

Research Brief

The Role of Philanthropy in Education Reform: Striking a Balance between Leader- and Community-Centered Reform

Warren Simmons
Brown University

In 1993, Ambassador Walter H. Annenberg gave what was then an unprecedented \$500 million gift devoted to improving education in the arts and advancing school reform in urban and rural communities. The Annenberg Challenge, as it came to be known, was the first of many efforts led by corporate philanthropists designed to transform K–12 education. Fifty million dollars from Ambassador Annenberg’s gift was used to establish the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University under the leadership of the late TheodoreSizer, founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools and an esteemed researcher and advocate who spearheaded the small schools movement.

The Annenberg Challenge’s Approach

As a newcomer to the field of education reform, Ambassador Annenberg entrusted the design of the Challenge to Vartan Gregorian, then president of Brown University and currently president of the Carnegie Corporation. Dr. Gregorian, in turn, assembled a small team that included TedSizer and the late David Kearns, former CEO of Xerox, to shape the initiative’s design.

Dr. Gregorian and his colleagues chose to leverage change in urban and rural communities by requiring local teams composed of K–12 and higher-education leaders, members of the business and arts communities, and representatives of civic and grassroots organizations to develop grant proposals that responded to the Challenge’s eight broad principals:

1. All children can learn.
2. All children benefit from high academic standards.
3. All children learn more in small schools and in settings where teachers know them well.
4. Schools must engage parents as active partners in their learning communities.
5. Teachers need to measure students’ strengths regularly and use the results to improve instruction.
6. Schools cannot succeed without political, financial, and moral support from their communities.
7. Schools work better in networks than in isolation.
8. To change entire systems, policies that perpetuate inequities and hold schools back must be changed (Annenberg Foundation and Annenberg Institute for School Reform 2002).

The Annenberg Challenge’s theory of action held that 1) community oversight and ownership were critical to sustain reform through and beyond the life of the grant and 2) each grant had to be tailored to address

the local school reform context and amass the technical, fiscal, and political resources needed to support implementation. While the Challenge fell short of its goals to transform education, it demonstrated the importance of cross-sector partnerships to clear ground for new policies and practices; strengthened local intermediaries and legitimized their role as reform partners; and shed light on the need for district reinvention as a critical component of school reform (Annenberg Institute for School Reform 2002).

New Directions for Corporate Philanthropy

Walter Annenberg's vision and commitment inspired a new generation of corporate philanthropists such as Bill and Melinda Gates, Eli Broad, Warren Buffett, and Larry and Joyce Stupski to invest in education reform, particularly in troubled urban communities. Like the Annenberg Foundation, these new philanthropies were often led by their founders and supported in their early stages by a small number of staff and advisors. Their lack of bureaucracy fostered a nimbleness that was lacking in their traditional counterparts, which were encumbered by governing boards with multiple perspectives and priorities, coupled with layers of review by staff and external advisory groups.

The new corporate philanthropists sought to focus their resources on one or two major issues rather than dilute their potential impact by delving too broadly. For example, in its first foray into education reform the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation invested millions of dollars in the creation of small schools in response to the failure of large comprehensive high schools, especially in urban communities. During the same period, the Broad and Stupski foundations focused their resources on identifying and rewarding exemplars of district reform and on developing a new cadre of leaders to transform urban systems. However, these new philanthropic efforts departed from the Annenberg Challenge in several ways.

Alternative Leaders and Schools. Frustrated by the slow pace of change in urban districts and in schools of education that prepared their teachers and leaders, these foundations have invested heavily in alternative professional training and school development efforts to bolster change and innovation. Charter schools and alternative preparation programs such as Teach For America, The New Teachers Project, and New Leaders for New Schools have been major beneficiaries of this thrust and have risen in importance and clout locally and nationally as a result.

New Data and Accountability Systems. In addition to creating a new source of ideas and competition for schools of education and district-governed schools, corporate philanthropy has increased pressure for change by investing in the design and implementation of new data and accountability systems. These systems are designed to advance individual and system improvement, or in the face of continued failure, foster their replacement.

Corporate philanthropy's emphasis on alternative leadership, data-based decision making, and the transformation of schools and entire districts through reinvention and/or competition has had a major impact on school reform. It has heightened the urgency for reform and injected critical fiscal resources into urban districts strained by budget cuts due to local recessions that predated the national recession of 2008. With the election of President Obama – ironically, a former co-chair of the Chicago Annenberg Challenge – corporate philanthropy has found a federal partner with an agenda attuned to their interests.

Alignment of the Federal and Corporate Education Agendas

The four pillars of the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top Competition – teacher effectiveness, data systems, rigorous standards and assessments, and turning around low-performing schools – resonate with corporate philanthropy's interest in new leadership, data-centered accountability, and competition as levers to promote innovation and transformation. Moreover, the two largest grants (\$50 mil-

lion each) in the Department of Education's recent Innovation Fund competition were awarded to Teach For America (TFA) and the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), strengthening their respective positions as alternatives to traditionally governed schools and teacher training institutions. This tool enables students and teachers to preview text, anticipate challenging words, and enables a motivating and playful exploration of the contents of the text. It is an appropriate role for the district to provide the technology necessary to put such tools into the hands of ELLs and their teachers, and to provide professional development support so that they can be effectively used.

Missing Elements

The levers used by Race to the Top and by corporate philanthropy foster change by investing in the potential of competition, new leadership, stronger accountability, and more data to drive change and remove policy barriers and stale ideas imposed by traditional K–12 systems and their higher-education partners. Whether by design or oversight, these levers rely on competition, data, and hard-charging leaders to outweigh or overwhelm the political, social, and cultural forces that have shaped the struggles facing urban school districts.

This approach also ignores important lessons from the Annenberg Challenge and recent research on the features of urban schools and school districts that have a track record of success. While raising standards and strengthening accountability and leadership, these schools and school systems also focus on organizational (as opposed to individual) capacity building by developing school networks or professional learning communities that employ data and research-based practices to foster continuous improvement within and across schools (Ascher and Maguire 2007, Bryk *et al.* 2010, Seif and Barnebey 2010, Burney and Klau 2007, Leithwood *et al.* 2010).

These efforts emphasize the importance of building new cultures, not just new tools and structures, through ongoing engagement with multiple constituencies (unions, parent and student groups, business, civic leaders) that broaden trust and political support and provide opportunities for extended learning, especially for underperforming students. Leaders of odds-beating schools and districts realize that education improvement occurs in a larger political and cultural context that must be understood and, possibly, changed – not through force of will alone, but through strategic and results-oriented community engagement.

This more community-centered perspective is critical in urban communities where school systems have been historical battlegrounds where successive waves of immigrants have fought for the resources needed to advance economically and politically. The failure to see education in a larger political and cultural context has undermined the sustainability of reforms in the face of promising results.

Importance of Constituency Building

Building a broad-based constituency inside and outside the educational system that can build capacity, sustain efforts, and align local with national aspirations for excellence and equity should be a priority rather than an afterthought. The importance of this lesson resounds in the recent defeat of Washington, D.C., mayor Adrian Fenty and the resignation of Michelle Rhee, the district's chancellor, in spite of substantial national support for both leaders and promising evidence of improved student achievement and system performance. This lesson was also echoed in the San Diego School Board's recent reversal of the reforms established by former school superintendent Alan Bersin and his chief academic officer Anthony Alvarado. In both cases, Frederick M. Hess, director of education policy studies for the American Enterprise Institute, attributed the lack of political support for reform to the failure to build local ownership and constituencies for reform.

One way to read the San Diego experience is, reforms that don't have a local constituency and are not supported by local advocates and efforts are not likely to stick. . . . In many ways, Bersin was a test case for how much you can force a school district to change. That's just an enormous cautionary note when we hear [U.S. Secretary of Education Arne] Duncan talk about how we're going to drive reform and what these superintendents are going to be able to accomplish. (Sparks 2010)

While the recent manifesto authored by Michelle Rhee, Joel Klein, and other education leaders (Klein *et al.* 2010), calls for adults, including “superintendents, educators, elected officials, labor unions, and parents alike,” to act responsibly, the implied collective action can only be engendered by civic engagement that forges shared values and a common agenda. The lessons from San Diego and Washington, D.C., reveal that it cannot be imposed from the top down or driven by results alone.

Moreover, recent research by Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister (2009) demonstrate that it doesn't have to be. A growing number of community-based organizations like the New York City Coalition for Education Justice, D.C. Voice, and Oakland Community Organizations have combined organizing techniques with access to research knowledge and data in order to advocate for school and districtwide reforms that produce results. These organizations bring together parents, students, small businesses, and faith and cultural institutions in low-income communities to amplify their voice in reform efforts dominated by the values and perspectives of leaders who are often new to the community and destined to be gone within a few years – the average life-span of an urban superintendent is three and a half years, with a full third in office for less than a year (Council of the Great City Schools 2008/2009). These organizations and their constituents remain committed and desperate for reform as new leaders come and go and as grants from traditional and new philanthropies begin and end.

Unfortunately, the importance of the role of community-based organizations and their constituents in sustaining the reforms that serve their community is grossly underplayed in the leader-centered, competition-driven agenda being promoted by corporate philanthropy. By neglecting the need to invest in a more community-centered approach to education reform, corporate philanthropy weakens the impact of the very reforms it espouses and creates missed opportunities for creating results and reform agendas that are more robust and sustainable.

Community-Centered Reform: A Basic Infrastructure

The Annenberg Institute's experience with helping communities conduct district reviews, engage in high school reform, develop strategic plans, and organize to support education reform has taught us useful lessons about alliances. We have seen that community-centered reform relies on cross-sector (grassroots, K–12 and higher education, business, labor, civic, cultural groups, etc.) alliances that use research and expertise from local and national reform partners to construct a shared vision and agenda and to amass the various forms of capital (fiscal, technical, political, social, cultural) needed to support and monitor its implementation over time. These types of alliances or coalitions don't replace the need for strong and focused educational leadership; rather, they create a supportive and accountable context that allows leaders to concentrate on design and implementation while sharing responsibility for generating trust and engaging communities with multiple partners.

In turn, these alliances are most successful when they are supported by a local network of organizations operating on different elements of a common agenda. These include *local action research organizations* like the Cowen Institute in New Orleans, Research for Action in Philadelphia, and the Chicago Consor-

tium for School Research that provide credible and accessible information about reform progress and results and provide answers to questions asked by key local leaders inside and outside of the school system. *Local reform support organizations* like the Boston Plan for Excellence, the Mobile Area Education Foundation, the Philadelphia Education Fund, New Visions for Public Schools, and the University of Chicago's Urban Education Institute amplify the capacity of schools and entire districts by serving as innovation incubators and school network managers or supporters.

As mentioned earlier, the impact of research and new approaches won't be fully realized without being bolstered by *informed and active advocacy* representing the full range of community stakeholders encompassing unions, grassroots organizing groups, and business and civic leaders whose collective support is needed to obtain sufficient funding, stable leadership, and constructive policies. While most cities convene business and union leadership through well-funded chambers of commerce, labor councils, and other alliances, *grassroots organizing* for education reform remains sorely neglected until the votes of residents in these communities are needed at the polls. Ironically, those with the least invested in maintaining the status quo in education reform receive even less support from corporate philanthropy than they have from more traditional grantmakers. Corporate philanthropy does, however, recognize the need for strengthening communications to deliver sharper and timelier messages to build public awareness and support, as witnessed by the recent debates sparked by the film *Waiting for Superman* and the media-based education summit, Education Nation. While traditional and nontraditional education leaders need better communication tools and strategies, information tied to mobilized groups ensures more action than data alone.

As the nation's schools face new deadlines for raising achieving and narrowing gaps that have existed far too long, new and more traditional philanthropies must contend with the African proverb popularized by Margaret Wright Edelman and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, "It takes a village to raise a child." The Annenberg Challenge laid much of the foundation for community-centered action through its insistence on civic engagement and its investment in local research and reform support organizations. Although competition and strong leadership impel action, collaboration and coalitions build the political, social, and cultural capital needed to produce results over the long haul, rather than the short run. With community support, leaders equipped with innovative ideas and adequate resources can produce the radical transformations urban education needs to produce achieve results at scale.

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About Warren Simmons

Warren Simmons is Executive Director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. The Institute was established in 1993 to generate, share, and act on knowledge that improves conditions and outcomes in American schools, particularly in urban areas and in schools serving disadvantaged students.

Over his 25-year career in education, Dr. Simmons has worked on urban education issues from several vantage points, such as as a grant maker at the National Institute of Education and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. As Director of Equity Initiatives for the New Standards Project, a coalition of 17 states and 6 school districts, he led teams of researchers and practitioners who designed a performance-based assessment system to advance curricular and instructional reforms. His local experience includes serving as special assistant to the superintendent of schools in Prince George's County, Maryland, where he designed and implemented reforms that improved the achievement of disadvantaged students; these included the Comer School Development Project, the College Board's Equity 2000 Project, and the school system's multicultural education and Black male achievement initiatives.

Dr. Simmons earned a B.A. in psychology from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, and a doctorate in psychology from Cornell University. He serves on many boards and advisory groups of numerous education reform organizations

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Judith McQuaide
NEA Research, ext. 7375
jmcquaide@nea.org

Gwen Williams
NEA Research, ext. 7368
gwilliams@nea.org