

Maximizing Collaborative Power: Lessons from Communities for Public Education Reform¹

By Melinda Fine, Ed.D., and Lauren Jacobs

When change goals are far-reaching, no single entity can achieve them; big changes are most often achieved by broad movements. And movements require a diversity of people and organizations with a shared vision, identity and message frame. They are fueled by common campaigns and coordinated action. They are grounded in relationships that are sturdy enough to navigate challenges and to seize the opportunities that emerge from alliances forged across regions, constituencies and issues.

These essential elements do not simply arise out of good will and best intentions. They depend on funders' sustained investment in field infrastructure, their tolerance for ambiguity and their patience in realizing results. Grantmakers have an important role to play in nurturing collaboration among the groups they support. However, in embracing this role, they must recognize and accommodate the additional time, labor and capacity that genuine collaboration requires.

Since 2007, the Communities for Public Education Reform Fund (CPER) has supported the collaborative power of community organizing and advocacy groups working for systemic policy reforms that advance educational equity and high-quality learning opportunities for students of color in low-income families. CPER is a project of NEO Philanthropy (formerly Public Interest Projects), the 501 (c)(3) public charity engaged to direct the fund. Over its eight-year lifespan, it has involved 76 local and national donor members and

invested \$34 million in 140 community groups, advocacy allies and national coalitions. Powered by multi-year campaigns that involved organizing, advocacy, research, communications and alliance building, CPER grantees played a key role in securing more than 90 policy wins at the school, district, state and federal levels.

This pooled funding effort employed diverse strategies to nurture the collaborative potential of its supported groups. Here are 10 lessons we have learned about collaboration at its best.

1. Support clusters of groups with shared goals: Each of CPER's six investment sites supported interconnected clusters of organizing groups, along with their advocacy and research allies. Groups shared site-wide policy goals but they pursued individual or-



Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE), a coalition sponsored by CPER, holds a press conference. Photo courtesy of CPER.

ganizational programs, received different sized grants and completed reporting requirements independently. They all knew that groups within a cluster would receive grants over multiple years for their part in shared work; this understanding incentivized collaboration by reducing funding tensions. One grantee noted, "Groups combined their strengths, with the organizing groups bringing the experiences of their members and their capacity for direct action while the advocates brought their expertise and mastery of district and government policy. This expanded the scope of the campaigns and the depth of the solutions we proposed."

2. Trust grantees to identify the partners they need: Arranged marriages among organizations rarely succeed; successful collaboration almost always depends on groups identifying their own collaborative partners. In most CPER sites, grantee collaboration among groups drew from existing longstanding relationships. In one site, however, funders initially channeled dollars toward a newly established organizing network, which was unable to deliver on the funders' expectations for coordinated action. After four years, a candid assessment caused the funders to retool expectations and shift resources to existing coalitions. This gave grantees room to invest time in relationships they saw as most important and resulted in major gains.

3. Appreciate organizational differences: Organizing and advocacy groups differ in their fundamental mission, pri-



Representatives attend CPER's 2012 Convening. Photo courtesy of CPER.

orities, pace and culture. Recognizing and accommodating these differences can help all constituencies involved achieve impact beyond what they might achieve alone. Among other things, it helps when funders:

- Balance expectations for collaboration and independence, safeguarding a coalition's unified voice while ensuring space for groups to act independently.
- Shape reporting and evaluation expectations in a way that values both policy impacts and increased community capacity and power.
- Set realistic expectations for outcomes that accommodate the longer timeframe that organizing typically requires.

4. Provide additional resources: Funders inadvertently undermine collaboration when they expect groups to shoulder collaborative demands on existing – and typically limited – organizational resources. CPER augmented direct grants through material, programmatic and administrative support. National staff at NEO Philanthropy designed, supervised and coordinated these supports, aggregating field lessons for both donors and grantees. These included: assigning locally-based staff in investment sites to

coordinate meetings among grantees; identifying common capacity challenges and training opportunities; conveying insights about grantees' progress to funders and staff; and national technical assistance facilitators who supported regional and national coalitions and convening and peer learning opportunities.

5. Convene groups to reflect, strategize and dream together: Face-to-face gatherings make palpable the sense of power that comes from being part of a larger whole. In supporting convening opportunities, funders offer venues for groups to come together across issues, sectors and change strategies. CPER's convening menu included cross-site visits and exchanges among grantees; year-long, "peer learning communities" to deepen grantees' knowledge of key education issues and enable crafting campaign strategies across regions; and large, annual gatherings bringing together funders, grantees and stakeholders. One grantee noted, "The CPER national convenings were extremely helpful in allowing us not only to feel part of a national movement but to understand our local experiences within a national context."

6. Strengthen intersections across issues: In today's philanthropic climate, many

funders advance their priorities by tightly focusing their investing, sometimes to a single issue, but organizations working to advance social change envision their work more holistically. Funding boundaries rarely mirror how complex social issues are experienced and tackled on the ground. Funders best advance social change goals when they seek to connect rather than silo issues from one another. CPER helped tackle integrally related social challenges through convening groups (as noted above), aligning with related donor efforts and supporting multi-issue organizations and alliances. For example, at times CPER combined resources and services with other NEO Philanthropy collaborative funds that addressed racial equity, immigration rights and juvenile justice – all related to our educational equity goals – strengthening intersections across these related concerns. The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy's *Smashing Silos: Multi-Issue Advocacy and Organizing for Real Results*² richly contributed to our understanding of this strategy.

7. Stand ready to support rapidly emerging opportunities: Opportunities for impact can arise suddenly, such as when a damaging policy proposal must be defended against or a dramatic event incites public interest. Activist groups often must scramble to reallocate resources to respond to such crises and opportunities. CPER helped groups seize the moment by providing time-sensitive, special opportunity rapid-response grants. These supplemental funds were included in CPER's national budget and designed to be allocated over the course of the grant year. Both grantees and local coordinating staff knew that rapid-response resources were available if needed, and grants were executed nearly immediately once approved.

8. Facilitate strategic alignment with key stakeholders: Productive relation-

ships between organizing peers and advocacy partners are leveraged when groups reach beyond their immediate allies and cultivate alignment with unusual stakeholders and strategic “influentials.” Funders put their own power as “influentials” into practice when they help grantees broker these relationships. CPER leveraged its direct support to grantees by facilitating new partnerships with local and national grantmakers across diverse issue areas, as well as teachers’ unions and academics committed to an equity-focused reform agenda. (See “Organizing for Educational Justice” in the Summer 2014 issue of *Responsive Philanthropy*.³) Strategies included briefings, conferences and rapid-response grants.

9. Nurture the growth of relationships over time:

Organizational relationships rarely start with love at first sight. Most often, they begin with informal staff contacts that lead to identifying common interests and sharing information – and from there move to joint work toward specific objectives. These discrete, narrowly bounded transactional collaborations serve to build trust and work out the kinks in a relationship. By nurturing relationships during these early stages, funders can help build the foundation needed for sustained collaboration on multiple issues, enabling the transformational change arising from social movements. CPER’s multi-year funding gave grantees the time to build the support base needed to move an issue, to conduct power analyses and identify key targets, and to cultivate and sustain relationships with these players. Grantmaker patience – coupled with sustained funding for collaborative work among grantees – is essential to realizing change that often is slow in coming.

10. Walk the talk: As in other collaborative funding efforts, CPER funders leveraged institutional investments by pooling

dollars. CPER funder collaboration functioned on two levels. First, to fuel sustainable local investment in community organizing work, CPER coordinated a local funder table in each site. Second, an anchor donor from each site joined CPER’s national donors in a national steering committee. This partnership helped local funders to locate their work in the national landscape and national funders to better understand local complexities. Funder collaboration also had positive value for grantees: it generated more dollars for the field, helped grantees gain access to new funding partners and freed them up to focus on their critical work because NEO Philanthropy handled grantseeking and grantmaking responsibilities.

In Many Hands, More Impact, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations argues:

“Next to funding, perhaps the most important things a grantmaker can provide to support movements are connections that lead to meaningful relationships. In fact, grantmakers with significant movement experience say that they cannot overemphasize the importance of their role as the ‘glue’ or ‘connective tissue’ between organizations and networks advancing a movement’s vision.”

In today’s “strategic” philanthropy climate, where focused, foundation-led agendas are increasingly seen as the surest route to achieving desired ends, allocating resources for collaboration among groups may be seen as a nonessential add-on. Holistic field-building strategies take time to deliver results and may not be suitable for every foundation, but they are an essential strategy for foundations seeking sustainable, transformative change.

As one CPER grantee noted:

“Organizations are so overtaxed and overwhelmed that we rarely prioritize consistent coordinated communication with organizations outside of our immediate campaign

coalition efforts. ... CPER’s chief lasting legacy has been to illustrate to funders and to organizations in the field how much groups with similar agendas and goals have to gain from coordination, communication and collaboration.” ■

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Notes

1. This article draws on findings from a larger report, “Strengthening Collaborations to Build Social Movements: Ten Lessons from the Communities for Public Education Reform Fund (CPER),” available at <http://www.theneodifference.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Strengthening-Collaborations-NEO-Fall-2014.pdf>. For a fuller discussion of CPER’s grantmaking model and an analysis of fund impacts in community organizing and education reform, see also “Greater Power, Lasting Impact: Effective Grantmaker Strategies from the Communities for Public Education Reform Fund,” available at <http://www.theneodifference.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Greater-Power-Lasting-Impact-NEO-Fall-2014.pdf>. More information and hard copies of each report can be obtained from Melinda Fine, Ed.D., Director, Communities for Public Education Reform, mfine@neophilanthropy.org.
2. Niki Jagpal and Kevin Laskowski, *Smashing Silos in Philanthropy: Multi-Issue Advocacy and Organizing for Real Results* (DC: National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, November 2013), <http://www.ncrp.org/paib/smashing-silos-in-philanthropy/>.
3. Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, “Organizing for Educational Justice,” *Responsive Philanthropy*, August 2014, <http://ncrp.org/publications/responsive-pubs/rparchive/responsive-philanthropy-summer-2014/organizing-for-justice>.