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# Changes in the Family and Implications for the Common School

James S. Coleman†

There are times, in the study of social institutions, when it is useful to stand back from specific observations about how they function and to engage in somewhat broader reflections. Research on specific topics can provide information useful in making minor adjustments in the institutional functions, but broader reflections allow one to raise more fundamental questions about institutions, questions that can lead to more extensive change.

In this paper, I engage in such reflections concerning American elementary and secondary schools. These schools are institutions of relatively recent origin, designed to complement the family in childrearing. Changes in the family have implications for the functioning of the school, and thus for the design of schools.

The governing ideal around which American schools are organized—that of the “common school”—was popularized in the nineteenth century by Horace Mann.<sup>1</sup> Americans adopted this ideal as a reaction against Europe’s class-based school system, which with its different tiers helped perpetuate the class system. They also hoped the common school would help implement the “melting pot” ideal for transforming immigrants into Americans. Most of all, they thought of the common school as a bulwark against the teaching of religion, or “religious sectarianism,” in the schools.

After a century and a half of schools designed on the common school ideal, questions are arising from changes in the modern family that throw into doubt the ideal itself. I examine here these changes and their implications for America’s educational system.

## I. CHANGES IN THE FAMILY AND THE INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

Over a period of time spanning two centuries, several events have undermined the ability of the family to perform its tradi-

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<sup>1</sup> See Horace Mann, *The Common School Controversy* (J.N. Bradley, 1844); Lawrence A. Cremin, ed, *The Republic and the School*, (Teacher’s College, Columbia 1957).

tional childrearing function. These events have transformed society from a set of communities in which families were the central building blocks to a society in which the central organizations are business firms, and in which families merely comprise the employees and customers.

Up to the middle of the nineteenth century, men and women both carried out their productive activities within the household and involved their children in these activities. As a result, parents sometimes exploited their children to further the economic goals of the family. At the very least, the family's tight grip constrained the children's opportunities. Constrained though it was, this environment provided children with a setting for learning the productive activities they would carry out as adults.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this pattern of childrearing and child training, stable for centuries, began to change as the household itself underwent a major transformation. Men abandoned household production, usually the family farm, to find opportunities elsewhere, in a factory or an office. Figure 1, which charts the proportion of the male labor force engaged in agriculture, depicts the extent of this change. Since 1810, the proportion of men engaged in agriculture has declined from 87 percent to 3 percent. Thus, over this period, there was a change from a state in which childrearing had been intimately intertwined with the learning of adult productive skills in nearly all households to one in which childrearing was carried out alone in nearly all households.

Figure 1.

## PROPORTION OF MEN IN AGRICULTURE

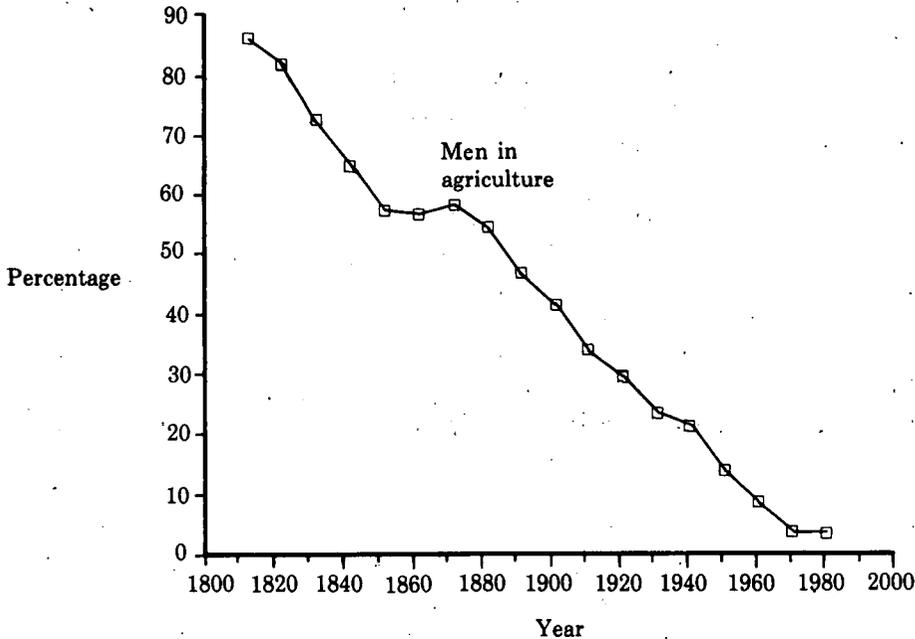


Figure 1 — Percentage of Male Labor Force Working in Agriculture, 1810-1980.

Source: US Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* 139 (Tables D167-181 and D182-232) (US Gov't Printing Office, 1975) and US Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstracts of the United States* 417 (Table 693) (US Gov't Printing Office, 1984).

The growth of formal schooling corresponds closely to the loss of the father's labor from the household. Figure 2 shows that, from about 1840 to the present, the proportion of boys between the ages of five and nineteen *not* in school parallels the proportion of men engaged in agriculture, declining from about 50 percent to about 10 percent. These two events—men going to work off the farm and boys going to school—are two indicators of the Industrial Revolution. The father, working out of the household, was no longer present to teach his son how to be a productive worker, and the son's future work was out of the household, off the farm. Mass schooling, then, can be seen as an institutional innovation in response to the change in the capacity of the family to prepare its boys for adult occupations.

Figure 2.

PROPORTION OF MEN IN AGRICULTURE  
AND BOYS NOT IN SCHOOL

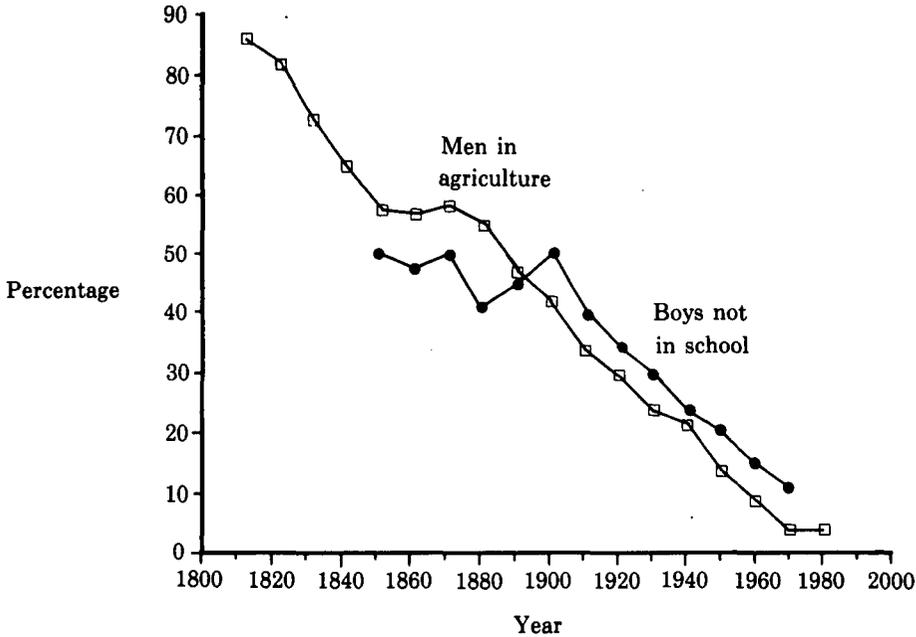


Figure 2 — Percentage of Male Labor Force Working in Agriculture, 1810-1980, and Percentage of Boys Aged 5 - 19 Not Attending School, 1850-1970.

Source: For the data on boys' school attendance, US Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics* at 370 (Table H433-441).

The second major event in the impairment of the family's childrearing capacity was the loss of the woman's labor from the household through her movement into the paid labor force. In the United States this loss has paralleled that of the man, but occurred about a hundred years later. As Figure 3 shows, the proportion of women in the home and outside the paid labor force declined from 82 percent in 1890 to 48 percent in 1980 and continues unabated.

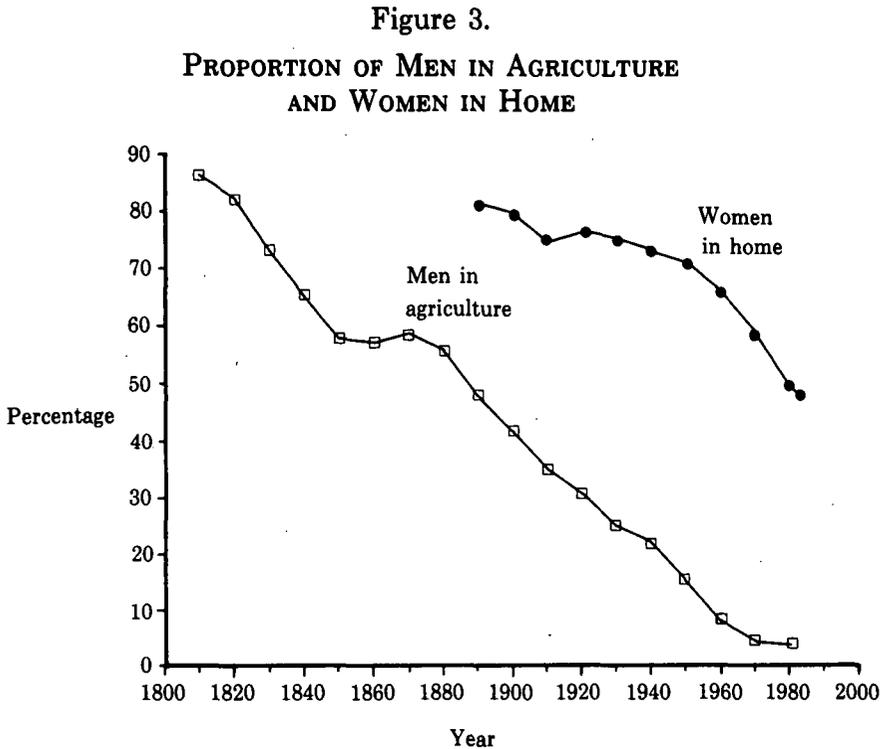


Figure 3 — Percentage of Male Labor Force Working in Agriculture, 1810-1980, and Percentage of Women Not Employed in Paid Labor Force, 1890-1982.

Source: For the data on women, US Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics* at 133 (Table D49-62) and US Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract* at 413 (Table 683).

## II. DEFICIENCIES OF THE INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

The institutional responses to the loss of the parents from the household are problematic in two ways. First, the way in which schooling has been organized has reduced the family's participation in its child's development beyond that required by changes in the locus of economic production. The common school, with its standard structure, curriculum, and mode of learning, has largely eliminated parents' choice about the kind of education their children will receive. The result has been not merely to shift the child's upbringing increasingly away from the home to an external institution, but to take control of how that upbringing occurs increasingly out of the hands of the parents.

The consequences of this first problem brought about by the common school are related to the second problem it has created. Neither the nursery school nor the common school proper has been a sufficient institutional response to changes in the family. Each has addressed certain aspects of the loss of function in the family. Most prominently, the school, the nursery school, and the day care center have been places for parents to deposit their children to be cared for during the day. The school has also been a place for children and youth to learn some cognitive and vocational skills—although the school has performed this function less well than it has performed its child care or babysitting function. These extra-familial institutions, however, have not addressed other changes resulting from the transformation of the family. One such change is the replacement of the family by the individual as the principal unit of consumption. Thus leisure time pursuits that were once carried out in an extended family context spanning generations are now carried out in age-specific contexts. For the young, age-specific contexts include attention to music designed especially for their generation, sports, youth groups, and gangs. Some of these pursuits are sponsored and guided by adults, and they in effect constitute an institutional response to the family's decline beyond that of the school. Others, however, are neither sponsored nor guided by adults. Some appear to result from the growth of discretionary income among youth and the response to that growth by commercially enterprising organizations that want to exploit the youth market. The growth in consumption of music, fashion clothing, and—most recently—videos, exemplifies this trend.

Society's institutional response has also failed to address the loss of moral and character education. Of course, not every family before the Industrial Revolution provided strong moral and character education. However, the need for children to aid the family's economy by working in the household, on the family farm, or in the family store imposed on children the discipline of being held accountable for their actions, and it gave them experience in working with others toward a common goal—an experience that the social organization of the school, focussed on individual self-development, fails to provide.

Schools fail to provide moral and character education not merely because they are organized around individual tasks and goals, but also because the bringing of children and youth into adulthood requires some consensus on how they are to be shaped. Within a family, that consensus between father and mother can be

achieved in a wide variety of areas. But when socialization of the young is carried out in public schools that all must attend, as it is in the United States, the range of areas consensus can cover shrinks greatly.

Restrictions on what schools can do in response to changes in the family are less pronounced outside the public sector, especially in the private religious sector. In a religious school, the range of areas on which parental consensus exists is much wider. Also, because the school is not a state institution, the constitutional prohibitions in the United States against engaging in religious activities do not hold. Thus these schools are free to supplement the family in a broader range of areas than are the public schools.

### III. THE PUZZLE OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

This advantage held by schools outside the public sector may be responsible for what is otherwise a puzzling fact in United States education. Until recent years, both public and religious school staffs believed that religious schools were academically inferior to public schools. Religious schools argued, however, that they were providing a broader range of education, shaping values and character as well as cognitive skills.

But beginning in 1980, data became available on representative samples that allowed the comparison of academic achievement and dropout rates among public schools, Catholic schools (which are the principal religious schools), and other private schools (which are mostly secular). Analyses of these data found that, for students from comparable backgrounds and initial achievement levels, growth in verbal skills in Catholic schools was *higher* than that in the public sector schools, and growth in mathematical skills was higher than that in both public schools and non-Catholic private schools.<sup>2</sup> The contrast between dropout rates was even greater. For comparable students, the dropout rate was only about a third as great in the religious sector as in the public and secular private sectors.<sup>3</sup>

Now for the puzzle: If, as is generally accepted, the religious schools were academically inferior thirty years ago, why are they academically superior now? One possible answer is that in earlier

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of this research, see James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* 57-95 (Basic Books, 1987). Such a comparison is carried out by ordinary least squares regression analysis in which a number of background characteristics are statistically controlled. See *id.* at 75.

<sup>3</sup> See *id.* at 96-117 for the analysis of comparative dropout rates.

years families were stronger. The additional functions carried out by the religious schools were therefore less important for the child's general well-being. Families of children in the public sector were appropriately complementing the public school, providing those inputs into a child's life that made it possible for the child to benefit from school: imposing discipline, supervising homework, reinforcing the school's demands, and providing order in the child's home life. Today, this may be less true, and religious schools, which have always done more to supplement the family's activities in this area, may be able to compensate for deficient families in ways that public schools cannot.

Additional facts support this conclusion. All schools succeed less well with children from single-parent families, children from families with poor parental educational backgrounds, and minority children from families that are structurally weak.<sup>4</sup> This lack of success is illustrated by Figure 4, which shows the dropout rate between tenth and twelfth grades in American high schools in 1980, for children from two-parent families and children from single-parent families. The dropout rate of children from the latter group is about twice that of the former.

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<sup>4</sup> A large body of educational research documents the lesser success of schools with students from families with poor educational backgrounds and disadvantaged minority children. See James S. Coleman, et al, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* 298-302 (US Gov't Printing Office, 1966); Coleman & Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools* at 118-48.

Figure 4.

PROPORTION OF DROPOUTS  
BY FAMILY TYPE

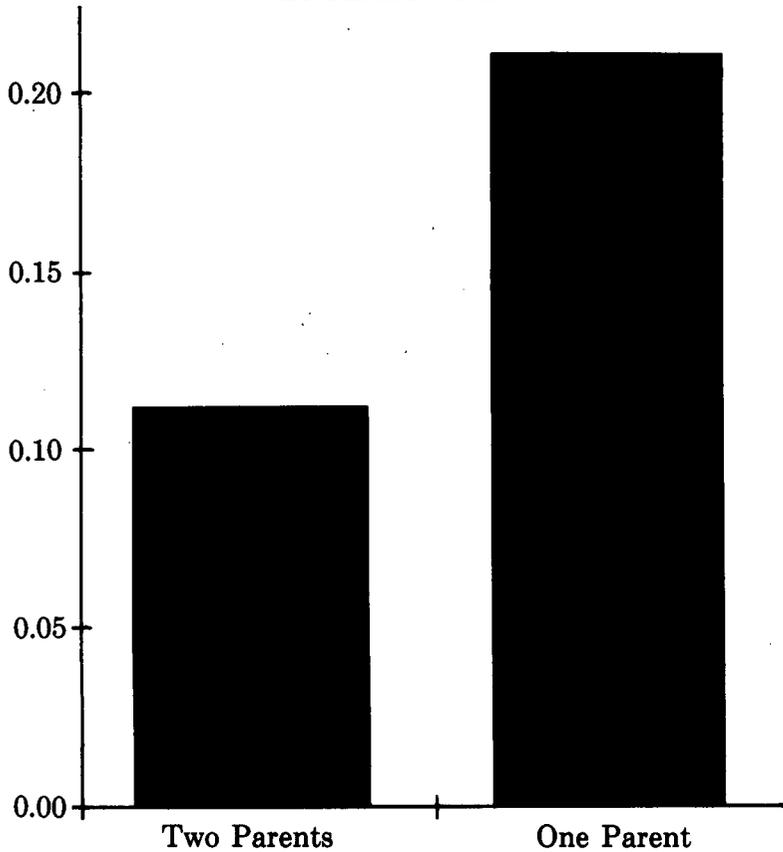


Figure 4 — Proportion of Students Dropping Out Between Spring of Sophomore and Spring of Senior Year for 1980 from Single-Parent and from Two-Parent Families.

Source: Center for Statistics (formerly National Center for Education Statistics), US Dept of Educ, High School and Beyond project.

Catholic schools, however fare strikingly better with disadvantaged children than do either public schools or secular private schools. Figure 5, which shows the dropout rates for children from two-parent and single-parent families separately for Catholic schools, public schools, and other private (mostly non-religious) schools, illustrates this point.

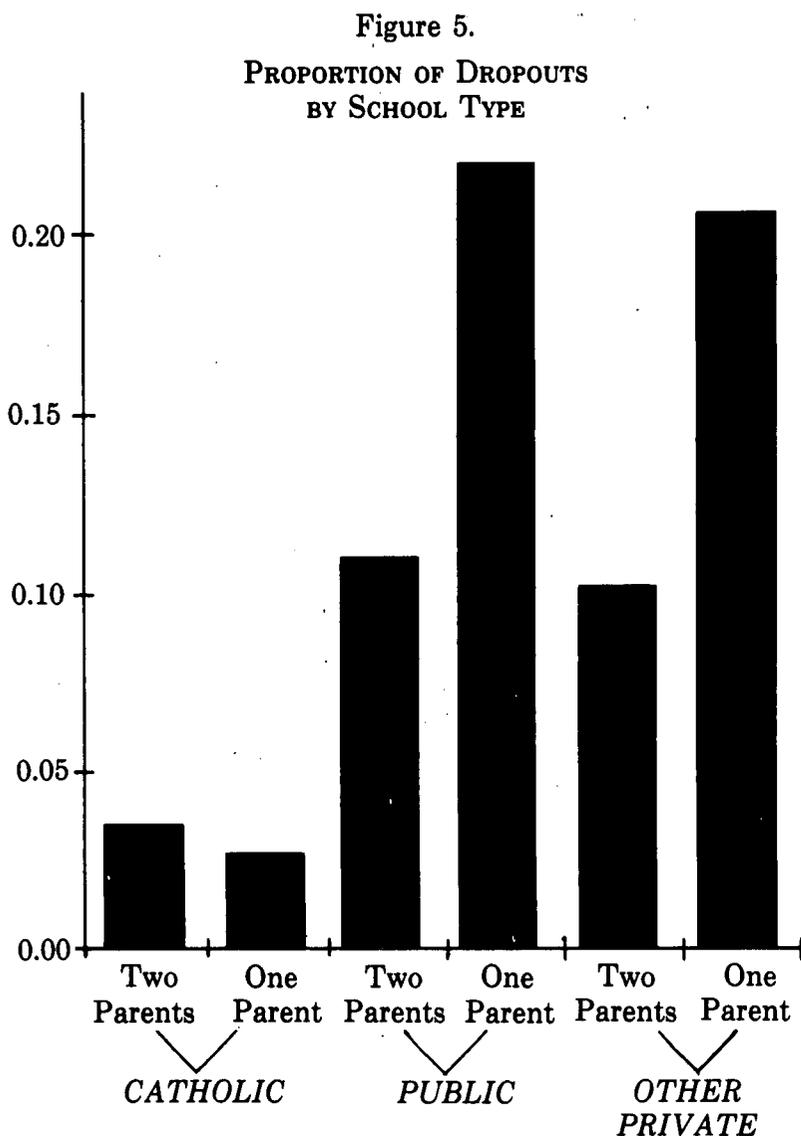


Figure 5 — Proportion of Students Dropping Out between Spring of Sophomore Year and Spring of Senior Year for 1980 from Single-Parent and from Two-Parent Families, Separated According to Type of School Attended.

Source: Center for Statistics (formerly National Center for Education Statistics), US Dept of Educ, High School and Beyond project.

The dropout rate for children from single-parent families in Catholic schools is essentially the same as that for children from two-parent families. In the other schools, it is about twice as high. Isolating the non-Catholic religious schools from the secular schools, however, reveals a dropout rate of 3.4 percent for the religious

schools.<sup>5</sup> Thus, religious schools *in general* have lower dropout rates than their secular counterparts.

These results suggest that the religious sector schools supply something that is deficient in many single-parent families, something not supplied by schools outside the religious sector, whether public or private. To give some indication of what this may be, I will introduce a concept—capital, in its various forms—that will be useful in characterizing the situation confronted by the school, and thus by children.

#### IV. HUMAN AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS

Traditional discussions of capital have focussed on its tangible forms, whether financial capital or productive equipment. Building on this idea, economists have developed over the past 30 years the concept of human capital: the assets embodied in a person's knowledge and skill.<sup>6</sup> Traditionally, economists have measured human capital principally by the educational attainment of the individual. The more education, the more human capital. Like financial capital or physical equipment, human capital is a productive asset, useful in producing desired outcomes.

In recent years, sociologists and a few economists have recognized that the social relations that exist in the family or in the community outside the family also constitute a form of capital.<sup>7</sup> These social relations generate obligations, trust, and norms, all of which function as resources upon which an individual can draw in time of need. While physical or financial capital exists wholly in tangible resources, and human capital is a property of individual persons, social capital is a set of resources that resides in the relations among persons. All of these forms of capital are important for a child's education.

<sup>5</sup> See Coleman & Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools* at 96-118 (cited in note 2). In this work, the possibility that public-religious differences are due simply to parental backgrounds is examined in detail. While a part of the difference can be accounted for in this way, a larger part is independent of family background. See also James S. Coleman, *Schools, Families, and Children* (U of Chicago, 1985) (1985 Ryerson Lecture).

<sup>6</sup> See, generally, Theodore W. Schultz, *Investment in Human Capital*, 51 *Am Econ Rev* 1 (1961); Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital* (Columbia U Press, 1964).

<sup>7</sup> See Glenn C. Loury, *A Dynamic Theory of Racial Income Differences*, in Phyllis A. Wallace and Annette Le Mund, eds, *Women, Minorities, and Employment Discrimination* 153-86 (Lexington Books, 1977); Pierre Bourdieu 3 *Actes de le Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 2 (1980); H. D. Flap and N. D. de Graaf, *Social Capital and Attained Occupational Status*, 22 *Netherlands' J of Soc* 145 (1986); James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* 300-21 (Harvard U Press, 1990).

Each of these forms of capital has changed over time. In general, financial, physical, and human capital have increased, while social capital has decreased. The increases in financial and physical capital are evident in the improved standard of living over time. The increase in human capital is easily seen by the increase in educational attainment in the population.

Figure 3, depicting the effective evacuation of adult members from the household, suggests a decrease in the family's social capital. Other measures also reinforce this finding: In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some families were three-generation households, containing not only children and parents, but also grandparents.<sup>8</sup> Three-generation households have since given way, however, to nuclear families consisting of only parents and children, providing only a subset of the social relations that existed in the three-generation household. Fewer adults in the household logically mean a loss of adult time in the household for children. Now, two-parent families are giving way in part to single-parent families, as divorce and illegitimate births increase. Of course, social capital in the family that is available to aid a child's learning does not result merely from the presence of adults in the household. Adults must also be attentive and involved in their children's learning. There may be wide variations in the amount of social capital provided by adults in the household without variations in their physical presence.

Human and social capital are significant contributors to a child's education. As Figure 6 illustrates, one can conceive of four logical possibilities involving the presence or absence of these forms of capital. The family in cell 1—comprised of well-educated parents who are involved with their children's learning—has both human and social capital.

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<sup>8</sup> Early data on this are scarce, but see Edward T. Pryor, Jr., *Rhode Island Family Structure: 1875-1960*, in Peter Laslett, ed, *Household and Family in Past Time* 571-89 (Cambridge U Press, 1972). This article indicates that a large number of households in 1875 included grandparents, as grandparents would otherwise have constituted additional households, resulting in a much higher percentage of households without children.

Figure 6.  
 PRESENCE OR ABSENCE OF HUMAN AND  
 SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE FAMILY

|                  |     |                |    |
|------------------|-----|----------------|----|
|                  |     | Social Capital |    |
|                  |     | Yes            | No |
| Human<br>Capital | Yes | 1              | 2  |
|                  | No  | 3              | 4  |

The families in cells 3 and 4 are traditionally regarded as being disadvantaged because the parents lack education. Cell 3 represents families who, because of the strength of social capital, manage to aid their children despite a meager supply of human capital. The family in cell 2 illustrates the new, typically overlooked form of disadvantage in the family: well-educated parents, whose time and attention are directed outside the family, and who are unavailable to aid in their children's learning. Families in this category are typically middle-class families, and may be either intact or single-parent households. All households in cell 2 are households of convenience, whose members provide little in the way of social and psychological resources for one another.

Research results indicate the importance of both human and social capital in the household for a child's scholastic success. Of course, these results merely document what school administrators and teachers observe every day: Those children succeed best in school whose parents are both educated (possess human capital) and involved in their children's progress (provide social capital). Parental education is an important predictor of children's educational achievement, as are various aspects of social capital, such as parents reading to a young child, encouraging the child to go to college, and being present in the household.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> These results can be found in two major national surveys of educational achievement: Coleman, et al, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* at 298-302 (cited in note 4), and the High School and Beyond survey in 1980, reproduced in James S. Coleman, Thomas Hoffer and Sally Kilgore, *High School Achievement* tables A6-A12 (Basic Books, 1982).

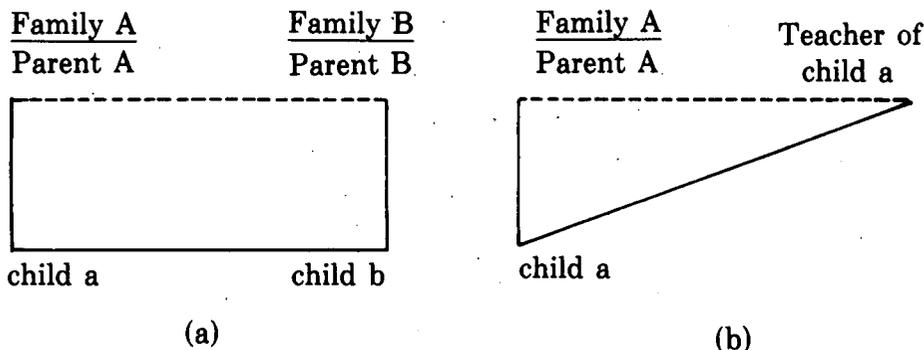
Social capital in the adult community outside the household, however, is also an important contributor to a child's success in school. The importance of this form of social capital is not apparent to school administrators and teachers because the contrasts lie not between families in the same school, but between different schools.

A school with extensive social capital in the community of parents is one in which parents have been able among themselves (or with the help of the school) to set standards of behavior and dress for their children, to make and enforce rules that are similar from family to family, and to provide social support for their own and each other's children in times of distress. In a community with extensive social capital, the collective capital can offset considerably the absence of capital within particular families. For example, as suggested by Figure 5, children from single-parent families are more like their two-parent counterparts in both achievement and continuation in school when the school is part of a religious community and has available the social capital provided by this community.

Social capital in the community depends greatly on the stability and strength of the community's social structure. Figure 7 depicts two structural relationships that are important in promoting the growth of community social capital, which in turn can aid in improving student achievement levels and minimizing dropouts. First, Figure 7(a) shows schematically the relations between parents and children in two families. Note the relation between the children themselves at the bottom of the loop and the relationship between the two sets of parents at the top of the loop. This latter relationship is problematic in many communities.

Figure 7.

TWO STRUCTURES THAT SUPPORT THE GROWTH  
OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE COMMUNITY  
SURROUNDING THE SCHOOL



When the social structure joins the two sets of parents, they can set norms and standards for their children and compare notes about rules for them; their children cannot exploit their ignorance about what rules exist for other children. In addition, Parent A can provide support for child b when necessary and can sometimes serve as a bridge if the child's communication with his or her own parent has broken down. In short, each parent constitutes a capital asset both for other parents and for children in the community.

Figure 7(b) involves the parent-child-teacher relationship. Here, the relationship between parent and teacher closes the loop, making possible both support for and social control of children that would be absent if there were not the information flow between teacher and parent that comes about with closure.

The common school no longer can draw upon the social capital of the neighborhood, as it could when parents worked in the same neighborhoods in which the family lived. With the growth of automobile ownership in the 1930s and 1940s, and particularly since the 1970s, adults have increasingly evacuated their neighborhoods during the day and refocused their psychic and social lives around the workplace. Exacerbating the problem, albeit unintentionally, are two widespread policies of the modern common school—school desegregation through bussing between neighborhoods, and school consolidation in rural areas, which involves the bussing of all students from local communities to a central location. Both policies destroy the capacity of those neighborhood relations that still exist to serve as social capital for parents and children.

Even where the social structure of neighborhoods has deteriorated, "functional communities" may continue to exist based on social institutions. These social institutions, which may or may not be neighborhood-based, provide a functional linkage among parents. One social institution upon which such schools are based is the religious community surrounding religious schools. Other institutions may play a similar role for some public schools. The evidence presented earlier<sup>10</sup> suggests the importance of the social capital created by such functional communities, and is particularly evident in the low dropout rates in religious schools compared to that in public and secular private schools.

Schools have also been organized, in a few isolated instances, around the parents' workplace. There is as yet little evidence regarding the potential for such schools, but it is likely that they maintain a closer connection between parents and their children than is found with neighborhood schools when most parents work outside their neighborhoods.

#### V. POTENTIAL REMEDIES

Two different approaches may be taken towards remedying the educational problems resulting from the decline in social capital. First, recreating social capital in the community served by the school can rebuild parental consensus. This social capital, once created, will support the school through the rules, norms, and standards it helps to bring about and enforce. The creation of such social capital by the school consists, quite simply, of creating closure of the form shown in Figure 7(a). The relations between parents themselves, however they are brought into existence, will then operate on their own in the ways described earlier to make and enforce norms that reinforce the school's goals.

Second, schools and parents can create a modern-day social contract. If a school system gives up its prerogative of assigning children to schools, and allows children and parents to choose among schools, it may ask something new of them in return. Specifically, it may require students to accept and obey, and parents to reinforce, a set of rules as a condition of entering and continuing in the school. Of course, schools already have rules they insist upon, even in the absence of choice. Nevertheless, the existence of choice among schools gives the principal of a school of choice a new weapon with which to gain acceptance of more extensive rules,

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<sup>10</sup> See text accompanying notes 2-3.

rules that make it possible to have a well-ordered school. To be sure, this possibility is a reality only where parents have feasible choices, and even there the potential is more realizable in middle, junior, and high schools than in elementary schools, where parents may be more concerned with proximity. Yet it is these schools, and not elementary schools, in which the most serious problems of order, authority, and discipline arise.

Choice alone, of course, cannot achieve the consensus on which viable authority depends. Choice makes possible greater demands upon parents and children, but the principal must grasp this possibility, whether through a written contract signed by parent and child, as is done in some schools, or through a verbal contract. The central point is, however, that once the school becomes a school of choice, a form of social contract between the school and its clients is possible that was not possible before.

The first remedy discussed above, the creation of consensus through creation of social capital in the parental community, is not mutually exclusive with the second. In fact, in schools of choice the construction of relations among parents through parents' organizations and activities may be especially important if children come from several different neighborhoods.

#### CONCLUSION

One might surmise from this general set of results that the classical institutional response to the loss of family socialization functions—the public common school—is insufficient to meet the demands created by the loss of family functions being experienced today. One might further surmise that institutions independent of the state are necessary to supplement the failing family. The logic of my analysis is diametrically opposed to the notion of a common school, as the common school necessarily restricts the range of socialization functions that can be carried out—a restriction that is particularly harmful to children as families weaken. The analysis favors further increasing the range of parental choice, for this allows consensus on a broader set of socialization functions. It thus constitutes an argument for, among other things, a voucher system—in which parents can choose among schools in both the public and private sector—precisely because of what private schools can do that public schools, tied to the state, cannot. It also constitutes an argument for publicly supported, but privately supplied and voluntarily attended institutions outside the school, such as scouts, youth groups, the YMCA, Jewish Community Centers, and Boys and Girls Clubs.

What precisely is the institutional structure for schooling that is implied by the facts I have presented? These facts point to the properties that such institutions should have, which the ideal of the common school clearly lacks. The time for a new institutional ideal for schooling that appropriately complements the modern family has arrived in the United States. What that ideal should be goes beyond what I can say here, but I suggest that the absence of such an ideal, and the inability of the old common school ideal to fit with the society of today, underlies a large part of the ills that presently beset American schooling.