

A second, and potentially more powerful, way in which parents influence their child's choice of friends is by selecting the settings in which their child will spend time—by living in one neighborhood as opposed to another, by choosing one school over another, and by involving the child in certain types of after-school and weekend activities. This is really a matter of playing the percentages, trying to maximize the number of "good" peers a child comes into contact with and minimizing the number of "bad" peer influences in the child's environment. When parents maximize the number of good peers in their child's environment, they are less likely to need to exert control over their child's choice of specific friends, since the odds are good that by chance alone the child will come into contact with peers who are likely to be positive influences on his or her development. In essence, although parents can't choose their children's friends, they can influence their child's choices by defining the available pool of possible peers. One way that parents can do this is by making sure that their child's world is adequately populated with other children who themselves have been raised in authoritative families—families that, as I have explained, tend to produce the most well-adjusted children.

WHY NEIGHBORHOODS MATTER

A clear example of this phenomenon was revealed when we looked at how neighborhoods affect children's behavior and performance in school. Because our sample was so large, we were able to compare adolescents who went to the same school but lived in different neighborhoods within the

school district. What we found was that adolescents who live in neighborhoods in which a large proportion of families are authoritative perform better in school and are less likely to get into trouble than adolescents who come from identical home environments—and who go to the same school—but who live in neighborhoods in which the population of authoritative families is much lower.

Why would growing up in a particular neighborhood matter, above and beyond the influence of the home and school environment? Because where a family lives affects the pool of peers their child comes into contact with, and this, in turn, influences the child's behavior. If you are a good parent and you live in a neighborhood with other good parents, chances are that the lessons you have tried so hard to teach your child at home will be reinforced when your child comes into contact with other children, and other adults, in the community.

I want to stress here that choosing a "good" neighborhood in which to settle and raise a family is not the same as choosing an affluent neighborhood. Although, as a general rule, the prevalence of authoritative parenting rises, and that of disengaged parenting falls, as one moves up the socioeconomic ladder, parenting style and family income are by no means perfectly correlated. Within any particular social class range, therefore, there is considerable variability in how children are raised, and it is possible both for a well-to-do family to end up in a terrible neighborhood (so far as the quality of parenting is concerned) and for a family of more modest means to end up in a neighborhood that provides a wonderful social environment for children.

What specific factors increase the likelihood that a given neighborhood will provide a good social environment for the child? Based on our research, parents should look for a high level of parental involvement in the local schools, a high level of parental participation in organized activities serving children (sports programs, arts programs, etc.), and a high level of parental monitoring and supervision of children. Our research shows that children who grow up in such neighborhoods fare better. Even if their *own* parents are not especially involved in school, active in their child's life, or vigilant supervisors of their child's activities, the children benefit from contact with peers whose parents have these characteristics. And for parents who *are* in-

volved, active, and vigilant, living in a community in which there is a high proportion of like-minded parents gives an added boost to the beneficial effects of an authoritative home environment.

SCHOOL CHOICE: CHOOSING SCHOOLS OR CHOOSING PEER GROUPS?

Our findings on the importance of peers as influences on adolescent achievement and behavior are interesting in light of current debates about school choice. Most debates about proposals to increase parents' choice of schools—for example, tuition tax credits, giving parents vouchers to use for private school tuition, or permitting parents to choose among several public schools within their area—have focused on the impact of these policies on schools' practices. Proponents of school choice have argued that permitting parents to choose among schools—either among private and public schools, or among only public schools—will enhance school quality because it will force schools to compete with each other. Opponents of school choice programs contend that providing parents with vouchers to use for private schools will undermine the quality of public schools (by siphoning resources out of schools' coffers and directly into parents' hands). In addition, opponents argue that encouraging competition among public schools will ultimately widen the gap between good schools and bad ones, since the good ones, over time, will become more selective and attract better and better students, while the bad ones will ultimately have to serve a larger and larger proportion of ill-prepared students.

An important part of the case made by school choice proponents is the observation that students attending private schools outperform those in public schools. One of the most important elements of this argument is that the observed achievement difference between private and public school students persists even after taking into account the different family backgrounds of these two groups of students (as one would expect, private school students, on average, come from more affluent families). The usual interpretation of the achievement differential between students from private schools and those from public ones is not, then, that the students attending the two kinds of schools are inherently different from each other, but that

private schools have higher standards, more rigorous requirements, and more strenuous disciplinary practices. As a consequence, it is argued, students attending private schools take more demanding courses, work harder, behave themselves better, and, ultimately, learn more in school and perform better on achievement tests.

An equally plausible alternative, though, is that the achievement differential between public and private high school students is not due to differences between their families *or* between their schools, but to differences between their peer groups. Comparisons that take family background into account do not control for the more intangible factors that distinguish students who are sent to private school from those who attend public school, such as motivation, self-reliance, and the knowledge that one's parents have made a financial sacrifice for one's education. In all likelihood, students who attend private and parochial schools are exposed to a higher proportion of peers with high educational aspirations and good study habits, and this exposure positively affects their own behavior, entirely independent of the instructional climate of the school. Although our study did not include students from private schools, our findings on the importance of peers, as well as a wealth of research on the minimal effects of school differences on student achievement, are consistent with this interpretation.

When parents are choosing a school, they are not only choosing a principal, a school facility, and a faculty. They are also choosing classmates—and potential friends—for their child. Our study suggests that it may be this aspect of school choice—the choice of a peer group—that may be the most important, and that parents should keep this in mind when selecting a school for their child.

ETHNIC DIFFERENCES IN ACHIEVEMENT: THE IMPORTANCE OF PEERS

Our findings on the importance of peers in adolescent achievement also bear directly on the question of ethnic differences in school performance. Remember, one of the puzzles we encountered when we looked at the role of the family in school achievement was that Asian parents did not, on the surface, appear to be doing anything particularly special that would account

for their children's remarkable success, nor were Black parents doing anything noteworthy that would explain their children's relatively weaker performance. Overall, Asian students in our study were performing better than we would expect on the basis of their parents' practices, and Black students were performing worse. Something in Asian students' lives protects them, even if they are exposed to less than perfect parenting, while something in Black students' lives undermines the positive effects of parental involvement and authoritativeness.

According to our study, this "something" is the peer group. One clear reason for Asian students' success is that Asian students are far more likely than others to have friends who place a great deal of emphasis on academic achievement. Asian-American students are, in general, significantly more likely to say that their friends believe it is important to do well in school, and significantly less likely than other students to say that their friends place a premium on having an active social life. Not surprisingly, Asian students are the most likely to say that they work hard in school to keep up with their friends.

Asian students' descriptions of their friends as hardworking and academically oriented are corroborated by information we gathered independently from the friends themselves. You may recall that one of the unique features of our study was our ability to match information provided by adolescents with information provided directly by their friends. This provided us with a more accurate assessment of each adolescent's social network than would have been possible had we been forced to depend on adolescents' *perceptions* of their friends' behavior, since such perceptions can be erroneous (like adults, adolescents tend to overstate the degree of similarity that exists between their friends and themselves).

When we look at friends' activity patterns for adolescents from different ethnic groups, we see quite clearly that the friends with whom Asian students socialize place a relatively greater emphasis on academics than other students do, whereas the opposite is true for Black and Hispanic teenagers. Specifically, Asian students' friends have higher performance standards (that is, they hold tougher standards for what grades are acceptable), spend more time on homework, are more committed to education, and earn considerably higher grades in school. Black and Hispanic students' friends earn lower

grades, spend less time on their studies, and have substantially lower performance standards. White students' friends fall somewhere between these two extremes on these various indicators.

When I first saw these findings, my presumption was that they were due entirely to racial segregation in adolescent peer groups. In other words, if Asian students are performing better in school than other students, and Black and Hispanic students worse, and if peer groups are constituted mainly along ethnic lines, it necessarily follows that Asian students will have friends who are doing better in school, and Black and Hispanic students will have friends who are doing more poorly.

It turns out that the segregation argument is only partly true. While it is certainly the case that adolescent peer groups are characterized by a high degree of ethnic segregation—about 80 percent of White and Black students, and more than half of Asian and Hispanic students have best friends from the same ethnic group—there are sufficient numbers of cross-racial friendships in any school to ask whether the pattern described above holds for students who travel in integrated circles. The answer is that it does, at least for the most part. Even if we look solely at youngsters whose best friends are from a different ethnic background, we still find that Asian students' friends place a greater emphasis on doing well in school, and Black and Hispanic students' friends, relatively less. Once again, White students fall somewhere in between.

Peer pressure among Asian students and their friends to do well in school is so strong that any deficiencies in the home environment—for example, parenting that is either too authoritarian or emotionally distant—are rendered almost unimportant. It is, of course, true that Asian students from authoritative homes perform better in school than those from disengaged ones. But an Asian student who comes from a less-than-optimal home environment is likely to be "saved" from academic failure by falling in with friends who value academic excellence and provide the necessary support for achievement.

Why is it so likely that an Asian student will fall into an academically oriented peer crowd and benefit from its influence? Ironically, Asian student success is at least partly a by-product of the fact that adolescents do not have equal access to different peer groups in American high schools. Asian stu-

dents are "permitted" to join intellectual crowds, like the "brains," but the more socially oriented crowds—the "populars," "jocks," and "partyers"—are far less open to them. For example, whereas 37 percent of the White students in our sample were members of one of these three socially oriented crowds, only 14 percent of the Asian students were—even though more than 20 percent of the Asian students said they *wished* they could be members of these crowds (slightly less than one-third of the White students aspired to membership in one of these crowds). In essence, at least some Asian students who would like to be members of nonacademically oriented crowds are denied membership in them.

A similar argument has been advanced by several Asian social scientists in explaining the extraordinary success of Asian-American students. They have noted that academic success is one of the few routes to social mobility open to Asians in American culture—think for a moment of the relative absence of Asian-American entertainers, athletes, politicians, and so on. For Asian youngsters, who see most nonacademic pathways to success blocked off, they have "no choice" but to apply themselves in school. This is why Asian students are so much more likely than other youngsters to subscribe to the belief that academic failure will bring terrible consequences. When individuals believe that there are few opportunities to success through routes other than education, doing well in school becomes that much more important.

Because Asian students find it more difficult than White students to break into the more socially oriented crowds, they drift toward academically focused peer groups whose members value and encourage scholastic success. The result of this drift is that a large number of Asian students, even those who are less academically talented than their peers, end up in crowds that are highly oriented toward success in the classroom. Once in these crowds, Asian students benefit tremendously from the network of academically oriented peers. Indeed, one of the striking features of Asian student friendships is how frequently they turn to each other for academic assistance and consultation.

The opposite is true for Black and Latino students, who are far more likely than other students to find themselves in peer groups that actually devalue academic accomplishment. Indeed, peer pressure among Black and

Latino students *not* to excel in school is so strong in many communities—even among middle-class adolescents—that many positive steps that Black and Latino parents have taken to facilitate their children's school success are undermined. In essence, much of the good work that Black and Latino parents are doing at home is being undone by countervailing pressures in their youngsters' peer groups. As a consequence, parental efforts in these ethnic groups do not have the payoff that we would expect.

This is true not only in racially integrated schools, but in segregated schools as well. In one well-known study of an all-black, inner-city high school, for example, the researchers found that students who tried to do well in school were teased and openly ostracized by their peers for "acting White." Students were criticized—accused of acting as if they were "better" than their peers—if they earned good grades, exerted effort in class, or attempted to please their teachers. Those who wished to do well academically were forced to hide their success and to develop other means of maintaining their popularity among classmates in order to compensate for being good students, such as clowning around in class or excelling in some athletic activity. Why would Black and Latino peer groups demean academic success? In many minority peer groups, scholastic success is equated with "selling out" one's cultural identity, as some sort of surrender to the control of White, middle-class America.

I found this so interesting that I asked an extremely bright African-American undergraduate in one of my seminars at Temple University, who was familiar with our research, to help me better understand this phenomenon. The student said that the finding rang true for her. She had been raised in dire poverty within inner-city Washington, D.C., and she was the only one of her school friends to have made it out of the ghetto; as she explained, all of her former schoolmates were either on drugs, in jail, on welfare, or raising an infant. She was torn about where she would settle after graduating from college; the pull to return to her home community was very strong, but she felt that she could not face her former friends. Whenever she returned home during school vacations, she was taunted for thinking too highly of herself and teased for not yet having given birth to a child. She said that the pressure her friends put on her over the years to drop out of college and return to her roots was enormous. In fact, she said, her friends inti-

mated that the only reason she had gone off to college and avoided early pregnancy was because she was not physically attractive enough to interest a man.

Why is succeeding in school equated in some circles with "acting White" or "selling out"? As Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu, two African-American social scientists who have studied this phenomenon explain:

> [W]hite Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge that black Americans are capable of intellectual achievement, and . . . black Americans subsequently began to doubt their own intellectual ability, began to define academic success as white people's prerogative, and began to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously, from emulating white people in academic striving, i.e., from "acting white.

One of my colleagues at the University of Georgia, Layli Phillips, points out that this message—that academic success is somehow incompatible with a healthy Black identity—is perpetuated by a mass media that emphasizes and glorifies low-income African-American peer culture, making it attractive even to middle-class African-American youngsters. African-American parents who want their children to succeed in school are not only battling the force of the Black peer culture (which in many circles demeans academic success), but are fighting a difficult battle against the very powerful images of anti-intellectual Black youth portrayed as normative in music, movies, and television.

We heard variations on the "acting White" theme many, many times over the course of our interviews with high school students. The sad truth is that many students, and many Black students in particular, are forced to choose between doing well in school and having friends. Although there are crowds within each high school in which academic success is valued and in which successful students are respected, these crowds tend to be dominated by White students, and peer groups in American high schools are so ethnically segregated that it is extremely difficult for Black and Latino students to join these crowds. Thus, in many schools, there is a near-complete absence of identifiable peer groups that respect and encourage academic success and are genuinely open to Black and Latino students. As a consequence, it is far

more difficult for a talented African-American student than it is for a comparably skilled Asian or White student to find the necessary peer support for achievement.

Among the high-achieving Black students in our sample, for example, only 2 percent said their friends were members of the "brain" crowd, as opposed to 8 percent of the White students and 10 percent of the Asian students with the same grades in school. Interestingly, the proportion of high-achieving Black students who said they *wished* they were members of the "brain" crowd (6 percent) was about the same as it was for White students (5 percent). Thus, while just as many Black students as White students aspire toward membership in the "brain" crowd, membership in this group is more open to White than to Black students.

It is important to understand that the pressure against academic excellence that is pervasive within Black and Latino peer groups is not unique to these ethnic groups. Rather, what we see in these peer groups is an extreme case of what exists within most White peer groups as well. As noted earlier, the prevailing norm in most adolescent peer groups is one of "getting by without showing off"—doing what it takes to avoid getting into trouble in school, but at the same time shunning academic excellence. The chief difference appears to be not in the different ethnic groups' avoidance of excellence—this is common among all but the Asian youngsters—but in how the different ethnic groups define academic "trouble."

We measured students' perception of this "trouble threshold" by asking them what the lowest grade was that they could receive without their parents getting angry. The students' answers to this question confirmed our suspicion: Among Black and Latino students, not until their grades dipped below a C– did these adolescents perceive that they would get into trouble. Among White students, however, the average "trouble threshold" was one entire letter grade higher—somewhere between a B and a C. And among Asian students, the average grade below which students expected their parents to become angry was an astounding A–! One reason for the relatively poorer school performance of Black and Latino students, then, is that these students typically have different definitions of "poor" grades, relative to their White and Asian counterparts. And because peer crowds tend to be ethnically segregated, different normative standards develop within Black and

Latino peer groups than in other crowds. Conversely, one reason for the remarkable success of Asian students is that they have a much stricter, less forgiving definition of academic failure than their Black, White, and Latino peers, and this definition shapes peer norms.

Our findings suggest, then, that a large part of ethnic differences in high school achievement does not derive from differences in the ways in which parents from different ethnic groups raise their children—that is, the "launch" they get from the home environment—but come instead from differences in the peer environments—the "territory"—that youngsters from different backgrounds encounter. At a time in development when children are especially susceptible to the power of peer influence, the circle of friends an adolescent can choose from may make all the difference between excellent and mediocre school performance.

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