

# PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATION GRANTMAKING



IMPROVING PUBLIC EDUCATION: *A Guide for Donors to Make a Difference*

# grantmakers<sup>for</sup>education

## GRANTMAKERS FOR EDUCATION

Grantmakers for Education is philanthropy's knowledge source for improving achievement and opportunities for all students. Founded in 1995, we are a national association of over 200 philanthropies that builds knowledge and networks to improve the effectiveness of education philanthropy. [www.edfunders.org](http://www.edfunders.org)



## ASSOCIATION OF SMALL FOUNDATIONS

*for foundations with few or no staff*

## THE ASSOCIATION OF SMALL FOUNDATIONS

The Association of Small Foundations is a membership organization of nearly 3,000 foundations with few or no staff. ASF enhances the power of small foundation giving by providing donors, trustees and staff of member foundations with peer learning opportunities, targeted tools and resources, and a collective voice in and beyond the philanthropic community. [www.smallfoundations.org](http://www.smallfoundations.org)

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## SOCIAL VENTURE PARTNERS

Social Venture Partners is a network of engaged donors that brings together nonprofits and philanthropists to learn from each other and build capacity for positive community impact. SVP welcomes partners from diverse backgrounds who want to pool financial contributions and skills to provide more resources to nonprofits and produce greater results. [www.svpi.org](http://www.svpi.org) and [www.svpseattle.org](http://www.svpseattle.org)



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# PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATION GRANTMAKING

Effective education grantmaking changes the lives of students. It does so by impacting educational outcomes, influencing policies and practices, engaging and empowering stakeholders, or leveraging needed resources. As we hope the IMPROVING PUBLIC EDUCATION guide makes clear, effective grantmaking is not accidental; it is deliberate, well-conceived and well-executed.

In June 2005, Grantmakers for Education announced eight education grantmaking practices – drawn from the experience and wisdom of successful grantmakers and donors – that we think lead to results in education. These Principles for Effective Education Grantmaking seek to promote the wisdom, craft and knowledge education funders need to achieve maximum results. We’ve summarized the principles below.

More information about the Principles – including an accompanying series of in-depth case studies examining a variety of effective grantmaking strategies – is available at [www.edfunders.org](http://www.edfunders.org).

*Note: The umbrella term “funder” embraces individual donors and foundations. We recognize that not all funders make contributions through a formal grantmaking process. For simplicity’s sake, however, we use the word “grantee” to mean a beneficiary of any type of philanthropic contribution.*



## *Discipline and Focus*

**In education, where public dollars dwarf private investments, a funder has greater impact when contributions are carefully planned and targeted.**

*To maximize your chance of success:*

**Choose a discrete, manageable area of work** where you can realistically impact the problem.

**Define the need you are trying to address.** Do you want to improve an individual's achievement or opportunities? A school's performance? The way the system works for all schools?

**Consider where you can add maximum value** and how you can leverage assets and capabilities.

One of the philanthropist's biggest assets is the ability to act nimbly. Balance focus with a willingness to respond to unforeseen developments.

## 2

## *Knowledge*

**Information, ideas and advice from diverse sources can help a funder make wise choices.**

*Seek understanding of:*

**The public education landscape:** social, political and economic factors; federal, state and local policies and priorities.

**Problems in education:** needs; barriers to progress; limitations of working from outside or inside the system; links between education problems and areas such as youth development and community development.

**Field of education philanthropy:** where and how other funders are working on similar issues; what is being learned; assets of other funders, organizations and networks.

**Opportunities:** community influencers, assets and will to change; leadership in the field; proven strategies for addressing specific problems; points of leverage.

**How organizations and systems change (or resist change):** incentives and disincentives to change; the roles of culture, leadership and politics.

When deciding which education solutions to pursue, reaching out to both theorists and practitioners will help avoid "tunnel vision".

# 3

## *Resources Linked to Results*

**A logic-driven “theory of change” helps a donor think clearly about how specific actions will lead to desired outcomes, thus linking resources with results.**

*To build a theory of change:*

**Articulate the “big picture” impact you hope to accomplish.**

**Make explicit your assumptions about how your efforts will make change.** Which actions are likely to achieve the change you seek? Why?

**Determine the types and levels of resources (financial, technical, etc.) needed to produce the proposed actions.**

**Consider how you can realistically and effectively support the proposed actions.** Consider the agendas and capacities of potential grantees and other stakeholders.

**Specify outcomes you intend to result from proposed actions.** Describe how these outcomes will lead to the big picture impact you seek to achieve.

**Identify which elements in your plan are fact-based or measurable and which rely on informed assumptions.**

The question of how to realistically and effectively support the proposed actions is significant especially for smaller funders. Remember that funding direct services is not the only option. Supporting activities that influence how services are provided – such as research, advocacy and capacity-building – can be a powerful way to leverage limited resources.

# 4

## *Effective Grantees*

**A funder is effective only when its grantees are effective. Especially in education, schools and systems lack capacity and extra resources and may require deep support – a consideration especially consequential for smaller funders.**

*To improve the likelihood that you and grantee partners will achieve intended outcomes:*

**Balance working with established organizations with a willingness to support new leaders and ideas.**

**Perform due diligence in selecting grantees.** Look for strong leadership. Consider their administrative and fiscal health, wise use of resources, and capacity to implement the project.

**Ensure a good fit exists between your focus and resources and those of each partner** – and that the work to be accomplished is a priority for all participants.

**Set realistic and clear expectations about contributions and outcomes** for all grantees and other partners.

**Tailor funding and procedures to support grantees' work.** Link the funded work to the broader goals of grantees.

**If appropriate, develop a clear plan for how grantees will sustain efforts after the grant period.**

A key question to consider is what you can realistically expect of your grantees. Sometimes investment in grantee infrastructure – for example, funding for operating expenses or a multi-year commitment – improves the likelihood of long-term success of a project.

# 5

## *Engaged Partners*

**A funder succeeds by actively engaging its partners – the individuals, institutions and communities connected with an issue.**

*To ensure collective “ownership” of education problems and their solutions:*

**Provide the means for stakeholders to help define the problem, identify viable solutions and participate in the design of the intervention.**

**Help build a broad constituency in support of solving the problem.**

**Engage and respect a diverse range of community stakeholders.**

**Resist the temptation to think that funders have the answers.**

Funders can play many roles that don't involve the transmission of money. Smaller funders especially should consider how they can add value by taking a lead in initiating or accelerating action, and convening and organizing stakeholders.

# 6

## *Leverage, Influence and Collaboration*

**The depth and range of problems in education make it difficult to achieve meaningful change in isolation or by funding programs without changing public policies or opinions. A funder is more effective when working with others to mobilize and deploy as many resources as possible in order to advance solutions.**

*To leverage your position:*

**Use all your assets – not just financial resources – to attract other partners and to increase the likelihood of success.** Employ your knowledge, ability to convene stakeholders, reputation, visibility and communications capacity.

**Consider whether local, state or federal public policies and priorities can be a tool – or, conversely, whether they must be changed – to solve the problem on which you are working.**

**Value collaboration and coordination with other funders.** Work in tandem or as partners whenever possible to tackle a specific need, problem or geographic area.

**Leverage is at the heart of how smaller funders can help make large-scale impact.** Without the money to fund larger ventures, you must determine which assets you can deploy strategically and creatively to produce cascading or “snowballing” impacts.

Sometimes public policies and funding priorities, or public opinion, offer leverage for achieving desired outcomes. Sometimes they provide an obstacle. If the latter, you need to consider whether influencing public will or advocating for policy change are roles you want to play or fund.



# 7

## *Persistence*

**The most important problems in education are often the most complex and intractable, and will take time to solve.**

*To improve the likelihood that your contribution will matter:*

**Commit to work for sufficient time to gauge results and make a lasting difference.**

**Determine explicitly whether and when an exit strategy is appropriate.**

The question of whether you are willing and able to commit the resources required to “go the distance” is especially acute for smaller funders. To be engaged in effective education philanthropy is to find answers to the questions: How long do we need to work before we should expect to see results? Before we have created sustainable change? If we don’t have the resources to make that happen, how will we preserve the investment we’ve made? How will we know when an intervention is unsuccessful and it’s time to end support?

# 8

## *Innovation and Constant Learning*

**Even while acting on the best available information, a funder can create new knowledge about ways to promote educational success. Tracking outcomes, understanding costs and identifying what works – and what doesn’t – are essential to helping funders and their partners achieve results.**

*To gauge whether you and your grantees are making a difference:*

**Be clear about what you want to learn from your funding.** Every contribution is an opportunity to learn.

**Draw on your theory of change – from Principle #3 – to establish measurable goals and identify milestones.** At each milestone and at the project's conclusion, assess your success, reflect on progress, adjust assumptions, and revise strategies and implementation efforts to improve outcomes of future grants.

**When possible, publicly release significant information about the results of your contributions and what has been learned – both successes and failures.** Understand and communicate the uses and limitations of research and evaluation data.

**Stay engaged with grantees while contributions are being implemented to learn from and leverage their work.** Plan ways to stay connected with partners after projects finish to track the long-term impacts of your efforts.

**Remain adaptable to new ideas and open to unexpected learning.** Innovate and take risks that have the potential to advance solutions.

**Admit when you are wrong or contributions do not turn out as expected.**

Funding evaluation, new learning, and knowledge dissemination is a powerful way for smaller funders to leverage their resources to inform change. As is clear from the above, evaluation can be time- and resource-intensive. You should be aware up front of the resources required, both of you and of your grantees. You may also consider funding the evaluation component of a project whose major funding comes from other sources.

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