

Responsive Philanthropy

IN THIS EDITION

Lessons Learned
Collaborative Mobilizing for Education Reform 1

Swoosh
 Philanthropy Redux 2

Communities, Unions Partner For Change 5

Nonprofit Salaries, Intermediate Sanctions And the New York Stock Exchange 8

Advocating For Advocacy 12



Photo courtesy of CHATE.

Lessons Learned

Collaborative Mobilizing For Education Reform

By Lori Bezahler, Susan Cahn and Cassie Schwerner

In 1995, when a group of New York City-based grantmakers founded the Donors' Education Collaborative (DEC), coverage of public education in the media focused on horror stories about crumbling facilities, out-of-control youth and violence in the schools. Most politicians avoided discussions of education policy, and the general public rarely engaged in meaningful dialogue on the subject of schools. In 1995, New York State's governor and legislature cut \$1 billion from the city's education budget with minimal objection from the public. In 2003, the governor proposed a similar cut, but community groups, advocates and others fought for and achieved restoration of \$1 billion to the education budget.

"Lessons Learned" continued on page 15

Long-Term Commitment Boosts Education Reform

“Lessons Learned” continued from page 1

The funders who formed DEC set out to reinvigorate a progressive constituency for public education through collaborative funding based on several core premises:

- That by working together as a collaborative, DEC could provide substantial, long-term support that would heighten the potential for impact;
- That an active and knowledgeable constituency could bring both accountability to a struggling system and political support for change; and
- That success in achieving educational reforms would require a combination of approaches, including organizing, constituency building, public policy analysis and advocacy, working in a coordinated fashion.

These principles led DEC to fund projects with several key characteristics. First, each project had to be a partnership among organizations that together could achieve power that they would not be able to achieve on their own. Each had to be engaged in constituency building, rather than providing services. Each had to be working at the systemic, rather than the single-school or neighborhood level. And, finally, each had to be involved in effecting policy change rather than creating model programs.

In total six initiatives were funded during the first six years of the DEC initiative. Of these, three were supported for the entire six years and they provide some significant lessons for funders seeking to bring about policy change. These projects are the Equity Reform Project, which, in conjunction with a lawsuit brought by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, worked to create popular support for school finance reform in New York State; the Parent Organizing Consortium, which built a citywide coalition of grassroots, parent-driven organizations that worked together to impact a variety of education policy issues; and Transforming Education for New York’s Newest, which focused on the educational needs of immigrant students through

the simultaneous development of policy and constituencies.

Working with the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, DEC continually evaluated the work of its grantees, drawing important lessons both for the funded organizations, enabling them to reflect on and, when appropriate, modify their work, and for funders seeking to influence policy. These lessons include the following:

- Constituency building and policy work are most effective if they are pursued simultaneously as linked, mutually informed efforts;
- Systemic change takes time and requires sustained support; incremental change matters; and
- Organizations engaged in systemic reform need an adequate infrastructure if their efforts are to bear fruit.

Constituency Building and Policy Work: United They Stand

Transforming Education for New York’s Newest (TENYN) was a collaboration between the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC) and Advocates for Children (AFC), a legal services and advocacy organization focused on meeting the education needs of New York City’s poor families. The city’s public schools serve over 150,000 English language learners (ELLs)—speaking more than 100 languages—and this collaboration sought to improve the quality of the education ELLs receive, in part by building a strong and informed constituency around the pertinent issues. The TENYN initiative demonstrates the importance of linking constituency building with policy work. The linkage helped sustain the community’s engagement, thereby promoting the success of the policy work. Because it pursued constituency building at the same time as it developed policy, TENYN created the political will necessary to achieve reform while bringing new voices to the reform debate.

A coalition of almost 200 organizations representing New York City’s immigrant community, the

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Funders must have confidence in the strategies, leadership and goals of any given project to make a sustained, long-term commitment.

Students, parents, teachers and district administrators came together at a Long Island forum to discuss the needs of students. Photo courtesy of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity.



most diverse in the nation, NYIC had not taken on education reform prior to receiving funding from DEC. With this grant, NYIC began to research the concerns of its constituents in their role as parents of public school students. From this research, coalition members became increasingly aware both of how crucial immigrants believed schools to be for integration into American society, and of how isolated many immigrant parents were from their children's schools.

Recognizing the urgent need to advocate for education reforms in the interests of their constituents, NYIC's member organizations took on this task. NYIC used the results of its action research to develop a policy reform program:

- It called for a variety of approaches to English language learners (ELLs) rather than the stark alternatives of bilingual classrooms or total immersion in English language instruction.
- It brought attention to dual language programs and the need for improving the skills of those who taught ELLs.
- It developed policies on translation and interpretation for parents, aimed at increasing parent access to information and to their children's schools.
- It brought to policy makers' attention implications of the new Regents' Learning Standards for ELLs.

TENYN used the energy generated by parents empowered through their action research to believe they could—and should—play a role in their children's schools and advocate for these policy changes. While parents had diverse opinions

on which program might be right for their own children, TENYN found overall agreement that parents needed materials to be available in many languages, qualified teachers for every program offered to ELLs, and more and a variety of programs offered to ELLs.

The size of TENYN's constituency and its ability to mobilize its membership awakened policy makers to the need for reform of the school system's handling of ELLs and their parents. TENYN's ability to speak authoritatively on behalf of immigrants gave traditional education advocates and the system a real constituency for information, for debate and, finally, for negotiation. The New York City Board of Education, for example, worked in conjunction with TENYN to create and adopt a policy on translation and interpretation services for families, and implemented an increased number and variety of programs for ELLs; the mayor appointed a key member of NYIC to the newly created position of director of the mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs.

DEC's long-term commitment to this initiative enabled the collaborators to shift their strategies as external events, their own research and the fund's evaluations suggested. It also gave the key organization representing immigrants the opportunity to bring its members into the struggle for education reform, and the immigrant community's presence has reshaped that struggle, bringing to the fore new issues as well as new approaches to reform.

Policy Change Takes Time—and a Long-Term Commitment by Funders

DEC members realized from the start that, to achieve systemic reform they would need to create a multiyear initiative, that policy change cannot be accomplished in one year, or even within a three-year grant cycle. Much of the most compelling and strategic work would, in fact, occur in the later years of the initiative. As the Chapin Hall evaluators noted, "The fifth and sixth years of implementation proved enormously important in the progress of the projects." Funders must have confidence in the strategies, leadership and goals of any given project to make a sustained, long-term commitment.

The Equity Reform Project (ERP) was a partnership among the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE), the Educational Priorities Project, the

League of Women Voters of New York State, the Urban League of New York City and the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy. CFE, the lead partner, was a coalition of community school boards, parents and advocates suing New York State on behalf of the 1.1 million schoolchildren in New York City. CFE and its partners argued that New York State did not provide enough resources for schools in the city, and across the state, to deliver a “sound basic education.”

With its focus on statewide policy reform, ERP is one of the DEC grantees that serve as an example of the need for long-term commitment. The ERP partners spent years organizing public engagement forums across New York. In these forums, participants examined issues such as the meaning of “sound basic education” and ways of financing the state’s public schools equitably, and ERP turned the ideas generated at the forums into public policy recommendations. CFE introduced these public policy recommendations, generated by public engagement, directly into the discussion of the remedies component of its court case, *CFE v. New York*. ERP spent years organizing these events, collecting the data and then using the data as it pursued the CFE litigation.

Although ERP reached certain particular milestones within a one- or two-year grant cycle, many years of work were required before CFE attained its tremendous victory in January 2001, when the Supreme Court of New York found entirely in CFE’s favor.¹ The judge even directed that the state implement many of the remedies—remedies developed in the forums.

DEC’s long-term funding proved critical in several ways:

- It gave organizations time to respond and regroup when the political or economic landscapes changed unexpectedly.
- It enabled the development of multiple strategies, essential for achieving systemic change. But the development and implementation of multiple strategies requires time. DEC’s long-term commitment gave its grantees that time—and even time to develop different

strategies if the original implementation proved ineffective.

- It gave all the grantees the time necessary to grow into real political players on new or different issues. CFE and NYC gained considerable influence over the six years at the city and state levels, becoming valued resources to policy makers, journalists, academics, community organizations, elected officials and other opinion leaders.
- It gave the organizations time to develop relationships with potential allies, a long-term and labor-intensive process. Through the public engagement process, ERP developed key relationships with upstate mainstream organizations like the New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA) and Midstate School Finance Consortium, which initially had perceived the ERP policy agenda as threatening. NYSSBA currently serves as one of CFE’s most influential partners.

Infrastructure: Mundane but Vital

The Parent Organizing Consortium (POC), a collaboration of neighborhood-based groups, was committed to the notion that parents, particularly in low income communities and communities of color, needed to build power in order to improve the education of the children in their neighborhoods. They saw the issue as one of equity: Were funds for school construction being dispersed based on need or on political clout? Were class sizes in schools serving poorer students larger than in wealthier communities? Did schools and school personnel respect all parents? POC was in the early stages of development when DEC first funded its work. The groups had come together so that issues identified on a community level that required a system-level solution could be addressed citywide. Its history offers an illustration of the need to build an infrastructure that is capable of both grassroots local organizing and assembling a broader coalition to bring about substantive changes in policy and practice in large systems.

As Emily Blank of CHAFE, a member organization of POC describes it, “If CHAFE weren’t part of POC, our group alone couldn’t have influenced a huge citywide issue like school governance. On the other hand, if all of our groups weren’t active on the ground in our neighborhoods, doing constant outreach and education of parents and com-

DEC Funders 1995 – 2003

Booth Ferris Foundation
Carnegie Corporation
Robert Sterling Clark
Foundation
Deutsche Bank Americas
Foundation
Aaron Diamond
Foundation
Dickler Family Foundation
The Ford Foundation
Bernard F. and Alva B.
Gimbel Foundation
The Greenwall
Foundation
The Stella and Charles
Guttman Foundation
The Edward W. Hazen
Foundation
J. P. Morgan Charitable
Trust
New York Foundation
The New York
Community Trust
The Pinkerton
Foundation
Charles H. Revson
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1. This decision was later reversed by an intermediate court and then largely reinstated by New York’s highest court in June 2003.

Ana Espada
of Advocates
for Children trains
parents to effect
change in New York
City schools.

Photo courtesy of
Advocates for Children
of New York Inc.



**Changing
public policy
takes
long-term,
sustained
funding that
provides
grantees
with clear
benchmarks
for progress
but protects
them from the
fluctuations in
philanthropic
interest.**

community members, and fighting to change local issues that affect the schools, then we wouldn't have strong local leaders who would be ready to come together and take action on this kind of issue."

Because POC is solidly rooted in its own communities, it developed inclusive operating procedures that engage members in issue identification and the development of solutions. POC pays constant attention to the development of local leaders, involving parents as key participants in strategy sessions, trainings, research actions and meetings with school administrators, elected officials and policy makers. Its structure reflects its commitment to grassroots leadership.

While POC's structure emerges from the grassroots values of the member groups, it is also driven by a belief that only a constituency genuinely invested in policy change can create and sustain it. Yet, this structure requires significant time and energy for group decision-making processes, leadership development, and the continuous communication necessary to sustain interest beyond a single campaign, rally or petition drive. POC struggled in its first years to create an infrastructure that would enable these independent groups to take on system-level campaigns without diluting their effectiveness at the local level. At the same time, the composition of POC evolved; some initial member organizations proceeded with their own efforts independently while other organizations of varying sizes joined POC. These decisions to opt in or out of the consortium reflected POC's increasing clarity about its identity and methods.

POC has had a marked impact on the development of policy reforms on such issues as school

construction, class-size reduction, "respect demands" that speak to the relations between parents and school decision-makers and governance. The city's Department of Education acknowledges POC as a legitimate representative of parent interests. Through its participation in the statewide Alliance for Quality Education, POC is participating in the school finance debate at the state level. Member organizations have become key players in reform efforts in the local districts, using the skills, standing and access they gained through their work with POC. POC's organizational structure may be compared to a scaffold, with the member organizations providing local grassroots constituencies as the solid base. The consortium itself is the next level of the scaffold and is the mechanism bringing the local groups together to support a shared platform for change. With the assistance of POC, a third, statewide level has now been erected.

Implications for Funders

Must a foundation wait years before public policy results are apparent? No—but they must be willing to make a long-term commitment. There will be results along the way—incremental results that are, in fact, significant victories. These victories are essential for participants struggling to bring about any given reform; they are also essential for foundations. Foundations willing to take a long-term perspective can and should require grantees to track progress along the way and should themselves monitor outcomes and process objectives.

One of the reasons DEC funders decided to extend their collaboration was that they saw tangible progress and important victories along the way:

- POC leveraged its forces into a coordinated, statewide campaign, successfully fighting budget cuts at the city and state level—including restoring \$1 billion in public education funding the governor had sought to cut.
- POC won a major victory when the Board of Education prioritized low-performing schools in its 1999 class-size reduction plan.
- NYC was able to grow its capacity to mobilize large numbers of parents and other constituents for actions and rallies.
- ERP developed criteria to define a “sound basic education” through its public engagement process, the major points of which were adopted by the New York State Supreme Court.
- ERP built alliances in key legislative districts around the state that have become partners in legislative action around school finance reform.
- POC’s research concluded that class size reduction (a Board of Education goal) could not be achieved without new school construction and, as a member of the board’s School Construction Working Group, POC created the regulations to enable new school facilities to be built and owned by community organizations and leased to the Board of Education.
- TENYN successfully advocated for the formation of the chancellor’s working group on immigrant education issues.
- TENYN’s advocacy resulted in the New York State Regents’ recommendations for increased resources to be directed to English language learners throughout their education careers.

Through these years of cooperation, the members of the Donors’ Education Collaborative learned some key lessons for funders interested in substantive change in public institutions:

- Changing public policy takes long-term, sustained funding that provides grantees with clear benchmarks for progress but protects them from the fluctuations in philanthropic interest.
- Combining capacities around policy and constituency building results in policy solutions that are feasible, innovative and rooted in the communities they impact.
- An active, knowledgeable constituency is key to creating the political will for change.

- Continuity of leadership is critical for success and requires adequate funding to retain key staff as their expertise increases.

Funder participation in the donors’ collaborative proved critical to education reform efforts in New York City and at the state level. The pool of donors was able to sustain commitment and funding over time. Moreover, the collaborative could offer funding at a level that enabled grantees to pay their leadership enough so that the leaders could afford to stay, another important factor in the grantees’ progress toward their goals. In addition, the commitment by the collaborative to multiyear funding allowed funders to avoid the pitfalls of “going it alone” in the daunting enterprise of effecting change in the nation’s largest educational bureaucracy. It also gave them a rare opportunity to incorporate their own professional development into their grantmaking as each funder learned from others in the collaborative, and funders together analyzed the outcomes, findings and theories of change emerging from the work jointly funded.

As year six of the collaboration came to a close, the funders believed that their efforts might be on the cusp of real success and reorganized the initiative to extend it by an additional three years, raising an additional \$3 million, and continuing to offer support to projects that both build constituencies and advocate policy reform. The lessons the collaborative has learned are moving forward the overall goal of education reform for New York City’s schoolchildren. And other funders addressing other pressing issues can apply some of these same lessons to create meaningful, systemic change. ○

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