

SEEING IT THROUGH:
*Advanced Strategies
for Influencing Education Policy*

2009 EDUCATION GRANTMAKERS INSTITUTE

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The
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Introduction

“No education grantmaker can afford to ignore public policy. Local, state and federal policies shape the context in which we work by establishing education standards, allocating resources and setting priorities for people working in education.” So begins the report on Grantmakers for Education’s 2005 Grantmakers Institute, Foundation Strategies for Influencing Education Policy. The statement rings more true than ever.



Even funders that choose to steer clear of public policy grantmaking must do so with an understanding that their work will almost certainly be influenced by shifts in the policy environment. This reality will persist as long as American schools and colleges continue to suffer the effects of the economic crisis, cities and states look for ways to stimulate significant educational improvements, and states step up to participate in new federal policy initiatives and to meet the challenges of preparing students for the global economy.

Building on its 2005 examination of the procedural and legal strategies funders need to consider for engaging with policy, GFE convened grantmakers from around the country in Cambridge, Mass., in May 2009. Through a series of discussions with education leaders and faculty members from Harvard University's Graduate School of Education and John F. Kennedy School of Government, Institute participants deepened their understanding of successes, opportunities and challenges in public policy grantmaking.

Robert Schwartz opened the 2009 Education Grantmakers Institute by reminding the participants of a quotation by F. Scott Fitzgerald. "The test of a first-rate intelligence," Fitzgerald wrote in his 1936 essay "The Crack-Up," "is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to

function." For education grantmakers today, especially those supporting public policy change, the opposed ideas are the worldwide economic crisis and the emerging sense of possibility that real improvement in American education is attainable.

The optimism of the current moment stems in part from the willingness of the Obama Administration to place education at the forefront of policy change and federal spending. But the new mood also emanates from the school reform movement itself, and the palpable sense that education reform is becoming "unstuck." The promise of profound policy change is in the air, and grantmakers are playing an instrumental role in areas as diverse as improving community colleges, introducing new common academic standards for the nation's K-12 schools and significantly expanding early education.

The promise of profound policy change is in the air, and grantmakers are playing an instrumental role.

This is a hopeful time, and an appropriate one for thinking strategically about what can be done to improve the public policies that inform American education, how policies can be implemented in practice, and which roles different actors (including grantmakers) can play in bringing about needed improvements in both realms. The Institute featured lively discussions as participants and faculty members explored the complexities of these issues. This report reflects the insights that came out of those conversations, as well as the sense of urgency the participants brought to their learning.

PART 1

Opportunities *and* pitfalls *in* public policy grantmaking

For a grantmaker, the decision to get involved with public policy change requires answering some preliminary questions: What are the realities of the current environment? What are our objectives and underlying assumptions? And what are the risks and challenges of being a private actor in the public policy domain?



The Institute began with a discussion of those questions considered in the context of an historical case study, “The Carnegie Foundation and the Standardized Testing Movement.” This study examines the role of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in the creation of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) during the decades before and after World War II. Concerned that the quality of American higher education might drop as the nation’s colleges absorbed an influx of underprepared students, the foundation championed the development of a common placement exam—a step, some believed, toward guaranteeing the rigor of the high school curriculum in schools across the country.

A complex story, the case weaves together the foundation’s long-standing involvement in American higher education and the policy pressures of a period in which high school attendance was expanding rapidly and placing new demands on private colleges. The case also offers a detailed account of the specific moves made by the foundation to capitalize on a particular moment of opportunity and paints a vivid picture of the interests, hostilities and loyalties that motivated the major characters.

In other words, despite the passage of roughly 60 years, the story of the Carnegie Foundation’s involvement with public policy has many of the same ingredients that today’s grantmakers

find when they work in the policy arena. The sharpest and most relevant lessons have to do with setting goals, understanding the policy context, and managing one’s own role and that of the foundation in a complex environment. These include:

- **Insularity is a danger if you don’t vet your assumptions carefully.** Calling the study a “cautionary tale,” one grantmaker pointed to the importance of vetting your own assumptions rigorously and considering alternative points of view. “Insularity was a problem for them,” he concluded. That insularity contributed to the creation of a testing system that perpetuated the social stratification of American society, some participants argued, rather than ameliorating or challenging it. “This case is about what happens when you inject private values into public processes,” said one, arguing that the foundation “assumed a certain model of education that many people did not share.”

The sharpest and most relevant lessons have to do with setting goals, understanding the policy context, and managing one’s own role and that of the foundation in a complex environment.

- **A project doesn’t need to be about policy to have policy implications—and sometimes the implications are significant.** The Carnegie Foundation did not set out explicitly to create a national test; rather, it simply sided consistently with a particular faction in the standardized testing debate—a faction that represented elite interests in American higher education and had a stake in protecting what it saw as the high standards of a traditional college education. By lending its support to an already powerful constituency, the foundation added weight to a movement that had implications far beyond the immediate context.

- **Personality conflicts and competitiveness can drive policy debates and sometimes distort them.** Nothing in the Carnegie Foundation case suggests that any of the parties was acting in bad faith; in all likelihood, they were genuinely trying to establish a fair and rational system for connecting colleges with qualified students. Yet, as the case makes clear, the debate was fueled throughout, and perhaps driven off course, by complex personal and institutional animosities and loyalties that were not always readily apparent.
- **Policy formation is not a particularly objective or democratic process, and the boundaries of ethical involvement are not always clear.** More than once, participants noted, the Carnegie Foundation decided at a crucial moment to “buy” a decision—once by arranging for a competitor of ETS to go out of business. Some thought this constituted a clear breach of ethical standards. Others objected: “Come on!” interjected one. “We all buy decisions. The bottom line is, they hit the target.”

Scrutiny and accountability, in combination with an engaged, thoughtful process, can ultimately yield powerful results.

- **Solutions in one area can raise new challenges in another.** In seeking to address one set of problems—the lack of academic standards in American high school education and the danger that underprepared students would compromise the quality of American private colleges—the foundation helped to craft a solution that contributed to a different, and perhaps more serious, problem: persistent disparities in college access among American students. “Broad access to higher education was not a priority at the time. Access was not the problem they were trying to solve,” one person

Philanthropy and education policy

1940S AND TODAY:

What’s the same? What’s different?

The Carnegie Foundation case discussion wrapped up with a brainstorming session about what’s similar and what’s different about being a grantmaker working in education policy then and now.

What’s similar:

- Tendency inside foundations to think they know what’s best
- Use of philanthropic power or money to buy decisions
- Importance of relationships if you want to make change
- Lack of rigor in inspecting the idea and testing it against data

What’s different:

- Explicit value placed today on broad engagement and a diversity of voices
- Increased availability of research and data
- Many more players (especially among foundations) working in the policy arena, and a tendency among them to scrutinize and challenge one another
- Increased magnitude and scale: more students, more educational institutions, more regulation
- Greater oversight and transparency, in part because of easier communication

noted during the discussion. “And the SATs did open up access to some students,” said another. But what might have happened, one person wondered, if public universities had been included in the process? Might they have anticipated the access problem and helped to forestall it?

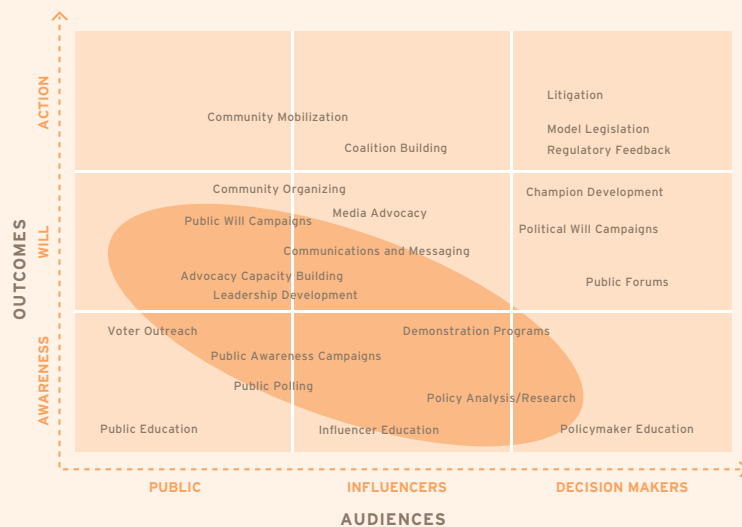
- **Be careful what you wish for.** Whether the Carnegie Foundation saw it coming or not, standardized testing has created barriers to higher education for many students. “That’s the risk of getting into policy,” one participant said. “If you push for policy change, and you’re as successful as these people were, then you may find that you’ve screwed things up *royally*.” You may think you’re being objective, he went on, but “all foundations come with a set of values. Unless we’re questioning those values, and examining how they inform our goals, then we’re dangerous.”

Testing and college admissions were lightly regulated in the 1940s, and the Carnegie Foundation therefore had significant scope to influence the field. Today, the standards and testing landscape is far more complex, and it is hard to imagine a foundation operating with such a degree of latitude. Nevertheless, comparable opportunities may still exist—arenas where funders could push widespread changes without getting lost in a thicket of existing practice, or where the development of a pivotal new tool or model could have broad implications. Foundations today are more heavily scrutinized and the ethic of public accountability is much stronger than was the case for the Carnegie Foundation at that time. But scrutiny and accountability, in combination with an engaged, thoughtful process, can ultimately yield powerful results, without the pitfalls underscored by the case study.

Foundations and Public Policy Grantmaking

As preparation for the Institute, participants read this white paper by Julia Coffman, commissioned by the James Irvine Foundation, available at http://www.irvine.org/assets/pdf/pubs/philanthropy/PublicPolicy_Coffman.pdf.

In this paper, Coffman proposes a useful framework to guide grantmakers as they develop public policy strategy, identifying more than 20 activities that constitute key policy grantmaking approaches. The framework arrays these activities along two strategic dimensions: the audiences the funder is trying to influence and the outcomes it seeks to achieve with those audiences in order to advance a policy goal. In her analysis, Coffman emphasizes the wide range of options grantmakers have for engaging in policy and suggests how they can tailor their approach based on their desired outcomes, intended audiences, and their foundation’s particular style and preferences. The paper includes case studies of four foundations—the California Endowment, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education—and charts their policy strategies onto the framework.



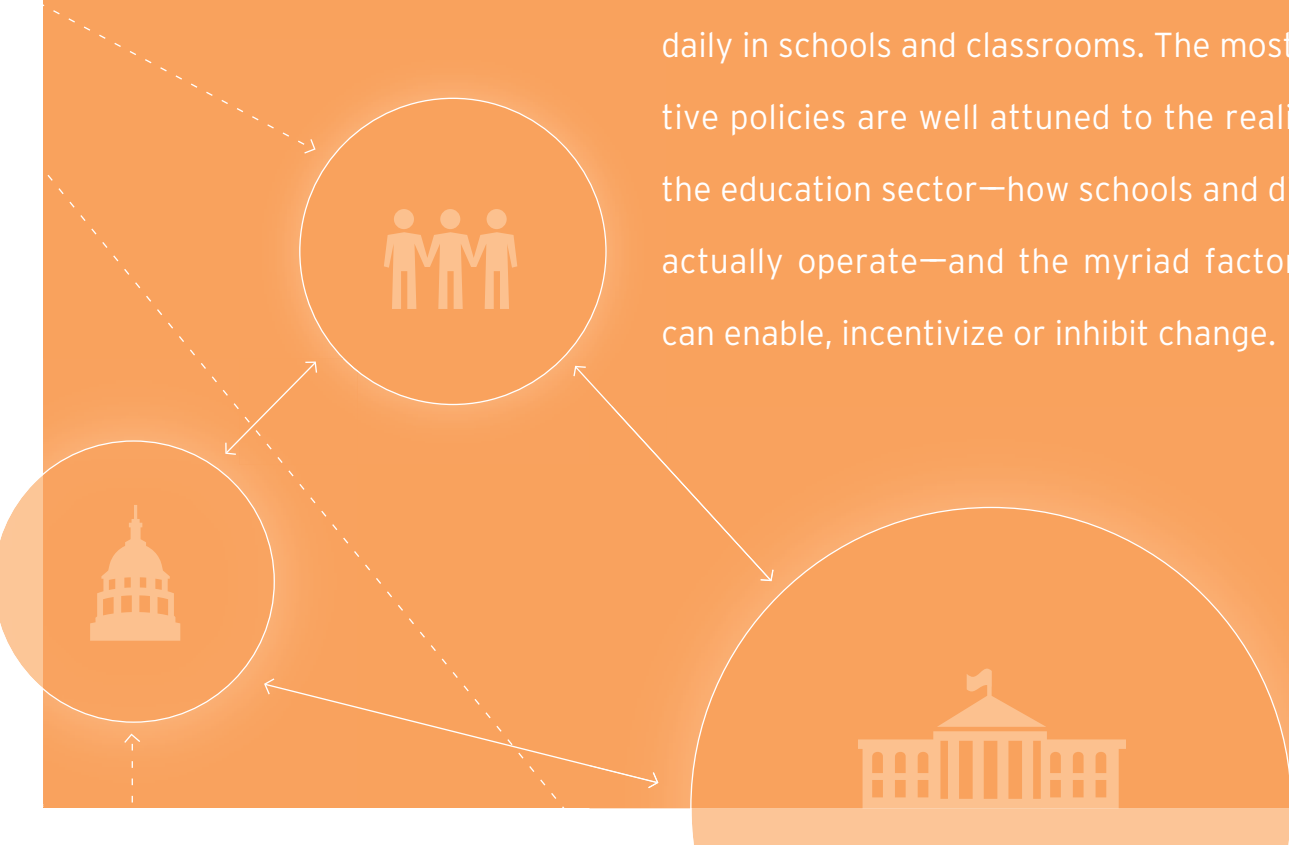
Coffman also uses the framework to present a summary of current trends in public policy grantmaking. As depicted above, Coffman estimates that “most grantmaking tends to fall into the area that has less perceived risk, emphasizing strategies to raise awareness and build public will over more action-oriented approaches.” She also sees evidence that “grantmaking tends to be more action-oriented with public audiences than with decision makers directly.”

This picture may be changing, however. Coffman notes that various factors appear to be pushing grantmakers toward bolder strategies. She cites three influences as especially powerful: leadership from innovators and early adopters of new policy grantmaking techniques, education about legal guidelines for philanthropic engagement in public policy, and advances in evaluation methods.

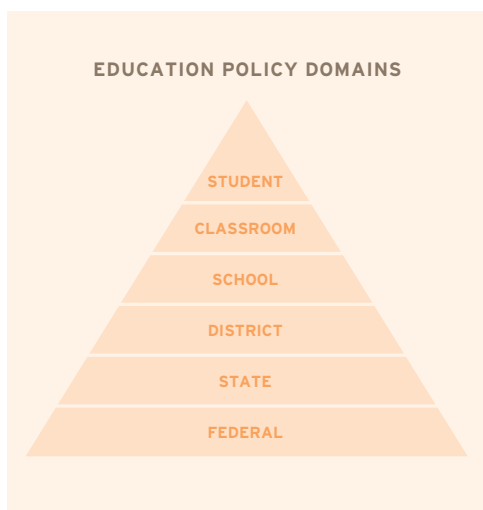
PART 2

Navigating education policy domains

Good education policy, whatever its particular intent, has one core purpose: supporting student learning by providing the right combination of pressure and support to educators, school leaders and school system managers. It's through this mix of pressure and support that policymakers hope to influence what happens daily in schools and classrooms. The most effective policies are well attuned to the realities of the education sector—how schools and districts actually operate—and the myriad factors that can enable, incentivize or inhibit change.



In the United States, the major policy domains for K-12 education chart roughly onto a pyramid, with policies regarding individual students at the apex and federal education policy at the base (although the specific domains may vary at other levels of the education system, the same construct of nesting domains also applies). Because our education system is largely a decentralized one, most education policy—and most education policy grantmaking—is focused at the state or district level. The effectiveness of a policy on one tier of the policy pyramid—student, classroom, school, district, state or federal—will almost certainly depend on well-crafted, complementary policies at other levels.



Complementary policies are usually designed to produce consistency of effort: state policies on accountability and testing, for example, work best when they are aligned with both federal and district guidelines for school accountability. But, as Robert Schwartz pointed out, complementary policies can also establish a “better division of labor” by focusing the attention of practitioners on actions that are appropriately within their scope and by ensuring that demands from one level are matched by supports and incentives from another. So, for example, a state’s demand for improved graduation rates might be augmented by a district’s support for more effective school-level professional learning, stronger incentives to work in hard-to-staff schools and other initiatives.

Recognizing the interplay across these domains is critical for implementation, which is the real measure of the impact of education policy. Political scientist Richard Elmore reminded the group of the importance of developing a thoughtful implementation strategy that takes into account the incentive structures that drive practice at each level, and to consider how philanthropy might influence them in positive ways.

Institute participants explored these concepts, looking for practical lessons for their own grantmaking, through a discussion of a case entitled “The Next Phase of Accountability in North Carolina.” This case tells the story of one state’s attempt to upgrade its existing accountability system and reconcile it with federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements.

When North Carolina implemented ABCs of Public Education (ABCs) in 1996, it was one of the most advanced state-level accountability systems in the country. Comprehensive and multifaceted, ABCs was associated in the minds of many North Carolina educators and policy-makers with a clear and rapid jump in student performance. But after the enactment of NCLB, it became clear that ABCs employed method-

ologies that were not completely consistent with the new federal policy's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) calculation, leading to confusing results and mixed messages to schools. In some cases, schools that did well on ABCs measures did poorly according to AYP measures, thus negating any impetus to improve that either system alone might inspire.

An effective policy solution would eventually need to address the differing incentives motivating schools, districts and the state, as well as those of the practitioners, leaders and policymakers working at each level.

In May 2007, the North Carolina State Board of Education appointed a Blue Ribbon Commission on Testing and Accountability and charged it with developing recommendations for a redesigned statewide accountability and testing system. The commission included representatives from education, business and government and heard testimony from educators, parents, and representatives of teachers' and other professional organizations, higher education, and business. The recommendations, offered in January 2008, emphasized improvements to the existing system of testing and accountability, greater attention to college and workforce readiness, the inclusion of new formative assessments, and greater public transparency regarding school performance. The state's Department of Public Instruction was urged to "rethink assistance and comprehensive support for reform" to schools in need of improvement.

With this information as background, Institute participants dissected the ensuing developments for lessons about how education grantmakers can navigate the public policy arena effectively:

- **Check for innovations that are already addressing the problem, looking first to the policy domains closest to your area of focus.**

Having received its charge from the commission, North Carolina officials began to scan the field for robust, proven methods to assess schools' strengths and weaknesses and support improvement. Of particular interest was the Quality Review methodology developed by the New York City school system and the UK-based Cambridge Education consulting group. As the officials looked into this approach further, however, they were surprised to learn that the second largest school district in their own state, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools, had already engaged the Cambridge team, beginning in 2006, to help design a system capable of reconciling the ABCs and AYP measures—the same challenge that had inspired the formation of the Blue Ribbon Commission. By the spring of 2008, the district had developed a prototype system, known as School Quality Review (SQR); conducted training the previous summer; and implemented a pilot in a handful of schools. "It happens to us all the time" as grantmakers, laughed one Institute participant: "We have a great idea, and then we go into the school district and discover that others have had it too—and are already working on it!"

- **Consider the incentives that motivate different parties; solutions take hold for different reasons at different levels of the system.** For state policymakers, the discovery that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district had developed a prototype quality review system seemed like good news at first, but they quickly recognized that it presented them with a new set of challenges. As they considered the comparative advantages of developing quality systems on parallel tracks or deliberately pulling the two processes together, it became clear that it would be difficult to produce the best possible result for both this large district and the state because their interests were different: the district was focused on building its

administrators' capacity to improve schools, while the state needed to consider variations in capacity among districts. An effective policy solution would eventually need to address the differing incentives motivating schools, districts and the state, as well as those of the practitioners, leaders and policymakers working at each level.

- **Innovators are often highly motivated—a condition that's unlikely to prevail when innovations are scaled systemwide.**

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg pilot showed that the SQR process was complex and demanding and that it frequently produced school scores significantly at odds with ABCs and APY ratings; participating principals nonetheless gave the system high marks because it produced findings that mirrored their own sense of where improvements were needed. SQR “created a platform from which to make changes,” said one. “It brought things to light that we knew, but didn't know how to address.” The district was pleased with the results and began to contemplate what it would take to implement SQRs in all 167 schools, not just a small subset of reform-minded volunteer schools. State officials were also impressed with SQR but found themselves weighing a related question: Would SQR, which had been developed by the ambitious and innovative Charlotte-Mecklenburg district, translate well to districts around the state, including those that did not place a high value on improvement or innovation?

- **The interests of the general public—in access to information, for example—can get lost when they are not consistent with the interests of even well-intentioned public officials.** The most glaring problem revealed by the case, some participants said, was the lack of meaningful public accountability measures in either the ABCs system or the new SQR system. Said one funder, “There's an excess of metrics here—NCLB,

ABCs, SQR, and all the end-of-course and end-of-year assessments students are taking—but nothing that can really tell parents if their kids are going to a good school.”

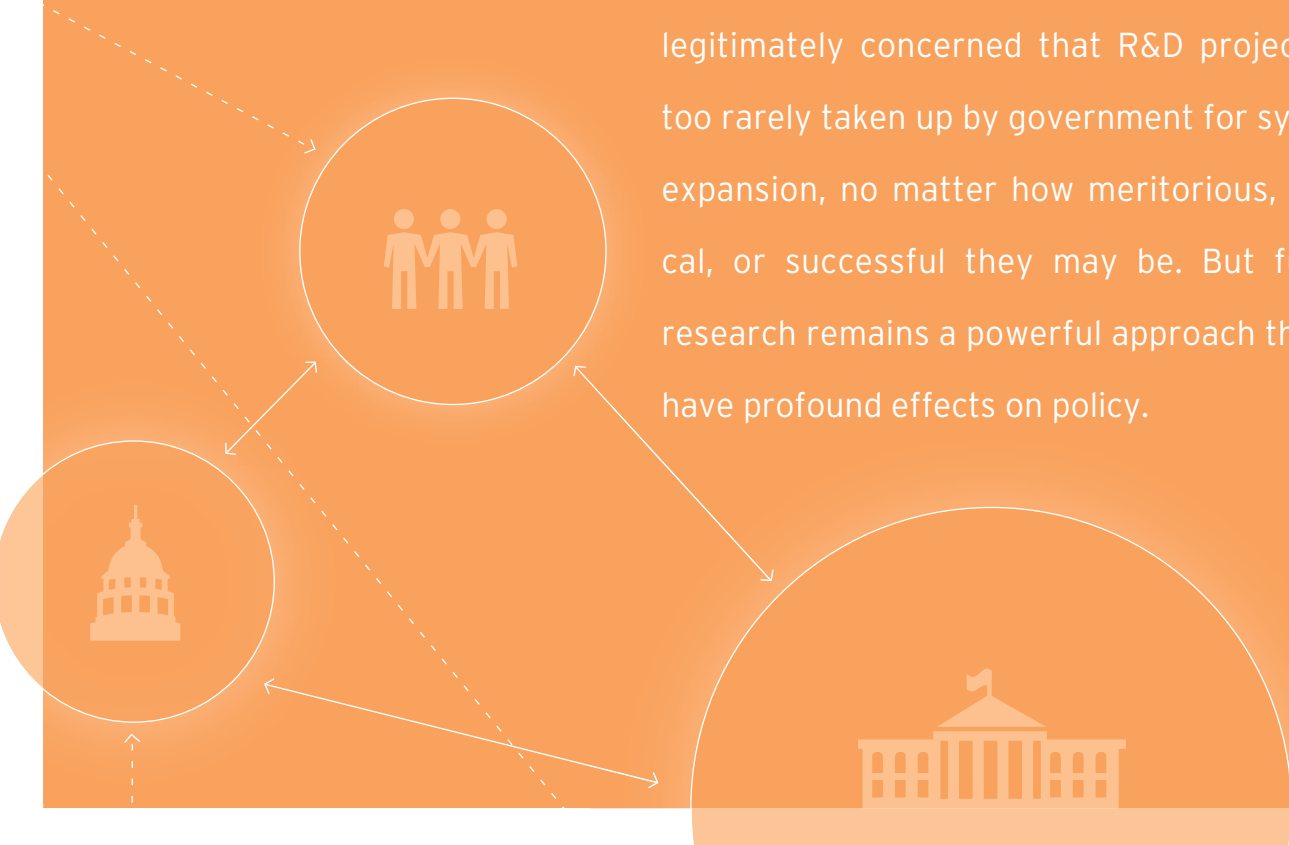
Others agreed, noting what appeared to be a “fuzzy” connection between student results and mandated interventions. There's always tension, the group agreed, between the need for public accountability and the need for “safe assessments” that allow students and educators to grow and that give schools a reliable basis for improving teaching and learning. Strategic grantmaking might help to resolve that tension by encouraging the state to develop an accountability system that provides meaningful information to the public and strengthens community support for school improvement.

Asked to speculate about how philanthropy could contribute constructively in a situation like that described in the case, Institute participants zeroed in on opportunities to support strategic communications and research connected to specific, implementation-related challenges. As a next step, said one, it might make sense to convene “all the education funders in the state” to brief them on the SQR experiment, what it might (or might not) offer as a statewide system, and how it could help drive instructional improvement. Another participant suggested that funders could support the development of “deep dive” cases that would look closely at how the new SQR assessments were influencing school improvement in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district in the pilot and second-round schools: “You'd want to look very close to the ground,” she said, “to know if the review process and findings were actually influencing conversations inside the schools on how to improve instruction.” This kind of research could provide useful information to the state development team, but it might be difficult for state or district partners to commission and fund.

PART 3

Using research *to* advance education policy reform

Philanthropy has traditionally contributed to policy advances by supporting research and development, yet decades of frustrating results—projects that fail to achieve scale, don't reach intended audiences, or don't align with broader reform—have led many grantmakers to turn away from R&D investments. Funders are legitimately concerned that R&D projects are too rarely taken up by government for systemic expansion, no matter how meritorious, practical, or successful they may be. But funding research remains a powerful approach that can have profound effects on policy.



The impact of such support becomes clear when a research project yields practical information that lends itself readily to policy adoption at a moment at which the field is ready to take it up. Harvard Graduate School of Education professor Bridget Terry Long joined Institute participants to describe one such project: an effort she led with coinvestigators Eric P. Bettinger and Philip Oreopoulos to determine how to make the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form easier to complete, assist families in completing it, and then measure the impact on low-income students' college enrollment and retention (see *Research background, page 16*). Long's discussion of the project and its rapid expansion as an early policy initiative of the Obama Administration generated a number of compelling insights about the role of research in education grantmaking.

- **A well-structured research project can provide “proof of concept,” even without firm impact data.** The successful administration of Long's project demonstrated “proof of concept” that simplifying the FAFSA process by drawing on information already provided on a family's federal income tax return could be far less burdensome to potential students and families who might not otherwise access student aid programs. In short, the case for a simplified FAFSA was made and the case for linking

the FAFSA with the federal income tax return was strengthened sufficiently to convince the Obama Administration to make significant practical reforms in FAFSA administration. Although definitive evidence that those changes would close major leaks in the college graduation pipeline is still lacking, this project provided “good enough” support to be persuasive.

- **Research often generates useful insights on how policy can best be implemented.**

The research project validated the idea that completion of the FAFSA represents an important opportunity to provide prospective college students and their families with accurate, timely information about the college application process, the likely cost of a college education, and the availability of financial aid. The research also uncovered important misapprehensions and information gaps that may inhibit students and their families from recognizing that college is a desirable and attainable objective. For example, tax professionals involved with the project reported that many students were reluctant to have the FAFSA form filed electronically by H&R Block because they believed that “filing ‘committed’ them to attend college” and they “wanted more time to think about it” or

The impact becomes clear when a research project yields practical information that lends itself readily to policy adoption at a moment at which the field is ready to take it up.

because they had never seen a FAFSA form and wanted to review it before sending it. The lesson here is that unfamiliarity, misunderstandings and discomfort can inhibit participation in public programs—even when the programs themselves are well intended and carefully designed.

Research background: The FAFSA experiment

A PROJECT BY BRIDGET TERRY LONG, ERIC P. BETTINGER AND PHILIP OREOPOULOS

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form serves as the basis for awarding federal financial aid to American college students; it is also used by most state and institutional need-based aid programs. Research over the past decade has found that many low-income students are poorly informed about college costs, financial aid opportunities and the college application process. Related research has suggested that, because the FAFSA form is so long and complicated to complete, many students fail to receive financial aid for which they are eligible. Researchers Bridget Terry Long, Eric P. Bettinger and Philip Oreopoulos set out to design an intervention that would answer a deceptively simple question: If the FAFSA form were easier to complete, would more low-income students go to college? Although their research looked specifically at the top tier of the policy triangle—the actions of individual students and their families in filling out the form and subsequent decisions to enroll in college—the most immediate implications for policy change were at the base: the federal government (*see illustration, page 9*).

The research team approached H&R Block, a national accounting firm that provides tax-preparation services primarily to low- and moderate-income families and asked if it would be willing to participate in an experiment that would potentially provide valuable information to its clients at relatively little cost to the company. Most of the information required for the FAFSA is also included on a family's tax return; the researchers therefore believed that H&R

Block could help its clients complete the FAFSA with only a small amount of additional time and effort. The company agreed to participate.

The researchers developed a multifaceted intervention designed to answer a series of questions about the FAFSA itself and about whether completing the form and receiving associated help and information affected students' decisions to go to college. The researchers also collaborated closely with H&R Block and an advisory group to develop the required software, establish workable protocols, train staff, and resolve a wide range of logistical and ethical questions that arose.

The study focused on families that had incomes below \$45,000 and a family member, either a taxpayer or a dependent child, between the ages of 14 and 30 who did not have a bachelor's degree. Within those criteria were three groups of particular interest: high school seniors and recent graduates (ages 17-21), who were deciding about or had just entered college; young adults (ages 22-30), who were enrolled in college or might enroll; and younger students (ages 14-17), who were preparing for the college admissions process.

Once an eligible participant was identified and consent was obtained, the project assigned the family randomly to an intervention or control group. One intervention group received assistance with completing and submitting the FAFSA from an H&R Block tax professional using special software and an interview protocol; in addition, H&R Block calculated the family's

estimated family contribution (EFC) and the amount of aid the student would likely receive at nearby public two- and four-year colleges. Two intervention groups received information and financial projections to assist them in planning for college, but no direct assistance with completing the FAFSA. Control group subjects received only very basic information about the importance of college and the availability of financial aid programs.

Working with H&R Block, the researchers carried out a pilot project with 3,300 families in Cleveland, Ohio, from January through April 2007. H&R Block was pleased with the results and agreed to expand the service area during 2008 and contribute financially to the project's continuation. Based on what they learned, the researchers altered the study criteria to exclude college-age students (owing to the difficulty of getting their informed consent), refined the protocol, planned an expanded second phase and sought additional funds. In January 2008, the revised program was implemented in 166 H&R Block offices in Ohio and North Carolina. By April, the program had provided services to more than 26,000 families, of whom 10,634 received FAFSA help, 3,463 received financial aid or estimated family contribution information, and 11,916 (the control group) received general college information only.

Although the ultimate impact of the intervention on college graduation will not be known for some time, the project appears to have affected college enrollment: 34 percent of students in the 2007 intervention group enrolled in college, compared with only 27 percent of students in the control group. Moreover, the researchers saw signs that the project had the greatest impact among families at the low end of

the income scale: families earning less than \$22,000, whose typical contribution to college costs would be zero.

- **University-based investigators can be important players in using research to advance education policy reform, but only if the institutions that employ them recognize the import of such work.** The project's results were rapidly taken up at the federal level and influenced the introduction of the FAFSA-EZ form in 2009. This was a superb result—a researcher's dream, Long acknowledged—yet achieving it entailed considerable professional risk and personal cost to the principal investigators. Presenting complex findings at hearings, meetings and conferences, traveling to Washington DC, spending “endless hours” providing follow-up information and talking with journalists on the phone: these activities take time and focus away from the academic writing and teaching on which scholars like Long and her colleagues are ultimately judged. Long reported, however, that she had recently been awarded tenure, owing in part to a policy at Harvard's Graduate School of Education to factor “practical impact” into its tenure decisions. Several grantmakers applauded the policy, noting that they often feel compelled to take policy-relevant projects to private firms because universities tend to favor more theoretical research.

For grantmakers, the funding dynamics of such research are especially noteworthy. In this case, working in partnership with a for-profit company raised particular challenges, as did satisfying the requirements of several different foundation and government funders. Recounting the story of the project, Long talked candidly and with some bemusement about balancing the “demands” of multiple funders from different sectors—the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Institute for Education Sciences, the Kauffman Foundation,

the MacArthur Foundation and the Spencer Foundation, along with H&R Block—each of which brought its own perspectives and goals. The Gates Foundation, for example, was mainly interested in designing the pilot project to be scalable, while the NSF and the Spencer Foundation were more interested in the integrity of the experimental research design. Others were interested in advocacy and influencing the education policymaking infrastructure in Washington DC.

The project's funders also provided assistance beyond money alone. At several key points, funders helped the researchers find additional funders, and they helped influence H&R Block's decision to maintain support for the project even after the economic downturn began in late 2007.

Funding collaboratively to build public will

LESSONS FROM THE DONORS' EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE

In a discussion led by Kennedy School professor Christopher Stone, the Institute participants considered a case developed by GFE on the Donors' Education Collaborative (DEC) of New York City. The collaborative originated in 1995, when a small group of foundation presidents charged their staffs with developing a shared strategy to improve the quality of education in the vast New York City school district—a system that at the time had roughly 1,000 schools and 1,000,000 students.

Rather than try to influence the system directly, the funders decided to pool their money, seek additional foundation partners, and embark on a strategy that combined advocacy and community organizing. As explained in the case study, to “spur real improvements in the school system [in New York City], DEC members agreed, they should support the growth of a constituency for reform—or, more immediately, a number of constituencies, organized around specific objectives and school- or neighborhood-level needs, that might eventually merge into a wider force.”

Stone urged the group to consider a key question for any collaboration: What's the value proposition of a funder collaborative? DEC was successful, he noted, in keeping foundations involved over many years and attracting new funders—27 in all over the collaborative's first dozen years, with only a handful staying with the group for less than three years. How did the collaborative structure itself strengthen the public policy strategy, and what did DEC achieve? Two salient successes emerged:

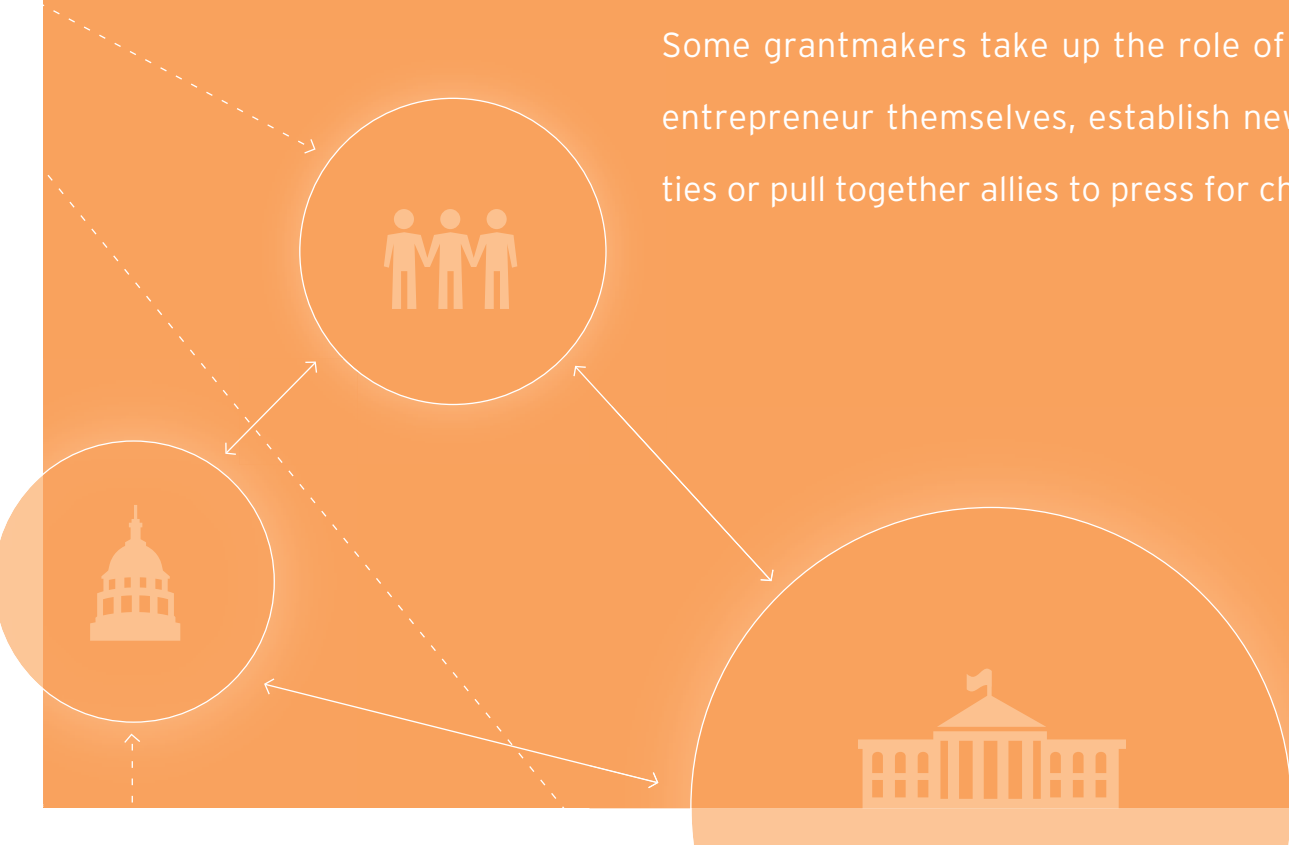
- **Wide understanding among New York City foundations of complex, controversial litigation to increase education funding.** DEC's grantees included the Alliance for Quality Education, which sought to build public support for the landmark Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) lawsuit that had been filed in 1993 against New York state. DEC members learned the ins and outs of the case and remained supporters through the final court decision in favor of CFE in November 2006.
- **Broad acceptance of community organizing as a viable public policy strategy.** Membership in the collaborative enabled many grantmakers to fund community organizing—a technique that had enjoyed only limited support among foundations in the 1990s. DEC made a large number of multiyear grants to key community organizing groups, thus helping to establish the relatively new field of education organizing in New York's immigrant, low-income and minority communities. As an Institute participant who was also a longtime DEC member explained, “Some of us believed strongly that people from the neighborhoods should speak for themselves—that was our policy agenda. You need a long-term funding infrastructure to support community organizing. It takes multiple years. And we provided that.”

Funder collaboratives combine funders' resources and distribute risk. They can therefore be very helpful mechanisms for letting foundations experiment with funding strategies—like community organizing or public policy advocacy—that are unfamiliar and perceived as exposing the foundation (or the individual grantmaker) to unwelcome public attention.

PART 4

Policy entrepreneurship *and* philanthropy

Policy formation is an entrepreneurial enterprise, one in which strategic grantmaking often depends on being poised to capitalize on opportunities as they arise. For many funders, this means identifying and supporting “policy entrepreneurs” who are working over the long term on issues that matter to the foundation. Some grantmakers take up the role of policy entrepreneur themselves, establish new entities or pull together allies to press for change.



When a grantmaker becomes involved in policy development, the ideal outcome is to advance policy on an issue that's at the heart of the foundation's program priorities and mission. Such shifts tend to happen, political scientist Richard Elmore observed during one Institute session, when policy entrepreneurs see an opportunity for change and put "institutional weight" behind making it happen. "There are problems out there in search of solutions, and solutions in search of problems," he explained, citing John W. Kingdon's *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policy* (1984). Policy entrepreneurs capitalize on events that bring problems and solutions into alignment—often in ways that enable the formation of new coalitions.

Institute participants considered philanthropy's place in public policy formation and implementation as they discussed a case study concerning Early Education for All (EE4A), a foundation-funded initiative to expand early education programs that began in Massachusetts in 1998. The case recounts the history of the EE4A campaign and details a step-by-step strategy developed by campaign organizer Margaret Blood in collaboration with the initiative's original funder, the Caroline and Sigmund Schott Foundation:

- Create and develop an independent, non-partisan organization to run the campaign.
- Use research to make the case.

- Include diverse allies at top levels of the effort.
- Mobilize a grassroots community.
- Outreach through messaging and the media.
- Translate public support into legislation and policy.

In a lively discussion that included Blood and several EE4A funders, the group uncovered specific lessons about the role of philanthropy, and of philanthropic coalitions, in public policy entrepreneurship:

- **To establish a broad base of well-informed supporters, get additional funders involved with the initial research and message development.** Initially managed from within the Schott Foundation, the campaign recruited additional funders to support the early research, including extensive voter polling and opinion leader interviews to gauge the level of support for early childhood services. The funders became a cohort of well-informed, committed supporters of the campaign and its mission. Representatives from five sponsoring foundations participated throughout the campaign as members of a multisector advisory committee that worked to craft a unified message.
- **Make sure funders stay well informed and prepared for action.** "Our bread and butter and what we survive on is communication," Blood explained. "It is our biggest challenge and some of the hardest work we do because we want to keep our funders as engaged as we do the legislature and the 6,000 people in our database." Over time, funders and other members of the advisory committee lent crucial support by signing op-eds for local newspapers, reaching out to community leaders and helping business leaders understand the economic value of state investment in early childhood education.
- **Seek new funders, and recognize that some funders' priorities will change.** Over

the course of the campaign, several new funders have joined the ranks while others have left. In one case, the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation, one of the campaign's early supporters and strategic partners, shifted its support away from the campaign to focus on implementation considerations. The foundation is now spearheading an effort to provide full-scale early education programs in one locality, Springfield, as the logical next step to secure the campaign's ultimate goals.

- **In addition to legislation, focus on building public support and establishing infrastructure.** In 2002, An Act Establishing Early Education for All began to work its way through the Massachusetts state legislature. It eventually passed and was signed into law by a new governor in July 2008. In the intervening years, the campaign focused on building popular support and crafting related policies—such as the creation of a state agency to provide a unified system of governance for early childhood service provision—sometimes over the active opposition of the then governor. The campaign also continued

Successful implementation often depends on a foundation's ability to apply steady pressure and leverage change in a system reluctant to shift its practice.

to build the case for universal early education by supporting cost analyses, a pilot program, a scholarship program, and systems to improve the early childhood workforce and assess service quality—steps designed to satisfy public concerns and strengthen the base of support.

As they discussed the case, Institute participants emphasized repeatedly that a successful campaign depends enormously on having a leader who can hold the members of a coalition—including funders—together to achieve its goals. Blood was “very clear about what she thought,” noted one participant, and she led the group forcefully toward consensus. “Dynamic, passionate, credible and trustworthy,” Blood understood that a successful coalition has to transcend narrow interests and address challenges, such as potential costs and governance arrangements, that might serve as stumbling blocks to passage and implementation, or that might keep essential constituencies from signing on. Legislators, business and community leaders, day-care workers and owners, advocates, and parents all knew where Blood stood, recognized the depth of her knowledge and understood that she was willing to listen: “If people think you have a hidden agenda,” one person noted, “then it just won't work.”

It takes tremendous skill, Elmore agreed, “to bring a wide range of different players into a campaign” and hold them together firmly enough to act decisively when the time is right. EE4A promised broad benefits—services for all children, not just those in low-income families, of a quality high enough to satisfy middle-income families and paid for by all the taxpayers in the state—and stuck to its guns, thus making it possible to hold the coalition together and expand it over time.

In addition to providing financial backing, the funders gave real support to both the leader and the coalition by participating actively in the campaign's advisory committee, using their influence with statewide and local constituencies, and supporting research that made a compelling case for the educational value and cost-effectiveness of high-quality services. Their long-term support helped to uphold the integrity of the campaign and keep it on track, with a workable mix of steadiness and flexibility, over the course of an entire decade until,

finally, the right combination of opportunities came together.

This entrepreneurial coalition gave traction and sustainability during a significant yet often overlooked stage of the process: implementation. “Policy formation is only 20 percent of the work,” Elmore observed, “the rest is implementation.” Successful implementation often depends on a foundation’s ability to apply steady pressure and leverage change in a system reluctant to shift its practice. Indeed, once the initial implementation is done, funders are likely to recognize a new need: scaling. As one seasoned grantmaker noted, “We in philanthropy have too often been guilty of a ‘prairie fire’ approach, assuming that good work will scale itself. We need to think instead about what incentives will cause the work to take hold.”

More than money: Applying leverage

Funders use much more than money to advance policy change. A grantmaker might bring steady pressure to bear over a long period, trying to provide evidence, lend credibility and build momentum behind a good idea. Alternately, a funder might make an energetic push at a crucial moment. As independent institutions, foundations are also free to make strategic choices about the stances they choose to take: it often makes sense to be constructive and helpful, faculty member Richard Elmore said, but sometimes the situation demands a “constructive irritant.” Be willing to think of yourself as a “burr under the saddle” of slow-to-change government actors, he urged, or the “grain of sand in the oyster” around which a nugget of new practice takes shape.

Over the course of the Institute, participants named a wide range of strategies funders can use to bring added “leverage” to a push for a new policy or its effective implementation:

- **Develop and validate “existence proofs”** that show that new practices are feasible and effective.
- **Conduct research** to uncover reasons why people or institutions resist worthwhile change; support interventions, such as community organizing, that alter the equation and make resistance more costly.
- **Generate data** that clarifies the scope of a problem and makes the case for change.
- **Engage interested parties**—schools, colleges, businesses, or other relevant institutions—in designing a model and participating in its continuing evolution.
- **Build coalitions** to support new and expanding work.
- **Provide “gap” funding** that lets the developers of government-funded programs work more thoughtfully.
- **Help partners understand philanthropy’s role** beyond “just giving them the money” so they can use a foundation’s support more strategically.
- **Step up personal involvement** in policy discussions to raise the stakes for public officials.
- **Bring supporters together** to advance policy change; strive to keep the coalition together to monitor implementation.

PART 5

Evaluating public policy grantmaking

Evaluation and accountability are never far from grantmakers' minds. Thoughtful articulation of strategic goals, objectives, measures and outcomes bears particular weight when funders are engaging with public policy.



In an exercise led by Bob Behn, lecturer at the Kennedy School of Government, Institute participants developed an evaluation strategy for an education initiative by a hypothetical foundation in the fictional state of West Dakota and drew some quick lessons about evaluation generally:

- **Pick a starting point.** The starting point for the discussion was a one-page “case study” outlining a hypothetical foundation’s three major (and, to many participants, absurdly ambitious and sketchily described) policy goals. This brought the group to lesson number one: “No matter how much detail is provided in a case,” Behn said, “people ask for more data before they’re willing to make a decision.” The key to exploring an evaluation strategy, whether in real life or when the process is only an exercise, is to choose something to investigate and start figuring out what you might learn and how to go about doing it.
- **Tie evaluation to the foundation’s core goals and strategies.** To evaluate the effectiveness of a funder’s public policy strategy, it’s important to understand why the foundation’s decision makers—board, leadership and program staff—have identified certain public policy changes as important and “what measurable aspects they have in

mind.” This sort of understanding is also crucial in order to “communicate the funder’s vision” for a better educational system publicly, participants said. To focus the conversation, the group selected “all children enter kindergarten ready to learn” as the hypothetical goal and mapped an advocacy strategy that would depend largely on advocacy aimed at enacting legislation to increase the supply of high-quality preschool “slots” and make them more available to children from low-income families.

- **Gather baseline data on what exists now and a clear description of what could change, why that change would matter and how it could be measured.** Before starting to pursue its policy goal, the hypothetical foundation would need to have a thorough picture of its state’s existing system for accrediting preschool programs and teachers, as well as precise information on how many centers and teachers are accredited, how many slots are available, and what funding is available to help low-income families access those slots.

The most relevant measurable outcomes are meaningful both to the funders and to the officials on whose support policy change depends.

- **Articulate expected long-term and intermediate outcomes and plot them onto a logic model.** The group identified four general, measurable outcomes that could be tracked over time: number of accredited preschool centers, number of certified teachers, number of slots available and number of slots held by children from low-income families. To narrow their strategic thinking even further, the group chose to hypothesize that a shortage of certified

Foundation Strategy	Interim Objective Year 1	Interim Objective Year 2	Interim Objective Year 3	Interim Objective Year 4	Measurable Outcome
					Accredited preschool centers established
				Preschool teacher certification organization established	Certified preschool teachers available for hire
Fund advocacy	Legislation and funding authorization	State education department sub-unit established	Scholarship funding for preschool teacher training	Higher education training programs established	Preschool slots available
			Funding to subsidize preschool for low-income families	Preschool voucher program in place	Preschool slots filled by children from low-income families

preschool teachers was a crucial limiting factor in the state’s ability to provide high-quality preschool programs to all children.

Honing evaluation to be comparative, measurable and meaningful is a critical piece of this work, one that funders must undertake as thoughtfully as any other part of the process.

- **Consider public officials’ perspectives and the incentives that motivate them.** Behn urged the importance of considering the perspectives of the governor’s office, the state legislature and the state department of education—and of asking consistently what steps would seem plausible to them, what evidence would be persuasive and what might incentivize them to advance change. The most relevant measurable outcomes, he argued, are meaningful both to the funders and to the officials on whose support policy change depends.

Not surprisingly, the logic model and prospective outcomes led the group to consider how a grantmaker might get a picture of even more fundamental, long-term outcomes—such as high school graduation rates, college enrollment and retention, even years of healthy life and total life expectancy in their state—and how those might be affected by greater access to high-quality preschool and greater readiness to learn among children reaching kindergarten.

Bob Behn’s Public Management Report

Behn grounded the conversation in a one-page reading from his monthly *Public Management Report* series: “Compared with What?,” a short essay on why every evaluation must begin with that question. Read the essay or register for a free subscription at <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/thebehnreport/>.

Behn left participants with this important thought: measurement is meaningful only when you're able to answer the question "Compared with what?" This question is at the heart of evaluation. "Every step of the above model should be compared with something," he noted, "and factors such as speed and quality need to be taken into consideration." The number of preschool slots might grow, but is it growing fast enough, and is the quality of services sufficient? "One basis of comparison might be 'What would have happened if we had done nothing?'" he suggested. But that may not satisfy a rigorous foundation board. Honing evaluation to be comparative, measurable and meaningful is a critical piece of this work, one that funders must undertake as thoughtfully as any other part of the process.

Conclusion

Although policy grantmaking is highly complex, it is an essential tool for education grantmakers seeking to leverage their investments to improve education outcomes.



As GFE's executive director Chris Tebben emphasized in her closing remarks, the discussions that took place at the Education Grantmakers Institute yielded lessons that were both daunting and reassuring:

- **Public policy grantmaking can require new ways of working, and the assumption of new risks.** Grantmakers interested in advancing policy change should bear in mind that doing so entails activities, grantees and perhaps even public scrutiny that may be unfamiliar to board members accustomed to more traditional forms of grantmaking. Foundation boards need opportunities to consider the risks and rewards of public policy grantmaking and how it can advance the mission and goals of their institution.
- **Public policy grantmaking is broader than we think it is.** Policy is everywhere, not just in the work of legislators and public officials. As both the ETS and the H&R Block examples illustrate, an amazing range of funded activities can have policy implications. We can influence policy by making common cause with unlikely actors and by using unconventional methods.
- **Policies often change because incentive structures shift.** Philanthropy can often make a difference through strategic grant-

making that encourages people at different levels of the educational system to innovate, adopt more effective practices or apply more rigorous standards to their work. As different players—with different concerns and goals—work together, funders can have a key role in leveraging policy change by keeping a focus on the broad public interest.

- **Clear goals are important—for philanthropy and the public.** Foundations need well-articulated and measurable goals in order to maximize the value of their investments, evaluate their work, and communicate their goals and values to policy audiences and the wider public.
- **The work isn't done when a new policy is adopted.** Policy enactment is only the first step toward the ultimate impacts funders seek. To ensure good implementation, follow-through is important. In fact, some grantmakers make important contributions by focusing exclusively on the implementation and sustainability of promising new policies—a challenge that includes maintaining public pressure to ensure implementation is properly funded.
- **Persistence remains a fundamental principle for effective education policy grantmaking.** Given the lengthy timeline for advancing policy changes, which extends still further when we include successful implementation after policy enactment, funders must bring patience, humility and tenacity to this work. Ultimately, the opportunities for high-impact outcomes when engaging policy are so great, we need to marshal the persistence to achieve them.

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PRINCIPLES FOR

Effective Education Grantmaking

principle
no.

1

Discipline and Focus

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

principle
no.

2

Knowledge

Information, ideas and advice from diverse sources, as well as openness to criticism and feedback, can help a funder make wise choices.

principle
no.

3

Resources Linked to Results

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

principle
no.

4

Effective Grantees

A grantmaker is effective only when its grantees are effective. Especially in education, schools and systems lack capacity and grantees (both inside and outside the system) may require deeper support.

principle
no.

5

Engaged Partners

A funder succeeds by actively engaging its partners—the individuals, institutions and communities connected with an issue—to ensure “ownership” of education problems and their solutions.

principle
no.

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 grantmaker is more effective when working with others to mobilize and deploy as many resources as possible in order to advance solutions.

principle
no.

7

Persistence

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

principle
no.

8

Innovation and Constant Learning

Even while acting on the best available information—as in Principle #2—a grantmaker 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 grantmakers and their partners achieve results.

grantmakers^{for} education 

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