

Funding for Education Organizing: An A+ Plan for More Effective Grantmaking

By Aaron Dorfman

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Proponents of high-quality public education have been losing ground during the years of the Bush presidency to proponents of privatized education. While total private school enrollment has remained steady at approximately 10-11% of total school enrollment over the past two decades, privatization advocates have been winning the hearts and minds of the general public and of our nation's policy makers. Even the newly-elected Democratic Governor of New York, Eliot Spitzer, is on record saying he favors directing more public money to private schools. This trend towards privatization can be attributed, to a great degree, to the political philosophies, personal loyalties, and power relationships of those who have been in public office. But no one should assume that this trend will change radically if the Democrats win the White House in 2008. The political leanings of officeholders provide insight into only part of the equation. Much of what's been happening with education policy over the past decade can be attributed to conscious choices and strategies initiated and funded by foundations.

Foundations provide miniscule amounts of funding in comparison to the budgets of local school districts. There was approximately \$4 billion in total grantmaking for education each year over the past several years. This figure includes all kinds of grants that are in any way related to education. For comparison, several large school districts individually have annual budgets greater than \$4 billion. Total taxpayer investment in K-12 education in 2004-2005 was \$536 billion, with another \$373 billion for higher education.

Of the \$4 billion in grantmaking for education, most was designated for direct provision of educational services in some capacity, rather than for policy reform. In 2005, grants totaling a paltry \$35 million were awarded to programs that explicitly aim to change education policy. Many grants which ultimately influence education policy, however, are never recorded as having such a purpose, so it is difficult to quantify exactly how much money is flowing into the policy arena.

But in spite of the relatively few dollars involved, foundation funding has had great impact by shaping public policy on education issues, especially when advancing conservative principles. The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) recently began to look at how those who support conservative policies on education issues have been advancing their agenda through foundation grantmaking. For the purposes of the research, NCRP defines the conservative policy agenda as anything that supports privatization.

The early findings of our research are shocking. Over 400 foundations – independent, family, and corporate – have been actively funneling money to support a conservative policy agenda on education issues during the past few years. Their funding has been sustaining more than 130 organizations working at all levels to advance the privatization agenda. Some of the organizations are the obvious national think tanks, but many operate at the state and local levels and have been building a grassroots constituency for privatization for more than a decade. Foundation grants to 90 of these organizations totaled over \$100 million per year in 2003 and 2004. Although many of the grants to these organizations are not officially recorded as grants for policy work on education issues, they directly contribute to the work of those organizations that are involved in these types of activities. The full report is expected to be released in August 2007 and will be available through NCRP's website.

Rick Cohen, NCRP's former executive director and the author of the report, says that there is more support for privatization than people think. Many trustees of small- and medium-sized foundations made their money in the business world and have an antipathy towards the public sector, especially when it comes to education. They are frustrated by the seeming inability of government to improve the quality of public education, and they view a lack of competition as a major cause of this failure. Privatization is the reform that is consistent with the world they know.

While some foundations, like those being examined in NCRP's research, consciously pursue a conservative agenda, many other funders attempt to pursue their grantmaking without obvious political motives. While the notion that grantmaking can be free from political motivation may legitimately be questioned, there are funders that simply want to be as effective as possible with their financial support. They want to see children succeed, and they seek to make their grantmaking as strategic as possible in order to do that. Therefore, they pursue a range of approaches which they believe will improve student outcomes within the context of the current political landscape. Unlike conservative grantmaking which aims to change the political landscape in favor of privatization, or progressive grantmaking, described later in this essay, which aims to build community power to improve public education, mainstream grantmaking on education issues seeks to incrementally improve the nation's public schools with various reform initiatives without fundamentally altering the status quo.

Grantmakers for Education (GFE) is the affinity group for funders who are seeking to improve their grantmaking on education issues, regardless of the political leanings of their funding portfolio. Membership in GFE grew from 175 foundations five years ago to more than 250 today, evidence of growing grantmaker interest in education issues. Bill Porter, executive director of GFE, reports that there is an engaged core of funders who take their grantmaking on educational issues very seriously, and who are constantly seeking to refine their grantmaking strategies to better achieve the outcomes they seek. Porter notes four areas of intense funder interest – teaching quality, early childhood education, charter schools, and high school reform.

The greatest area of funder interest at the moment, according to Porter, is focused on improving the quality of teaching in the classroom. The growing body of research by the Center for Teaching Quality, the Education Trust, and others, which shows a strong correlation between teaching quality and student achievement, is driving this interest. The basic premise is simple: higher quality teaching results in improved student achievement. Strategies to improve teaching quality include induction training, mentoring, and other initiatives.

Porter also notes a high level of interest in funding aimed at early childhood education, especially early reading instruction. Here, funder interest is driven by the premise that it is easiest to close the achievement gap among the youngest children. Grants focused on early childhood education are believed to be wise investments that will help children succeed academically before they fall too far behind to ever catch up.

Charter schools, too, continue to have a loyal following among grantmakers. Some in the charter school movement advocate charters as part of the conservative move towards privatization, but others advocate charters for less political reasons. Many funders, for example, are drawn to the freedom allowed by the charter school approach, and the encouragement charters provide for entrepreneurialism and innovation. Those funders hope that innovations developed in charters will eventually be adopted by the public schools. Other funders are drawn to supporting charter schools because of mounting evidence that it is more effective to start new schools than to turn around failing schools and because it is easiest to start a new school as a charter. Still others back charters as a way to provide for the unique needs of particular student populations. Support for charter schools comes from the political left, the right, and the center, and the debate on the merits of charters is far from being resolved.

A final trend noted by Porter is a high level of interest in high school reform. Funders of these projects are motivated by the extremely disturbing data about achievement levels for high

school students. A great variety of projects that promise to address this particularly challenging arena have drawn interest from funders.

So now comes the critical question for grantmakers who honestly want to improve public education and who want to help students, especially students in high poverty areas: given the current state of our economy and our educational system, will these strategies be sufficient?

While mainstream grantmaking such as that described above will likely show incremental improvement in student achievement, it is significantly less ambitious than conservative efforts to advance privatization. According to John Beam, a former organizer and now executive director of the National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham University, most funding intended to improve public education has been focused on strategic or tactical interventions for school improvement, often in partnership with the bureaucracy, rather than on a more systemic policy reform agenda. Without embracing those more political questions, Beam is skeptical that real progress can be made in improving public school education, at least at those schools into which low income children of color are tracked. Beam suggests that funders who really want to improve public education should be more ambitious in their reform agenda and in their grantmaking.

The most progressive grantmaking on education issues seeks to build community power and change public policy, with a goal of bringing about transformational improvement in the nation's public education system, not incremental improvement. And there are encouraging signs of movement in this direction. One of the most promising new developments in foundation funding for education issues is the Fund for Education Organizing, which will make its first round of grants in May, 2007. Those who advocate high quality public education, rather than privatized education, are pleased with the emergence of this new entity.

The Fund for Education Organizing is an outgrowth of the Working Group on Education Organizing, a national network of funders who belong to GFE and who are interested in community organizing as a strategy for improving public education. To date, seven national funders have committed more than \$5 million over three years to the Fund, which will be matched by funding from 30 local foundation partners in four localities: Chicago, Denver, Philadelphia and New Jersey. They will provide between \$400,000 and \$800,000 per year in each of the four localities in direct grant support to education organizing and allied groups, according to Julie Kohler, who serves as the Fund's program manager at the New York-based Public Interest Projects. Organizers of the Fund hope that the effort will assist organizing groups in having an impact on systemic problems affecting education, such as the lack of adequate funding for public schools, the inequitable distribution of educational resources, or the

lack of consistent high-quality instruction in the classroom. By supporting strategic partnerships between grassroots organizations, state-level policy/advocacy groups, teachers' unions, universities and other allies, the Fund is investing in strategic, grassroots-driven policy campaigns that seek to improve student outcomes by addressing the root causes of what ails our public education system.

Another aspect of the Fund for Education Organizing that many observers find promising is that several of the national funders involved are new to funding organizing, and some of them have the potential to invest thousands or possibly millions more in the coming years. The fact that the national funders have already leveraged more than 30 local funding partners for the effort is also encouraging, and the sheer number of funders involved in the Fund indicates there is increasing support for organizing as a viable strategy to improve public education. Many of the grantmakers have been funding education projects for years, but without incorporating organizing as a core strategy.

If organizing as a strategy to improve public education is ever to attract truly significant investment from foundations, there will need to be clear linkages between organizing efforts and improved educational outcomes. How effective is organizing at improving public education? The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation has been backing a massive study to examine that very question. Mott selected eight organizing groups to participate in the study and then funded the New York-based Annenberg Institute for School Reform, formerly the Institute for Education and Social Policy, to study their work and document its impact.

Kavitha Mediratta, a principal investigator for the study, says early findings show that in every one of the districts studied, key policy makers at the district, municipal and state levels attribute policy and school improvement changes to organizing groups. The study is also examining to what degree parent-, community-, and youth-led organizing efforts result in improved test scores. Because community organizing is an external intervention in schools, linking organizing to school improvement trends is difficult. It is therefore a very positive sign that decision-makers at all levels are willing to attribute important improvements to the efforts of organizing groups. The full report is expected to be released in 2008.

If the Fund for Education Organizing and the efforts of forward-thinking individual funders succeed in generating sustained funding for quality organizing, this will mark a major shift in funding to improve public education. Those foundations that support privatization learned more than a decade ago that targeting their funding to impact policy was the most effective way to advance their agenda. Will foundations that support improved public education learn the same lesson quickly enough and put sufficient dollars behind the effort to keep pace? The answer

remains to be seen.

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A Promising New Development: The Fund for Education Organizing

Seven national funders committed more than \$5 million over three years, to be matched by local funders:

- Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
- Carnegie Corporation of New York
- Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
- Edward W. Hazen Foundation
- Ford Foundation
- Marguerite Casey Foundation
- Prudential Foundation

Funding is targeted in four geographic areas:

- Chicago
- Denver
- Philadelphia
- New Jersey (statewide projects, and also projects in Patterson, Newark, or Jersey City)

Grantmaking will be significant:

\$400,000 to \$800,000 per year per site in direct support to community organizing groups working on education issues

For further info contact Julie Kohler, Program Manager, Fund for Education Organizing at jkohler@publicinterestprojects.org

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How Effective is Organizing as a Strategy for Improving Public Education?

The following groups are working with the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation to try and find out — the final report is expected in 2008:

- Austin Interfaith (AI), an affiliate of the IAF network, based in Austin, Texas
- Chicago Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), an affiliate of ACORN, based in Chicago, Illinois
- Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment (CC), not affiliated with any national network, based in Los Angeles, California
- Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project (EPOP), an affiliate of the PICO network, based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Milwaukee Inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAH), an affiliate of the Gamaliel network, based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC), not affiliated with any national network, based in the Bronx, New York
- Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), an affiliate of the PICO network, based in Oakland, California
- People Acting for Community Together (PACT), an affiliate of the DART network, based in Miami, Florida

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Policy Work in Support of Education Organizing

There are six organizations engaged in significant policy work in support of organizing as a strategy to improve public education. Many can provide technical assistance or research assistance to organizing groups for their campaigns. They are:

- Center for Community Change
www.communitychange.org/issues/education
- Community Involvement Program at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University
www.annenberginstitute.org/CIP
- Designs for Change
www.designsforchange.org
- Institute for Democracy, Education & Access
www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu
- National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham University
www.ncscatfordham.org
- Research for Action
www.researchforaction.org

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The Importance of Local Support

Manual High School

The story of Manual High School in Denver, CO, a Gates-funded school that was broken into three “small schools,” only to be re-merged, and then eventually closed in 2006, is a tale of caution for reformers. As reported in an in-depth article in the January 15th issue of The New Yorker, the chain of events leading to Manual’s closure was backed by big bucks, but little community support.

This fall, Manual will begin a staggered reopening and aims to enroll 175 ninth-graders. Rob Stein, the newly appointed principal and a Manual graduate himself, says the goal is to enroll an additional class each year for the next four years. The school's chaotic history has led to some resentment and suspicion among community members however, who say closing a mostly poor, minority school was unfair. Stein has held a number of community meetings since the Manual reopening announcement was made, and is reportedly focused on hiring local educators. In a recent article in Rocky Mountain News, Stein said "I like local knowledge and local expertise." For the students and families of Manual High, hopefully this latest initiative isn't too little, too late.

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