

Philanthropic Strategies for Community-Led Education Reform¹

Julie K. Kohler

Grassroots community organizations have been at the forefront of the fight for decent wages, emergency food assistance, fair treatment and other social issues for many decades. NCRP recognizes the crucial role that community organizing can play in helping fight for the rights and provide for the needs of the disadvantaged, and in trying to reform—politically and socially—a system that continues to perpetuate the problem. Many of these organizations, such as those working to improve the nation’s failing education system, are in need of more foundation support to help develop effective, long-term solutions.

NCRP asked Julie Kohler, director of evaluation and program manager for Public Interest Projects’ Communities for Public Education Reform (CPEP) program, to share how this funder collaborative for education organizing is answering the call for foundation involvement in the fight to ensure that our country’s children have equitable access to quality public education.

In May 2007, Public Interest Projects launched Communities for Public Education Reform (CPEP), a funder collaborative for education organizing, with awards totaling \$2.4 million in grants and technical assistance contracts to 19 education organizing and allied organizations, and two coalitions involving ten additional organizations in four U.S. localities.

The effort represents an unprecedented scale in philanthropic commitment to community-based public education reform. Over three years, the fund anticipates disbursing at least \$7 million to community groups working to organize communities around education reform.

The goal of CPEP is to improve educational equity and quality for low-income students of color by giving community residents a stronger voice in shaping the policies that affect their public schools. In statehouses, legislatures and school districts across the country, many of the decisions affecting public education are made without the input of communities—those whose on-the-ground needs and experiences allow them to ask the tough questions about inequities and offer intelligent and pragmatic solutions. CPEP-funded groups are working to address a number of issues that community members deem critical, including insufficient and inequitable

funding, inadequate and outdated school facilities, high dropout rates, the lack of highly qualified and culturally competent teachers, and insufficient services for immigrant and special education students.

EDUCATION ORGANIZING AND THE IMPETUS FOR CPEP

Over the years, there have been many examples of successful education organizing that have resulted in marked improvements in schools and instructional practice. Once focused almost exclusively on short-term tactics to deal with immediate problems in schools, community organizations have become more systemic and strategic in recent years. They have developed more sophisticated campaigns, often in partnership with educators, students, researchers, advocates, teachers’ unions and other support groups.

Systemic education organizing campaigns have benefited from collaborative funding at the local level. For example, the Boston Parent Organizing Collaborative (BPON) and the New York’s Donor’s Education Collaborative (DEC) have been instrumental in enabling community organizations and educational advocates to work together to push successfully for large-scale, equity-focused educational reforms, including billions of dollars in new funding for New York City’s public schools.



Candidates from Logan Square Neighborhood Association Grow Your Own Teachers project in a study circle for one of their college classes.

Despite its potential and efficacy, which has been documented by a growing body of research from the Annenberg Institute on School Reform, the Harvard School of Education, Research for Action and the Institute for Democracy, Education and Access (IDEA) at UCLA, the field of education organizing remains fragile and under-resourced. Its successes are just now emerging, and many in philanthropy still view education organizing as it existed 15 or 20 years ago, when community organizations were more confrontational and less focused on longer-term, collaborative strategies needed to improve schools and systems. As Aaron Dorfman, NCRP's executive director, noted in the spring/summer issue of *Social Policy*, less than 10 percent of all education grantmaking (approximately \$35 million) over the past several years had the explicit purpose of changing education policy; support for organizing is a small subset of that \$35 million. Model program development and strategic interventions, often in partnership with schools and school districts, remain the dominant models of foundation investment in education.²

Philanthropic interest in direct interventions in schools has been beneficial, helping to produce some excellent schools and teaching the field a great deal about the “technology” of improving education. For example, philanthropic investments in high school reform have revealed the value and potential of small learning communities to create nurturing and supportive environments for adolescents.

Unfortunately, the history of school reform suggests that even when individual school reform efforts are successful, success often is fragile, short-lived and dependent largely on the extraordinary commitment and talents of dedicated professionals working within each institution. While schools surely could use more leaders of this type, the failure to scale-up and sustain equity-focused reforms has occurred, in part, because schools—and school systems—are inherently subject to the politics and culture of their communities. For instance, reform

agendas often shift when a new superintendent or mayor comes into office, and fiscal and political pressures can lead to the rollback of reforms.

Education organizing has great potential to address the political and cultural dimensions of school reform, and in so doing, address educational inequities at scale. Education organizing also develops leadership and builds constituents to push for reforms that can be sustained over time. Because children in a given family or neighborhood likely will attend local schools for elementary and secondary education, parents need their

By empowering local residents to connect with grassroots efforts and fully engage in the reform process, organizing can generate fresh ideas ... and create the public and political will needed to address inequities at all levels and achieve meaningful reforms ...

school systems—not just individual schools—to work. Also, parent and community residents usually stay in their neighborhoods, towns and cities for the long haul, so they have a long-term vested interest in the quality of public schools. By empowering local residents to connect with grassroots efforts and fully engage in the reform process, organizing can generate fresh ideas—ideas that might not surface if reform is left entirely to the experts—and create the public and political will needed to address inequities at all levels and achieve meaningful reforms that last beyond the lifespan of a superintendent or mayor.

THE CPER APPROACH TO FUNDING

Responding to the inherently place-based nature of education organizing and the central goal of improving educational opportunities and outcomes for large numbers of students, CPER is structured to assure that the majority of its resources are used to strengthen local education organizing campaigns. Since CPER seeks to support campaigns that can be sustained over time, the fund leverages support through a match ratio of at least one local dollar to each national dollar, with a \$500,000 annual cap.

CPER's four sites—Chicago, Denver, New Jersey and Southeastern Pennsylvania—were selected through an RFP process designed and vetted by staff at Public Interest Projects, a 501(c)(3) public charity that manages the fund, and national funders serving on CPER's National Steering

state meets its State Supreme Court-mandated obligation, also known as the *Abbott* decision,³ to fund equitably its 31 most disadvantaged districts. Specifically, CPER funded education organizing campaigns in three cities (Newark, Jersey City and Paterson) focused on implementing *Abbott* school funding

mandates, new school construction and the provision of supplemental programs to low-income students. The local organizing groups and their allied partners also are collaborating on a statewide policy agenda focused on protecting

The ultimate goal is for education organizing—like research, policy advocacy and model program development—to be seen by funders and the public as essential to creating a public education system of high quality, equitable schools.

Committee. Site selection was based on several criteria, including the readiness of local funders to invest resources, the existence of high quality education organizing work on the ground and the alignment between the site's proposed work and CPER's priority issue areas.

In Chicago, CPER is investing in two large-scale education organizing coalitions: Grow Your Own (GYO) Illinois and Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE), both of which are working to bring the community voice into the policymaking process and deliver major education policy victories over the next three years, particularly around teacher quality, college readiness and improving the high school curriculum in low-income schools.

In Denver, CPER is funding education organizing groups working to strengthen effective policies and programs that ensure that key marginalized groups have access to high quality educational experiences. Immigrants, English Language Learners (ELLs) and other low-income students are the major focus of CPER's Denver-based work. Specifically, Denver CPER is investing in building the capacity of two "anchor" grantees Metro Organizations for People (MOP) and Padres/Jovenes Unidos, by helping them expand regionally and strengthen their state education policy agenda. In order to fortify the field of education organizing, CPER conducted organizational assessments on smaller "field building" organizations and is supporting, through grants or technical assistance contracts, the organizational development and capacity of the Project VOYCE and Northeast Parents for Quality Education (NEPQuE).

CPER work in New Jersey seeks to ensure that the

and strengthening *Abbott*.

In Southeastern Pennsylvania, CPER's work focuses on finance equity and high school reform. CPER funded a collaborative of five organizing and three allied groups that are working to help students, parents and other stakeholders hold the public education system accountable for equitable, quality public education; promote high school reform throughout Philadelphia (i.e., ensuring that "reformed" schools have the resources, flexibility and standards needed to actualize their potential and improve educational outcomes for students); document existing gaps among schools and school districts to raise public awareness of educational inequities; increase support among state policymakers for an equitable education funding formula and increase legislative funding for under-resourced schools.

In addition to the direct grant support to education organizing campaigns in the fund's four sites, CPER supports a Community Learning and Technical Assistance Network (CLTAN) that helps increase the effectiveness and visibility of education organizing campaigns at the local, state and national levels. Specifically, the CLTAN invests in technical assistance, cross-site learning, evaluation and documentation strategies that support community organizations' efforts to improve the equity and quality of public schools, and build funder understanding and support for organizing as an education reform strategy. The ultimate goal is for education organizing—like research, policy advocacy and model program development—to be seen by funders and the public as essential to creating a public education system of high quality, equitable schools.

A PROMISING FUTURE

Although it is too early to know whether CPER will produce its desired changes in education policy, practices and financing, the interest the fund has generated within philanthropy is encouraging. It suggests a growing awareness of the critical leadership role that parents and students can and should play in education reform.

Foundations may decide to support organizing for a variety of reasons, viewing it as a way to ensure accountability, encourage democratic processes, or engage communities around specific education reform strategies. Regardless, by investing in CPER and other education organizing initiatives, philanthropy is sending a message: that the discourse around public education reform must be broadened into a community conversation among educators, policymakers and families—the consumers of education.

Julie Kohler is the director of evaluation and program manager for Public Interest Projects' (PIP) Communities for Public Education Reform program, which involves

nearly 70 community organizations, and local and national funders. PIP is a 501(c)(3) public charity that operates grantmaking, technical assistance and strategic-planning programs for institutional and individual donors interested in social justice and human rights issues. By developing sustainable partnerships among donors, grantees and allied groups, PIP seeks to foster a movement of positive social change resulting in equality, fairness and a stronger participatory democracy.

NOTES

1. This article is based on a concept paper developed by Henry Allen at the Discount Foundation, Lori Bezahler at the Edward W. Hazen Foundation, Christine Doby at the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and Cyrus Driver at the Ford Foundation.
2. Aaron Dorfman, "Funding for Education Organizing: An A+ Plan for More Effective Grantmaking," *Social Policy*, vol. 37 nos. 3&4 (spring/summer 2007).
3. More information on this landmark ruling is available online on the Education Law Center's web site: <http://www.edlawcenter.org>.

FOUNDATION INVOLVEMENT IN CPER

NATIONAL FUNDERS

Carnegie Corporation of New York
Marguerite Casey Foundation
Ford Foundation

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Edward W. Hazen Foundation
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

Prudential Foundation
Schott Foundation for Public Education
Surdna Foundation

LOCAL FUNDERS

Denver

Annie E. Casey Foundation
Annie E. Casey Making Connections – Denver
City of Denver
The Denver Foundation
Piton Foundation
Philanthropic Community Organizing Collaborative
Rose Community Foundation

New Jersey

Community Foundation of New Jersey
Fund for New Jersey
Geraldine Dodge Foundation
Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation
JP Morgan Chase
Prudential Foundation
Sagner Family Foundation
Schumann Fund for New Jersey
Victoria Foundation

Philadelphia

Advanta Foundation
Allen Hilles Fund
Annenberg Foundation
Douty Foundation
Samuel S. Fels Fund
Lanham Fund
Philadelphia Foundation
United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania
William Penn Foundation
Western Foundation

Chicago

Marguerite Casey Foundation
Field Foundation
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Morris and Meyer Kaplan Foundation

Prince Charitable Trust
Polk Bros. Foundation
Wieboldt Foundation
Woods Fund of Chicago