



---

6-1-2007

## Better Together: Restoring the American Community, by Robert D. Putnam & Lewis M. Feldstein

Scott Kmack

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kmack, S. (2007). Better Together: Restoring the American Community, by Robert D. Putnam & Lewis M. Feldstein. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 10 (4). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1004122013>

This Book Review is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu). To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email [JCE@nd.edu](mailto:JCE@nd.edu).

included in the final versions of the bills that became law. The author provides a useful—but too brief—introduction to the legislative process at the beginning of the book, and the book's greatest weakness is that the intricacies of this complicated process grow confusing. In some places, the details of legislative wrangling that saved or killed some bills may be difficult to follow for readers with little background knowledge about the legislative process.

Despite the excessive detail of some passages, *Political Education* remains a highly readable, accessible introduction to the field of education policy, and the book is particularly strong as a short history of federal aid to schools. Cross makes it clear that Catholic schools have influenced the history of federal educational policy, though the book does not offer discussion of recent initiatives like the DC Choice Incentive Act. While an insider's perspective sometimes hinders Cross's ability to connect with the reader, ultimately the author's vast experience and intimate knowledge of the individual policymakers combine to create a compelling and thorough look at the issues and people who have shaped federal education policy.

*Christian M. Dallavis is a doctoral candidate in the Joint Program in English and Education at the University of Michigan.*

---

## **BETTER TOGETHER: RESTORING THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY**

ROBERT D. PUTNAM & LEWIS M. FELDSTEIN  
SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2003  
\$26.95, 336 pages

*Reviewed by Scott Kmack*

Society has lost much of its social and communal focus over the last several decades. Few live in places where they share with their neighbors, work in an environment where dialogue replaces e-mail and memos, or belong to community organizations that bring members together under a shared vision. We, as a country, have become inwardly focused, isolated from one another, and lack the civic participation that was alive and healthy generations before.

Is there a possibility for renewal and change, or are we on a course for continued individualism?

*Better Together* attempts to provide hope that true community does exist in our country today and can be used to create positive effects. The book is the successor to Putnam's earlier work, *Bowling Alone*, in which extensive statistical research was presented on the attitudes and actions of Americans in the 20th century, finding

over the last three decades involvement in civic associations, participation in public affairs, membership in churches and social clubs and unions, time spent with family and friends and neighbors, philanthropic giving, even simple trust in people, all have fallen by 25 to 50 percent. (p. 4)

The basis for *Better Together* is Putnam and Feldstein's concept of social capital, a term referring to "social networks, norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and trustworthiness" (p. 4) that can be utilized in "developing networks of relationships that weave individuals into groups and communities" (p. 1). The authors describe the process of creating social capital in terms of bonding, an attempt to bring people together and is often inwardly focused, and bridging, the development of connections across diverse communities. These two areas of social capital are presented in the form of 12 stories from around the country dealing with issues ranging from neighborhood revitalization in Boston to the effect of a virtual community—craigslist.org—on the culture of a city to the community focus of a large company and the transformative effect on UPS workers around the United States. The idealism represented in these successes are inspirational and provide the optimism that, although community is deteriorating as a whole in society, there are still occasions to build social capital and use the resources to create positive change.

This book is correctly entitled, *Better Together*, as Putnam and Feldstein clearly establish the positive results of leadership and development in the context of social capital. The authors offer clear signs of hope that there are stories of community building and advancement in our world today, despite the empirical evidence showing the decline of civic discourse. Stories such as that of the "Experience Corps," a small army of elderly school volunteers in Philadelphia, provides a clear vision and plan for social change. The concept of retired citizens giving 15 hours of their time a week to build relationships in an elementary school and tutor students from diverse backgrounds is visionary. Further, the details of the program provide a learning experience in organizational advancement in this particular environment, including the foundational value of commitment, the building of genuine relationships between the volunteers, students, and school, and the development of the

organization through the use of the existing organizations of the American Association of Retired Persons and federally funded National Senior Service Corps. The results of the initiative were undeniable, with scores of 75% of Experience Corps students increasing one grade level. This success is not simply the result of having additional tutors at a school, but the investment in social capital, serving both groups of constituents in the service relationship.

However encouraging, *Better Together* stops short of providing the reader with the tools to build social capital for oneself and embark on a path of change in one's community. Instead, much of the book is an episodic collection of features aimed to distract us from the loss of social capital and community on a larger level. There is the looming societal question of loss of cooperative spirit in general that must be answered. Putnam and Feldstein begin with the disclaimer that *Better Together* is "not a textbook of social-capital creation or a casebook designed to elucidate or test a particular theory of social-capital development" (p. 5), but perhaps that is what it should or could be. Although Putnam and Feldstein intentionally avoid giving specific theoretic models of organization, one may finish this book inspired, yet overwhelmed with the task of how to understand the needs of oneself in relation to the community, understanding existing organizations and structures that surround a neighborhood that are necessary for transformation, and how to begin the process of positive community change that will most likely take many years to come to fruition. Each example in the book cites specific conditions that existed in a community or organization, including visionary leaders and willing partners who made the given situation ripe for change. As Putnam and Feldstein state, "Building social capital depends both on the actions of protagonists and on key enabling structural conditions in the broader environment" (p. 271). However, placed within the context of our own communities, perhaps the issues discussed in this book would have never been faced. For instance, the chapter on the growth of civic engagement in Portland, Oregon, identifies the importance of the city's historic population patterns and "offers examples of the government genuinely responding to its citizens' calls for participation and that responsiveness encouraging further participation" (p. 248). This context is specific to Portland and could not be replicated in other cities given their specific history and government. Individuals appreciate learning of the successes of others, but also need to be empowered with the skills to utilize social capital to build partnerships themselves.

There are clear implications of building social capital in the education world. In the chapter describing craigslist.org in San Francisco, Putnam and Feldstein describe the uniqueness of community by stating, "Communities generally define themselves by both what they are and what they are not, by the norms that represent common community behavior" (p. 238). This is a lesson for all schools to learn, especially those that have grown in the Catholic tradition. Catholic schools

originally emerged in our country as a call to community and in response to the perceived threat of Protestant-based public schools. Nearly all Catholic elementary schools were established as part of a parish and part of a community of not only common religious beliefs, but also of similar culture, thought, and action. With the number of Catholic K-12 schools currently decreasing and enrollment declining, one must consider the mission of Catholic schools and what is missing from them today that was vibrant decades earlier. We must look at methods of community building that were key features in Catholic schools at the time of their establishment, that still exist in spirit and as an ideal, and that can perhaps come alive using models of building social capital. Within the context of a church that is hierarchical in structure, we must work to have all constituents involved and heard in the process of reclaiming and reinventing the greater community of Catholic schools in the United States. Parents, students, teachers, administrators, parishioners, and community members must all feel invested in the process of revitalizing and strengthening the network of Catholic schools, as seen in similar scenarios described by Putnam and Feldstein. The stories from *Better Together* must do more than inspire. They must be a call to action.

*Scott Kmack is the dean of academics at Trinity Catholic High School in Newton, MA.*

---

## **SAME DIFFERENCE: HOW GENDER MYTHS ARE HURTING OUR RELATIONSHIPS, OUR CHILDREN, AND OUR JOBS**

ROSALIND BARNETT & CARYL RIVERS

BASIC BOOKS, 2004

\$ 25.00, 289 pages

*Reviewed by Ruby T. Urbina*

“People’s behavior today is determined more by situation than by gender” (p. 5). *Same Difference: How Gender Myths Are Hurting Our Relationships, Our Children, and Our Jobs* explores how power makes the difference, not necessarily gender. The book is divided into three parts: relationships, work, and parenting.