

5. Lessons Learned from This Study

With the support of the John Randolph and Dora Haynes Foundation, we set out to examine, through our pilot study and this report, private support to public education. Although our sample of schools and districts was too small to make definitive conclusions, we nevertheless developed a number of recommendations that could be explored as hypotheses for future research, and as suggestions to consider for future policymaking.

The recommendations that follow offer both broad strategies for raising private support for public education and more-focused strategies to address the specific challenges of securing that support. Later in this chapter, we outline ways in which future research could be approached to expand the existing knowledge of private support to public education.

Broad-Based Strategies for Obtaining Private Support

The recommendations that follow offer some general strategies that may prove useful to schools and districts.

Maintain Continual Communication

One comment we heard repeatedly related to the importance of maintaining continual communication with the community at large. Principals, district superintendents, and other interviewees noted the need for ongoing communication with parents, local businesses, corporate business partners, interested citizens, and other potential givers. This can be accomplished through various modes of communication including phone calls, newsletters, and face-to-face conversations, which can be used to inform the community of any special events, the particular needs of the schools, or even to just to send a thank-you for involvement with district or school activities. As one principal observed, you need to think about every person you meet every day because that person may some day bring needed resources to a school.

Make It a Reciprocal Relationship

Both school and district officials noted the importance of creating a reciprocal relationship with business partners so that both parties feel they are benefiting from the relationship. Business partners need a compelling reason to become involved with helping out schools. Principals, superintendents, and other school staff cited a number of reasons for the importance of outside involvement: an improved future labor force, increased publicity for the giver, better schools for the children of employees of local businesses, and the intrinsic benefits that derive from developing relationships that can help children in their schooling.

In addition, successful schools and districts made sure that members of the community knew they were valued and respected. The private givers were made to feel like partners, rather than just spectators, in the success of a school or district. To foster this relationship, community members were invited to participate in the planning of school projects and invited to schools for various events. Private givers were also recognized for their involvement. Something as simple as a personal thank-you letter from the principal or students went a long way in sustaining donor relations. In addition, several schools and districts had donor recognition events to honor those who supplied resources to the schools.

Finds Ways for Donors to "Get Their Feet Wet"

Several school principals noted that finding ways for community members to make modest contributions to support a school, and thereby gradually introduce donors to a school and its needs, is an especially effective strategy. After volunteers got a firsthand look at the schools and met the students, they frequently came back with more support.

For example, one school established a "buddy" program whereby students initially corresponded with community members by mail on a monthly basis. The community members were then invited to the school for "buddy breakfasts." After the sponsors got to know the students better and were made aware of the school's particular needs, they often became more involved in the school through reading programs and other volunteer efforts. Principal-for-a-day programs, award ceremonies to recognize students or volunteers, and other such activities can expose a school to the local community in small ways and help foster future relationships.

Make It Appealing for Individuals and Organizations to Become Involved

Districts and schools reported that they needed to be flexible and creative in their approach to making involvement appealing to prospective donors. Most successful schools and districts presented numerous ideas to businesses, parents, and other community members about how these potential donors could get involved in helping the schools, while remaining open to alternative ideas and suggestions.

The process of getting people involved with the schools often required ongoing conversations and negotiations, and districts and schools needed to be receptive to community input. For example, one school wanted to build a concrete wall between the school building and an adjacent noisy freeway. The idea for the wall was not well received by possible supporters, so school officials used an alternative tactic. They suggested a more aesthetically appealing barrier of trees and were then able to get the support they needed. Community members not only found planting trees a more appealing option, they could make donations to purchase the trees in individuals' names.

Along the same lines, several school principals stated that successful schools make everyone feel welcome. Principals specifically mentioned that PTAs should not be seen as exclusive clubs. In addition, the scheduled times and formats of school events and club meetings should take into consideration those community members with scheduling and time constraints.

Provide Training to Volunteers

Providing orientation and/or training to community members who were interested in volunteering was another effective strategy used by some schools. For example, one school offered a tutoring program that enabled volunteers from the community to come into the school to help students with their reading. Many of those students had fallen behind in their studies and were therefore perceived to be more difficult to teach. The key to the school's success with the program was that the school told prospective volunteers up front that they would be trained to help the students, which added to the volunteers' enthusiasm and willingness to participate, and to their effectiveness as tutors.

Know Your Resource Base

School and district personnel discussed how the various characteristics of their communities affected how they approached the task of fund-raising. They suggested that identifying their resource base required an understanding of the local community and what it had to offer in terms of support. For instance, whereas wealthier districts and schools may be able to target parents to a greater degree, other districts and schools may need to be more creative in their approach and cast a wider net across a variety of potential sources.

We found that although districts and schools in low-income areas could not always generate a great deal of monetary support from parents, because of their perceived need they generally were more likely to receive grants and support from corporations or philanthropic organizations. In other cases, some districts had a strong local business community with a vested interest in becoming involved with the local schools, whereas other districts without a strong local business community had to seek other avenues for support.

Small- to medium-size businesses tended to be more localized in their outreach efforts, limiting their giving to schools within their own communities. Large corporations are less geographically limited because they can afford to have a wider scope and because their customers and employees are more widely dispersed. Therefore, large corporations are more willing to assist schools outside of their geographic area.

In addition, the districts targeted a somewhat different set of givers and used different mechanisms for raising private support than did the schools. Corporations and LEFs tended to be more involved at the district level, whereas schools had greater interaction with individual parents, parent groups, and local businesses. Furthermore, districts generally received relatively large monetary contributions whereas schools were more effective in recruiting volunteer in-kind support.

In short, district and school officials should evaluate their resource base and create a fund-raising strategy that takes into account the most likely sources of funding.

Private Support Garners More Private Support

Staff members from several districts and schools noted that when a school or district can establish some credibility with potential givers, other givers (including foundations, corporations, and the like) are more willing to give. By securing

private resources, a district or school established a precedent for asking others to donate. If a district or school exhibits a commitment to pursuing private support by receiving grants, developing local business partners, or building relationships with parents, other givers may also be interested in giving. Such support suggests that a school or district has educational programs worthy of private support, and the private contributions will be well used.

The Challenges of Raising Private Support and Suggested Strategies

The schools and districts in our sample faced some particularly difficult challenges in developing and maintaining private support. This section discusses some of those challenges and gives specific examples of what some schools and districts did to overcome them.

Time Demands

At every school in our sample, most of the responsibility for raising private support rested with the principal. However, most principals had difficulty finding the necessary time to develop game plans for obtaining private support and building relationships within the community. One principal addressed this problem by seeking a grant to fund the salary of a community liaison who could assume some of these tasks. Although the principal still initiated most of the external relationships and oversaw all the fund-raising activities, the community liaison handled much of the day-to-day communications and helped sustain the fund-raising efforts over time.

Turnover and Mobility

One of the challenges districts and schools consistently faced was turnover of key district or school staff and turnover of key contacts at businesses. Most of our interviewees had relatively short tenures at their current positions; several of the principals had been at their schools for only two or three years. Many interviewees suggested that longevity is a tremendous advantage in developing and maintaining relationships with parents, local businesses, corporations, and the community at large, and interviewees who had been in their positions for a relatively short period of time felt like they were at a disadvantage.

Building a new relationship with a donor, or stepping into an existing relationship established by a predecessor, usually takes a tremendous amount of effort. It was

not clear how long or to what extent programs continued after a principal or superintendent left a school. One way to address the issue of turnover is to have more than one person at a school or district involved in building relationships with members of the local community.

In addition, foundations and corporations also experience personnel turnover, which can make it difficult for schools to build relationships with these organizations. A principal or superintendent's contact at a corporation is typically one specific individual. So, if that person changes jobs, the connection with the corporation can disappear, sometimes without notice. To address this problem, one staff member at a district with numerous business partnerships suggested that written contracts be used to formalize the relationship. It was also suggested that if a number of people from a business are involved in the partnership, the more likely it is the relationship would survive any one person's departure.

Short-term Support Mentality

In almost every case, district and school staff members noted that donors regarded donations and in-kind gifts as short-term commitments and not part of an ongoing program of giving. Although this short-term support can be viewed as an asset, and can lead to longer-term support, it can also require a large investment of staff time without an equivalent payoff. By developing an informal verbal "contract" with donors that specifies the level and type of giving, a longer-term commitment may result.

Not Knowing How to Attract Private Support

A number of school principals reported that they lacked knowledge on how to attract private support, and weren't sure how to go about getting that knowledge. Two principals in particular avoided developing relationships with potential donors from local businesses and the community at large because they did not feel comfortable in that role. Others reported that they learned how to approach potential donors through "trial and error," which may ultimately lead to frustration and negative experiences for both the donor and the recipient.

Several districts addressed this problem by making their staff grant writer available to assist schools in the district with identifying and applying for grants. Developing a working relationship with education foundations is another possible way to address this challenge. Foundation staff could handle fund-raising efforts so that principals and district staff can focus their attention on other matters.

Lack of Communication Between Districts and Schools

Poor communication between districts and schools can limit a school's ability to use available district support for attracting private resources. Schools seemed to have limited knowledge of services and programs the districts provided to help schools raise private support. In several cases, district staff told us about their various support-related activities, such as principal-for-a-day and adopt-a-school programs, or about staff members who were devoted to helping to attract private support, but the schools seemed to have little or no knowledge of them.

The communication problem was successfully addressed by one district that hosts monthly meetings with all the school principals in the district. The LEF director also attends the meetings, as do the PTA presidents. In this way, everyone stays informed about school- and district-level fund-raising efforts.

"Donor Fatigue"

District staff and school principals complained that a lot of competition can go on between schools and fund-raising organizations, resulting in a single business being asked for help by multiple groups. In addition, schools tended to operate independently in raising support for themselves, which meant that they were often unaware of what other schools were doing to attract private support. Adding to this, communication between schools and districts, which would have helped avoid overlap in approaching potential givers, was often lacking .

To address this problem, one district scheduled a monthly principals meeting, which not only facilitated internal communications but also helped ensure that multiple parties within the district were not approaching the same donors simultaneously. In addition, one of the main priorities of most LEFs is to develop a system-level approach to fund-raising. This includes coordinating their solicitation efforts with the district to avoid overlap, and having staff dedicated to tracking donors' past contributions and encouraging their future contributions.

Fear of Commercialization

Many district and school staff members noted their concern about the possibility of businesses being inappropriately involved with the schools. For this reason, most districts and schools avoided exclusivity contracts with business enterprises. Coca-Cola Company, for one, is backing away from exclusivity contracts in its vending machine operations in schools, and other corporations may follow Coca-Cola's lead.

Summary

For this study, we examined the existing literature, and interviewed principals, superintendents, district personnel, and LEF representatives to gain a better understanding of private support in public education. The issue of private resources in public education was virtually unexamined until our study. No systematic national data existed on the extent of private giving and how it varies across schools, nor did data exist on the strategies that encourage giving or how the resources from private funding are used.

What little research had been conducted in this area focused primarily on monetary donations and on local education foundations. As our pilot study has suggested, there is in fact a very wide array of types of giving, both monetary and in-kind, which provide additional resources for public schools. Through our analysis, we are able to provide a description of the flow of giving from donors to the end use by the schools and districts.

Policymakers, researchers, and the general public have voiced concerns over the possible inequities created by private contributions to public education. Decades of judicial and legislative action designed to equalize public spending across districts (and to a lesser extent schools) could be circumvented with the use of private resources. In other words, wealthier communities prohibited from raising additional public dollars could instead turn to other sources of support. Unfortunately, no data exist to determine if such a trend has indeed occurred. However, our preliminary research does not suggest that resource inequities, when taking into account both in-kind and monetary support, necessarily result from private support.

Whereas parental support is clearly greater at schools in higher-income areas, our research also suggests that schools in lower-income areas may have opportunities for raising additional resources that are not available to wealthier schools. For example, schools in poorer areas may have access to foundations or corporations that are striving to target their funding efforts to needy communities. Having said this, it is undoubtedly more difficult overall to generate additional support in low-income areas.

The disparity in parental involvement is a particularly difficult issue for policymakers to address because discouraging parental involvement at schools in high-income areas would be counterproductive. However, it is often difficult to increase parental involvement in schools in poorer communities because of the constraints facing many low-income parents. Clearly, a dedicated and energetic principal is an essential element in garnering parental and community involve-

ment at schools in low-income areas. Therefore, anything that state and district officials can do to increase the placement of talented administrators in these schools is likely to lead to increased community involvement and a greater ability to secure private resources.

Policymakers and educators may want to explore other possible ideas to encourage private giving. For instance, state governments, counties, or districts could examine the possibility of providing training in effective strategies for raising private support. This could entail convening principals, superintendents, and other school and district personnel for formal training sessions to be led by consultants or other experts. These conferences could also serve to promote information sharing. For instance, school and district representatives could share strategies that have, and have not, proved effective. Undoubtedly, some information sharing already takes place informally, but requiring principals and other educators to focus on innovative and successful strategies—and learn about failed ones—may minimize the likelihood of wasting precious time and effort on ventures that do not have a high probability of success.

We've presented just a few examples of the many possible initiatives that could be considered. Obviously, with further thought and deliberation, state and local policymakers may be able to develop a set of policies specifically designed to encourage private support for public schools.

Future Research

The analysis presented in this report represents a large step forward in our knowledge of the relationship between local communities and public schools. Nevertheless, we can continue to build on this knowledge with future research.

First and foremost, future research should include a larger sample of schools, which would provide a more-representative collection and allow for statistical analysis of differences across schools and communities. A larger sample would also allow for an examination across a number of geographic areas beyond Los Angeles County. Patterns of giving and uses of gifts may vary across different geographic areas, and examining those patterns may produce greater insights into the range of relationships between communities and public schools.

Second, future research should include the development of a survey that specifically probes districts and principals for answers to questions about monetary contributions, volunteer time, and in-kind gifts given to districts and schools. Although school officials may not know *exactly* how much is given to a district or school, a survey that includes at least a range of dollar values for monetary con-

tributions would serve to improve the existing data. In addition, the survey should probe for various types of volunteer activities, the range of hours spent by volunteers in those activities, and an overall assessment of the quality of those hours. Questions in regard to the volunteer hours could be organized such that respondents would provide a range of the number of hours given to specific activities, and possibly assess the hourly value of the volunteer time.¹ A survey should also specifically ask school officials to provide an estimated value, or a range of the value, of in-kind gifts.

With the informational framework that a survey would provide, future researchers could more specifically assess the quantities and distribution of giving and determine how much value schools and districts place on different types of giving. This framework could also lead to greater insights into the degree to which districts and schools are circumventing equalized funding systems through private contributions. These sorts of analyses would be especially useful with a larger sample, where statistical analyses could be more meaningful and broader conclusions could be drawn.

Third, future research might include donor interviews and/or surveys, which could provide a greater understanding of why people and organizations give, and why businesses and organizations choose certain schools to support. Surveying donors may also serve to verify the estimated value of contributions to schools.

Fourth, future research could have a greater emphasis on business partnerships, which would provide additional insights into how these relationships are started in the first place and how they mature over time.

Our analysis summarizes the major themes of private support of public schools in Los Angeles County. Future studies could build upon this research to provide further answers to questions concerning why people and organizations give, how much they give, and whether statistical differences exist across various types of schools and communities.

¹Respondents could be asked to state the hourly wage they would be willing to pay for the volunteer time, if they had the financial resources.