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MOVING EDUCATION REFORM FORWARD

Grantmakers Reflect on a Convening with State and
Local Government Education Leaders

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In January 2011, teams of government education leaders and grantmakers from 13 states convened for Moving Forward with a Transformative Education Agenda: Practical Solutions for States and Districts, a first-ever national discussion of how grantmakers and state and local education officials might work together to promote elementary and secondary education reform. The states represented included U.S. Department of Education (USDE) “Race to the Top” winners and non-winning applicants. The gathering, coordinated by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), featured expert presentations on promising education reform efforts, panel discussions, workshops, and structured sessions for state teams to consider how to work together in an era when most states are facing drastic cuts to their education budgets.

To ensure that lessons learned from the convening will help to inform the efforts of state education officials and education funders nationally, the Foundation Center conducted confidential interviews with six grantmakers and one regional association leader who attended. They offered a nuanced assessment of the many benefits of this type of convening, as well as identified a number of challenges that will need to be addressed for grantmakers and state and local education leaders to coordinate their efforts most effectively in the future.

Was it productive to bring together government education leaders and grantmakers?

The Moving Forward convening offered a unique opportunity for state and local education officials and grantmakers to join together for what most interviewees characterized as unusually candid conversations. Interviewees appreciated having the opportunity to engage directly with government officials, with whom they rarely interact, and other funders who were not the “usual attendees at the usual meetings.”

The severe budget crises affecting most states appeared not to dampen the enthusiasm of state leaders for education reform. A couple of foundation interviewees were especially pleased to note the continuing eagerness of non-winning states for carrying forward ambitious education reform efforts. However, one respondent was struck by the challenges that officials from Race to the Top winning states described in implementing their ambitious reform agendas.

Are there novel areas of education reform that grantmakers should consider funding?

An important component of the convening was expert discussion of promising education reform strategies. While some of the education reform efforts discussed were seen as products of academics in “ivory towers” detached from real work on the ground, external forensic audits and policy audits captured the interest of several interviewees. In fact, a couple of interviewees expressed shock that many school districts were unaware of the components of their expenses, the implications of these expenses for their future budgets, and how they could secure savings. At the same time, one respondent remarked that forensic audits are something that school districts should be doing as a matter of course and would therefore be unlikely to attract the support of many grantmakers. By comparison, policy audits, which entail reviewing education policies and codes at every level and in every department to see if they align with current goals, have received support from foundations in the past, and several grantmakers expressed an interest in learning more about them.



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Does a “take it or leave it” approach work with foundations?

According to one speaker, the large-scale public education reform effort of a major U.S. city has a take it or leave it approach with potential donors. The city welcomes additional donors to support its efforts but will not allow them to modify in any way the structure of the reforms. Not surprisingly, this provocative stance generated a range of responses among the interviewees.

Among those supporting the position of the local education officials, one interviewee noted that consistency in implementation can sometimes be more important than the specifics of the strategy. Another familiar with the project indicated that a group of grantmakers had been involved in the initial planning and had made compromises to come together. However, this respondent suggested that it would be difficult to encourage other foundations to provide support without offering them a real opportunity to influence the direction of the project.

This example raised several concerns that funders have in working with state and local education officials. Interviewees suggested that government officials do not want foundations to be the ones driving the reform process. As one respondent remarked, “Funders want to be the boss and government wants to be the boss.” Especially during these times of severe state and local budget cuts, some grantmakers feel that they are being viewed as writers of blank checks to fill budget shortfalls rather than as active partners in education reform efforts.

As one interviewee noted, where foundations can really help government education leaders is in generating ideas, helping to solve problems, convening individuals, and serving as catalysts. However, this grantmaker was uncertain whether state education officials would be interested in engaging in an equal partnering relationship with foundations.

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About the Foundations for Education Excellence Initiative

The Foundations for Education Excellence initiative was launched by the Foundation Center in September 2009 as a resource to help foundations leverage federal education funds and plan strategies for longer-term impact on education reform. The initiative provides a wide range of services including a web portal (foundationcenter.org/educationexcellence) with mapping tools to track education reform funding, lists of top funders and recipients, summaries of key foundation-sponsored research on education reform, an events calendar, and links to news stories. Additional resources include a biweekly e-newsletter with policy updates from around the country; and webinars and teleconferences on critical education reform issues.

The Foundations for Education Excellence initiative and this issue brief are made possible through support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.



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When do grantmakers work around local education leadership?

Among the concerns expressed about foundations at the convening, one speaker identified a worry that foundations were bypassing local school districts to fund schools directly, which undermined local reform efforts. Several interviewees did not dispute this conclusion and cited reasons such as a lack of responsiveness and sense of accountability and impact when working with school districts. As one respondent remarked, “Superintendents have to be at the front door welcoming us, the way good principals do.” Instead, these grantmakers felt that they were facing too much bureaucracy and red tape.

Not all of the interviewees agreed with this perspective. These grantmakers felt that it was critical to work at multiple levels of government to ensure successful and enduring reform efforts. One interviewee noted that when a good principal leaves and there is no connection to the local school district, that departure will end the education reform effort. Others noted that funding “boutique” projects in specific schools does not make sense anymore because they often cannot or will not be replicated. Collaborating with government and other funders is the only way to secure the possibility of broader impact.

Are there ways for state and local education officials to engage grantmakers more effectively?

To encourage grantmakers to support government education funding priorities, one educator recommended that state and local education leaders develop discrete two-to-five year funding opportunities with measurable outcomes. Most interviewees thought that this would be a useful exercise for states, as these opportunities would align with the way that many foundations think about and structure their giving. It would also offer “actionable outcomes” that were meaningful for foundations, which can differ from the outcomes that state education officials regularly focus on.

Several respondents thought that considering reform efforts two-to-five years out would also be beneficial in encouraging state and local education leaders to think more long-term about their strategies. These funders expressed frustration over past interactions with government education leaders who could not articulate longer-term strategic visions and focused instead on short-term, piecemeal funding opportunities.

Beyond tailoring funding options for grantmakers in general, interviewees emphasized the importance of finding a “fit” with the missions of specific foundations. Regardless of how well defined the funding opportunity, if the project is not consistent with a foundation’s mission and grantmaking guidelines, it will not be funded. Moreover, even in cases where there is consistency, the foundations will decide themselves which projects they believe will have the greatest potential impact. The impression of one respondent was that education officials expected grantmakers to provide funding with no input or push back.



Beyond these considerations, interviewees indicated that both sides have to be clear about where their priorities rest—and the more specific they can be the better. Also, each side needs to be willing to provide cover for the other when appropriate. As one respondent suggested, there are times when a foundation-funded report may provide cover for a state official to move an agenda. At other times, a foundation may need the political cover of a state official before supporting a certain project.

What could be done better at future convenings?

All of the grantmakers interviewed for this report thought it would be worthwhile to reconvene teams of state education officials and foundations in some form for discussions of how to coordinate education reform efforts. However, they had a number of specific recommendations for ensuring stronger outcomes.

Among the principal concerns with the Moving Forward convening was an unevenness in the level of state

leadership present among the 13 teams. A few states were represented by their top education officials, and these states appeared to make the best use of this opportunity. The other states were represented by officials with varying and lesser amounts of influence. The interviewees felt strongly that a consistent high-level buy-in and participation would be critical.

Among other recommendations for future convenings were that state-level meetings of grantmakers and educators be held before state teams are brought together for a national convening; organizers should provide more time for state teams—which were often composed of people who had not worked together before—to socialize informally before the work begins; the convening should be thematically organized, with a specific set of challenges to address and clearly defined outcomes; there should be more national funders present; and a follow-up plan for advancing the work after the convening should be established up front.



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CCSSO Report on Moving Forward

The Council of Chief State School Officers commissioned a detailed summary of key learnings from the Moving Forward convening, including suggestions for philanthropy. Among key recommendations for grantmakers are that they:

- ◆ Question state or district education policies that are too politically sensitive for government officials to broach themselves (e.g., involving class size or seat time)
- ◆ Bring research and information on the public discourse to discussions with education leaders
- ◆ Align their education investments with state agendas and help to set priorities
- ◆ Increase collaboration among education funders to share successes and lessons learned with state and district leaders

The report will be available in the summer of 2011 at ccsso.org.