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Education Foundations: Changing Public Education And the Way Connecticut Communities Pay for It

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Introduction

Local Education Foundations are “a powerful mechanism through which [communities can] not only support their local schools, but, potentially, play a more enduring role in the quality and scope of local education than they had ever played before.”

When it was approved, in 1978, California’s legendary Proposition 13 turned public education on its head, capping the state’s property tax rates and making it extraordinarily difficult for municipalities to issue bonds. At the time of its passage, the referendum was perceived by many as a revolutionary expression of residents’ dissatisfaction with escalating property taxes and out-of-control government spending. Shifting control over funding to the state, it left municipal and county governmental agencies, including local school districts, with significantly less authority over how public funds could be raised and spent.

But Proposition 13 also provoked a response that was not entirely expected. As local school revenues plummeted, the range of programs and services that fell victim to declining dollars was both broad and deep, ranging from transportation services to healthcare to non-core educational programming. It soon became apparent that residents of local communities had not bargained on the new law’s dramatic impact on public education.

Within months after its passage, in fact, Proposition 13 had sparked a remarkable grassroots response, arguably much more revolutionary than the new law to which it was a reaction. That response has spread east over the past two decades and is now sweeping quickly across Connecticut.

With financial support for local schools drying up, parents, teachers and community leaders all over the state began to look for alternatives. What they discovered – and pioneered – was a powerful mechanism through which they could not only support their local schools, but, potentially, play a more enduring role in the quality and scope of local education than they had ever played before. That alternative was *local education foundations*.

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Ten Steps For Creating an Education Foundation

No two local education foundations will be identical. But the process of creating a local foundation with a high likelihood of success can be boiled down to a handful of basic steps.

1. Do your homework.

Learn about other foundations. Gather information. Don't make mistakes that other foundations have already made.

2. Recruit a group of core leaders.

3. Clarify what you want to accomplish. Without a clear understanding of your foundation's reason for existence, it doesn't have much chance to succeed.

4. Run it up the flagpole.

You can't succeed without community and school support. Start with your local school board. Experts generally agree that their buy-in is key to the success of local education foundations. When you have a clear picture of your goals and objectives, solicit the school board's support.

5. Schedule an informational community meeting.

As soon as your school board has endorsed your plan, set up a meeting for community members who want to learn more.

A New Way of Paying for Education

Though they differ from community to community, reflecting unique local needs and resources, local education foundations are generally alike in several important respects, says Susan Sweeney, executive director of the California Consortium of Education Foundations (CCEF). They are nonprofit organizations created and managed by local citizens. Their primary mission, though they often have others, is to improve public education at the local level.

For the vast majority of educational foundations, improving local education means finding new streams of revenue to replace or augment traditional public funding. In 1999, according to the Public Education Network, a national network of community-based school reform organizations, the nation's local educational foundations raised more than \$50 million to help improve public education.

“Local education foundations are not-for-profit organizations created and managed by local citizens and their primary mission is to improve public education at the local level.”

Many foundations, however, view their mission as broader than simply developing revenue sources. The support they provide for local schools may include a variety of in kind or human resources, as well. And in some cases local education foundations are actually shifting the way in which public education is perceived as a community resource.

In California today there are more than 500 local education foundations, so many, indeed, that CCEF was created to serve as a statewide professional association to help them meet their individual and collective needs. In the 22 years since Proposition 13, says Sweeney, a great deal has been learned about what works and what doesn't in the creation and management of education foundations. Even so, she notes, many communities still make mistakes when they undertake the creation of a foundation. Often the greatest mistake is not seeking out the counsel of seasoned experts and organizations like CCEF.

“Most local groups start creating a foundation with the idea that they are going to raise a lot of money,” says Sweeney. “It's a noble idea, but what is much more important is for them to determine how they will effectively control what they do with the money once they raise it. Fundraising is not easy. Education foundations work most productively when they are very clear about their goals and objectives and about the mechanisms that will guide how they support local education.”

Education foundations are also well advised to view themselves in the role of “convener,” Sweeney says. Foundations are not a replacement for local school boards. Rather, they should be seen as an honest broker that can bring people together in communities, forging collaborations that can enhance public education in ways that previously had not been imagined. For a variety of reasons, schools and local school administrations are not always ideally equipped to build and effectively utilize such alliances.

“But, no matter what sorts of creative community collaborations they are able to foster, education foundations must be able to work with local school systems. For that reason, many foundations have members of local school boards and/or school administrations as ex officio members of their governing organizations.”

Finally, she says, experience has shown that successful foundations devote a great deal of preliminary thought and planning to the development of their boards of directors. “Education foundations should not be intended to replace local school boards and school administrations,” she says. “That's not their purpose. They should augment what already exists. That's why it's important for people who are starting a foundation to do their homework. Touch base with community leaders and build consensus. Think carefully about skills and experiences that would help to make a board of directors successful. And start by under-

standing what services are already being provided in the schools, so that the education foundation can enhance those services, rather than duplicating them or alienating school personnel by stepping on toes.”

Connecticut Foundations Are as Diverse as Connecticut Communities

In Connecticut there are currently more than 40 education foundations and more are being born every day. “Foundations in our state have been able to jump-start many worthwhile projects for our school children that otherwise might never have been funded,” says Robert Rader, executive director of the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE) and an enthusiastic supporter of the education foundation concept. “And just as important, they have brought about a new spirit of school/community partnership by involving parents, businesses, professionals, local government and educators in their activities.”

Most of Connecticut’s education foundations are 100 percent volunteer managed, though a few have paid staff. And though the need to augment public education funding is almost always the impetus for the creation of education foundations, many also tackle much broader agendas, such as encouragement of creativity in teaching and technology and expanding the role of “public” education within the community. Serving the range of Connecticut municipalities – from small rural communities to the state’s urban centers – these foundations tackle a broad range of challenges.

“The geneses of foundations can be equally varied,” says Liz Stokes, past chair of the Weston Education Foundation, which was created in 1994, and current President of the Connecticut Consortium of Education Foundations, an organization created to help Connecticut education foundations succeed and share information and ideas. “In Weston, our foundation came about because of two issues,” she says. “The new superintendent of schools and the board of education were concerned not only about reduced state funding, but also about the growing need for technology education and the costs associated with it.” Weston had no real business tax base, so when Stokes learned about education foundations she attended a conference in California at which Sweeney spoke.

She returned to Weston enthusiastic about what she had learned and recruited an initial planning committee. The committee, in turn, researched bylaws and mission statements, recruited other members who would make up the board of directors, and established the foundation’s tax exempt status.

“In Connecticut there are currently more than 40 education foundations ... [that] have been able to jump-start many worthwhile projects.”

Then the committee went about the business that is at the heart of all local education foundations – defining what role, exactly, the foundation will play in supporting and enhancing local education. That role, says Stokes, will be unique to each community. Individual foundations and professional associations like the Connecticut Consortium can provide information and models for individuals and groups interested in starting a foundation. But ultimately, each local foundation must define its role in the community and in the local schools.

Weston’s foundation, Stokes notes, is built around three “pillars,” concerns that guide all of the foundation’s funding activities. First, the foundation is concerned with teacher and curriculum development. To address that interest, the foundation provides creativity grants of up to \$1,500 to individual teachers in support of novel class projects. The foundation also provides expert-in-residence grants that help teachers to bring to the schools local experts on a wide range of subject areas. The experts come to the schools repeatedly to

Ten Steps For Creating an Education Foundation, Continued

6. Create bylaws and file appropriate forms.

7. Recruit a board of directors. Your board should meaningfully reflect the make-up of your community. Remember to think about the expertise and experiences you’d like to have represented on your board.

8. Establish committees and draft your foundation’s policies.

9. Define your priorities.

10. Create a fund-raising plan. On its Web site, the California Consortium of Education Foundations provides a set of steps similar to these. It concludes with the advice that foundations which have successfully followed all of the development steps should, “Celebrate your success and evaluate your progress.”

Tips from the Experts

While education foundations vary significantly from community to community, experts agree that the ones that survive and thrive generally have several key factors in common. Collectively, the experts who contributed to this report agree on five important guidelines that any group should keep in mind if they are considering creating an education foundation for their community.

1. Be independent.

If foundations are to have meaningful control over the resources that they generate – and those resources are not always exclusively financial – it's important for them to remain zealously independent. This is not to suggest that they won't have dealings with other community organizations, but nearly all local education foundations commence their quest for autonomy by qualifying for 501(c)(3) tax status.

2. Be focused on public involvement.

Creators and managers of education foundations need to face the reality that relationships with their local school systems may not always be positive. To the extent they begin by focusing on quality, they will be better off down the road. It is important to start building bridges with the local school administration and with the community from the outset.

3. Focus on financial resources first, before tackling any projects.

Experts agree that one of the quickest ways for a foundation to fail is to bite off more

work with teachers and students. Finally, the Foundation established the David Trigaux Innovation award, a \$2000 cash award for teachers who demonstrate an unusual level of originality and dedication to creative teaching and make a difference in the school community.

A second pillar of the Weston Foundation is technology, one of the concerns that led to creation of the foundation in the first place, and an increasingly significant budget item for all schools. Early on, the Weston Foundation established a reputation in the community for getting things done by tackling and successfully addressing two big technology-oriented projects – creation of a state-of-the-art media laboratory for the town's high school and establishment of high speed Internet access for all three of the town's schools. Since then, the Foundation launched a third technology project, the "wireless library" and established grants for Enrichment and Technology Initiatives that support teachers working with community resources, such as museums, on creative educational alternatives.

The third pillar of the foundation is community education. "Our foundation is built around the belief that education is for everyone, not just for kids," says Stokes. That belief arose from conversations with Weston residents. By finding ways to address the wider educational needs and interests of the community, Stokes says, the foundation has been more successful at creating community-wide support for the foundation and its goals.

When, for instance, the foundation raised the funds to create high speed Internet access for the schools, it also insisted that the resource be made available after school hours to teach Weston adults how to use the Internet. The foundation was also instrumental in establishing and supporting a program called Weston Open Learning through which courses on such diverse subjects as landscaping, the new economy, computers and women artists are made available to the public. Taught primarily by local experts, in the schools and other Weston public buildings, the Open Learning courses address a real need within the community while reinforcing the idea that public education is a shared resource and responsibility.

Stokes is understandably proud of what the Weston Education Foundation has accomplished, and thinks of it as a model from which others can learn. But she's also quick to assert that local education foundations here come in many shapes and sizes. No one type fits all needs. Perhaps one of the ways in which education foundations differ most strikingly is the fund-raising strategies they employ.

"...Fundraising is a priority for all foundations. But not all foundations raise funds in the same manner."

The Business of Fundraising

Since it is virtually impossible for foundations to meaningfully impact the quality of public education without financial resources, fund-raising is a priority for all foundations. But, notes Stokes, not all foundations raise funds in the same manner. The Weston Foundation raises upwards of \$40,000 annually and all of it is appropriated. The foundation begins the year with specific objectives in mind and seeks the funding necessary to address those goals.

Many foundations, however, reverse the process. They begin with the goal of raising money and then determine how to invest the money that is raised. Even then, the mechanisms through which funds are raised can vary widely.

The Wilton Education Foundation was incorporated in 1991 at the suggestion of local residents and the superintendent of schools. Since then, it has been successful not only because it has employed successful fund-raising strategies, but also because those strategies include many public events that draw the community together, reinforcing the presence of the foundation within the community.

Among the first of those events was an adult spelling bee, says Lisa Bogan, chair of the Wilton Foundation. Captivated by the novelty of the event, Wilton residents supported it enthusiastically. Teams of competitors, anchored by prominent local business leaders and celebrities, raised funds for the foundation by obtaining the sponsorship of area businesses and corporations.

More recently, a children's spelling bee, operated like a walk-a-thon, has been a spin-off of the adult event. Youngsters receive a tee-shirt for taking part in the program, which has raised \$10,000 each time it has been held. Wilton has five schools and the foundation has raised funds by selling bricks that are engraved with sponsors' names before being installed in walkways at the schools. Finally, the foundation has also used an annual appeal letter, mailed throughout the community, as part of its fund-raising mix.

The foundation awards grants totaling \$25,000 to \$30,000 to Wilton teachers every year. Applicants for the grants are individually interviewed by members of the foundation's board and other citizens. Though the teacher grants absorb most of the funds the Wilton Foundation raises annually, the foundation does support two other popular programs, says Bogan.

“...Many foundations view their mission as broader than simply developing revenue sources. The support they provide for local schools may include a variety of “in kind” or human resources, as well.”

In support of an annual Read Aloud Day, the foundation has obtained the financial support of a local market that makes it possible to purchase a book for every kindergarten through fifth grade classroom in the town. A hundred Wilton citizens – most of whom do not have children currently in the schools – come to the schools on Read Aloud Day to read to the youngsters.

The foundation also sponsors an annual Career Day for grades six through eight. Adults from the community, representing a vast array of careers, meet with youngsters throughout the day to discuss career options and answer questions.

Read Aloud Day, says Bogan, “is the most popular program we do.” But both programs attract a great deal of attention and community support. They exemplify programming that can not only address real educational needs, but also build the kind of bridges and rapport with a community that serves education foundations well.

The Cheshire Education Foundation was started by former Superintendent of Schools Ralph Wallace in the autumn of 1994. Wallace wanted to be able to do more for the schools and he had heard what some communities were accomplishing with education foundations. He quickly set about recruiting a board of directors for the foundation and worked with a local attorney and accountant to establish the foundation's 501(c)(3) status.

Local businessman Marty Rauch soon became involved. Active in civic affairs in Hartford before he moved to Cheshire and started his own business, Rauch was firmly committed to the idea that “giving back to the community is important.” His son and daughter had both attended Cheshire schools.

Since then, Rauch has worked with the board to begin developing a foundation that would support programming for the broader community. “Only about 40 percent of families in Cheshire have children in the public schools,” he says, “so focusing exclusively on programs targeting youngsters can limit what we are able to accomplish. If we can find ways to serve all of the people in the community then there's more reason for them to support the foundation and its goals.”

With that goal in mind, the Cheshire Foundation determined early on that it wanted to focus on projects that would have a meaningful impact on the lives of “thousands of kids, not just a few.” They also decided that they did not want to fund programs merely to get them started, but neither did they wish to become the long-term funding source for programs they launched.

To date, most of their funds have gone to support specialized projects initiated by Cheshire teachers whose grant proposals are evaluated by both the foundation's board of directors and a subcommittee. The foundation has also provided funding for the creation and maintenance of a nature center at a pond near one of the town's schools, which is used by

Tips from the Experts, Continued

than it can chew. There is a natural inclination, on the part of those creating local foundations, to want to make something happen. After all, foundations are generally the natural consequence of a desire to shore up and enhance public educational institutions. But before a foundation can have an enduring impact, it must establish itself as a meaningful player. It may take some time to build a pool of funds, but foundations that put priorities first will fare better in the long run.

4. Build credibility with committed professionals

Experts advise that initial attention should be paid to recruiting talented people to serve as members of the foundation's governing body. Committed professionals will bring both experience and expertise to the challenges of defining the foundation's objectives and ensuring that the foundation survives. In addition, their collective credibility as community leaders will enhance the overall reputation of the foundation.

5. Have a strategic plan and stick to it.

Having a strategic plan doesn't mean there won't be detours. But, foundations launched without a strategic plan are more likely to founder. The board should determine precisely what they want to achieve, then adhere to the plan as rigorously as possible.

science classes.

Though the foundation began fund-raising with a rather traditional appeal to both Cheshire residents and local businesses, Rauch says it has also employed some more innovative fund-raising strategies. Two benefit concerts featuring the Waterbury Symphony have been successful. And foundation leaders are now planning the first Cheshire Education Foundation Golf Tournament.

The New Haven Public Education Fund was born in 1986, as an initiative of the New Haven Foundation (now the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven). To ensure the Education Fund's success, the Foundation set aside \$100,000 in seed money. A citizen planning group took a year to thoroughly re-search the project before settling on goals and an operational strategy. "The Education Fund was a proactive response to community concerns about the delivery of quality education," says Lydia Bornick, the fund's executive director. The New Haven Fund supports two primary grant programs. Grants for Excellence are \$500 mini-grants designed to help teachers enhance curriculum. Grants to Parents, up to \$1000, are intended to help parent groups become more involved in schools.

Unlike the majority of education foundations, which are managed entirely by volunteers, the New Haven Education Fund has a paid staff – Bornick and a program associate whose work is focused exclusively on the Fund's grants program. The Fund's work is guided by a board of directors, which operates independently from New Haven area schools, although the superintendent of schools and the head of the local teachers union are ex officio members.

With greater fund-raising demands than many education foundations, the New Haven Fund uses several different mechanisms to raise funds every year. For starters, the fund has an endowment and benefits from two generous individual donors. Additionally, Bornick says, they apply for grants each year, and conduct several fund-raising events.

Bornick sees a need for more Education Foundations to be formed across the state. In a climate of extreme financial difficulties that is being experienced here in the state of Connecticut, I envision the formation of many more education foundations," says Bornick. She cautions, however, that "Education Foundations are never intended to replace or supplant public school funding dollars. Education Foundations exist to enhance public school education and bring additional resources to enhance public school educational opportunities."

Marge Hiller, executive director of the Bridgeport Public Education Fund, one of the state's earliest education foundations, says the fund's single purpose is "to mobilize the community for quality education in Bridgeport." Created in 1983, the Bridgeport Fund is built on the idea that "the whole community is responsible for education," Hiller says.

Unlike most of Connecticut's public education foundations, the Bridgeport Fund is affiliated with a network of national education funds called the Public Education Network. Each fund within this network has professional staff and is committed to positive policy change.

The Bridgeport Fund sponsors many different kinds of programs. Mini-grants to teachers, in the \$800 - \$1,000 range, are oriented toward project-based learning activities that involve multi-disciplinary teams. The Fund also supports advocates, people from the Bridgeport community who play an active role in the schools promoting educational excellence, as well as college mentors who regularly meet with high school students. As part of a reading enrichment program the Fund supports, every student in the Bridgeport schools gets a book on the first day of school and volunteers are recruited to assist with reading classes.

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And an innovative neighborhood/school conversation activity is designed to surface creative and actionable ideas within the community that can then be fostered with support from the Fund.

"The whole movement of the education foundation is not just in response to state budget cuts, but also due to the desire for the improvement of public education," says Hiller. "Education foundations build consensus and encourage dialogue for improving public education and is the greatest source for bringing together the public for improving education."

Successful Interaction with Local School Administrations

When Dr. David Cressey became superintendent of Cheshire Public Schools in 1998, the Cheshire Education Foundation was already four years old. Though he'd had no experience with local education foundations in previous school administration positions, Cressey says he was immediately intrigued.

"I think some school administrators who are unfamiliar with the education foundation concept may initially be intimidated or skeptical," he says. "That's why it's important for the leaders of education foundations to establish rapport with school boards and school administrations as early as possible." In Cheshire, Cressey and the chairman of the board of education serve on the foundation's board as ex officio members. That involvement, says Cressey, is key to the foundation's success.

"It's no simple matter to keep a local education foundation working," he says. "It's not easy to raise money anywhere. What works best for us is focusing on specific, innovative start-up activities that yield positive results, but probably wouldn't get funded otherwise. We look for programs that will reach a lot of youngsters and add real educational value. People are more likely to respond favorably to requests for donations when you can demonstrate a track record of success."

He's quick to add, though, that the Cheshire Education Foundation is not just about raising money. "We're always looking for ways to successfully solicit other kinds of resources, as well," he says. Other resources might include the active engagement of high level executives from local corporations. When Cheshire High School was upgrading its video facilities, for instance, the foundation was instrumental in recruiting the assistance of professionals from nearby ESPN, who guided the school in the selection of equipment.

Cressey urges local foundations to "aggressively pursue that sort of community involvement. There's no question that local schools can benefit from the kind of funding support that education foundations can provide. But it's equally important to find effective ways to reach out to other segments of the community and enlist their support. Education foundations, comprised of community representatives, are in an ideal position to play an important role in that process. And they will benefit their schools and themselves at the same time."

Helpful Contacts for Getting Started

The experts agree that local organizations considering the creation of an education foundation are always well advised to seek out the counsel of pioneers who have gone before them. Although they are a relatively recent import to Connecticut, public education foundations and funds have existed for more than 20 years and many of the pitfalls new foundations might encounter have already been experienced by others.

The Connecticut Consortium of Education Foundations exists specifically to assist local foundations and individuals creating foundations in the state. In addition, all of the individuals quoted in this Best Practice Report, including Susan Sweeney, expressed openness to being contacted by anyone planning or developing a local foundation.

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