

Summary

The nation's public schools have been under attack over much of the past three decades. A commonly heard criticism is that school performance, as measured by students' standardized test scores, has stagnated or declined over the years. At the same time, schools have failed to close the gap in achievement between the lowest-performing and highest-performing students. This situation exists despite increased resources for public schools and attempts to allocate resources more equitably.

Dependence on state support has created a number of concerns for the nation's schools and school districts. School finance reforms have led to increased decisionmaking at the state level regarding education at a time when governance reforms call for more local control. State decisionmaking, in turn, imposes constraints on local decisionmaking. Schools have become dependent on the state economy and must compete with other demands on state resources. In addition, state education funding over time has shifted toward a greater reliance on categorical (that is, restricted) funds and a lesser reliance on general-purpose (that is, flexible) funds.

Taken together, reforms in school finance and education governance have made securing private support for public education an important activity of many public schools and districts. While public schools and districts have always attracted private support, anecdotal reports and a limited body of documented research suggest they are now pursuing private support with increased sophistication and aggressiveness.

Current reports and research provide a limited accounting of private support of public education and no systematic framework for thinking about such support. This pilot study is designed to provide schools and school districts with information on the types of public-private partnerships that have been developed and the mechanisms used to attract private resources.

In addition, we are interested in documenting the types of monetary and in-kind resources¹ that are most likely to be available to schools and districts that have differing economic resources within their communities.

¹*In-kind support* includes volunteer time and donated materials, equipment, and supplies. *Monetary support* is financial support for a specified or unspecified purpose.

This report focuses on questions relating to three broad areas:

1. Who are the private givers to public education?
2. How do schools and districts attract private support—through school-based organizations or through school and district personnel—and what mechanisms do schools and districts use to attract private resources?
3. What types of support are provided, and how are the contributions used?

To address these “who, how, and what” questions, we collected data from interviews with school and district staff and from questionnaires distributed to ten elementary schools in six districts in Los Angeles County.² The county provides a field of richly diverse districts and schools. Within the county, we picked a sample of schools and districts operating under different governance structures in communities that differ socioeconomically, and we selected districts of various sizes.

The information in this report should be useful to districts and schools in helping them plan for and assess the role of private support of public education. In addition, businesses and foundations can use our research to make decisions regarding how best to support public education. In particular, private corporations and foundations may be interested in learning how other similar organizations are supporting public education and which types of resources provide the most leverage for gaining private support.

This report represents our effort to better understand private support, both in-kind and monetary, in public education. We identify successful strategies for maximizing support and for overcoming obstacles in obtaining funding for public schools.

The Who, How, and What of Private Giving

To systematically examine private giving at the sample schools and districts, we developed a matrix that presents a useful framework for examining the various dimensions of private giving. The matrix includes private givers, school or district-based entities channeling private resources, mechanisms to attract private resources, types of private giving, and the use of private monetary giving. Specifically, both monetary and in-kind resources flow from private givers through various entities, and those entities attract donations through a variety of

²In the interest of maintaining anonymity, the specific names of the schools and school districts that participated in the study are not listed in this report.

mechanisms. Private giving, in turn, may take a variety of forms and be used for diverse purposes.

Within each dimension of private giving, we developed a comprehensive list of different examples of givers, mechanisms to attract private support, types of gifts, and uses of gifts. For instance, for private givers, the list of examples includes parents and local businesses, to name just a couple. These examples came from an extensive literature review, site visits, and interviews with school and district staff. We then examined the data for each district and school in our sample to determine whether we saw evidence of each example at a particular site.

Who Are the Private Givers?

Whereas parental involvement was the most common form of “giving” at the school level, other contributors played a significant role in providing support to the schools. A majority of schools rely on parents, local businesses, corporations, and community-based organizations for support. Although not as prevalent across schools, for 25 to 50 percent of the sample schools, students, philanthropic foundations, community members, professional associations, and city governments are givers (and often donate gifts of significant size). In contrast, colleges and universities did not play an active role in our sample schools.

Our sample districts attracted support from many of the same private givers as our sample schools, although the size of those contributions differed. Overall, school districts tended to attract resources from larger and more-organized groups, such as corporations, local businesses, and colleges and universities, as opposed to obtaining resources from individuals and smaller groups and associations, which was typical at the school level.

School or District-Based Entities Channeling Private Resources

At all of the sample schools, the principal was involved to some degree in attracting private resources to his or her school. In general, it was the principal who took the lead in developing relationships and maintaining ongoing communication with the community at large and other private sponsors. In addition, the principal was often a school’s sole connection with its business and community sponsors. The majority of schools also enlisted Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and local education foundations (LEFs) to attract private support. Whereas seven of the schools cited the existence of a district LEF, only one school regarded the LEF as a significant player in attracting private support.

Each of the districts had district staff at some level responsible for private giving. The district interviewees generally stated that the district staff played a variety of roles in helping schools attract private support (for example, in organizing special events, establishing school-business partnerships, or providing grant-writing assistance). However, the schools were generally not well informed about district activities.

Mechanisms to Attract Private Resources

The mechanisms that schools relied on most heavily to attract private in-kind and monetary resources were personal contacts and relationship building, product sales, and special events. Almost every school principal emphasized the importance of personal contacts and relationship building in attracting private resources. A smaller portion of the schools that we visited relied on mail solicitations, grant applications, and school-business partnerships, but those mechanisms were key components of their strategy to attract private resources.

Superintendents and district-level staff also relied heavily on personal contacts and relationship building to attract private resources. The next most prevalent strategies at the district level were grant applications and development of school-business partnerships.

Although the districts actively raise support, the principals whom we interviewed consistently reported that the share of private resources that the schools themselves raise is greater than the share they receive from the districts.

Types of Private Giving

We divided private giving into three types: volunteer time, material donations, and monetary contributions.

At the school level, no one volunteer activity appeared to dominate across the schools; different schools received different kinds of volunteer support. Volunteers gave their time to such activities as tutoring programs, after-school enrichment programs, mentoring programs, and classroom support.

The majority of schools received donations of instructional materials, computers and software, equipment and supplies, and gift certificates and awards (such as free tickets to a ball game for an outstanding report card). In addition, the vast majority of schools received some level of monetary donation from a variety of private givers. Our interview respondents suggested that corporate and business

donors generally start out by providing in-kind support and, as the relationships developed, some givers would eventually provide monetary support as well.

Monetary donations were almost always targeted for a specific purpose or program. Generally, schools first developed priorities, plans, or goals and then approached private givers with specific proposals. The use of private monetary support, therefore, was not totally flexible in that the monies were given to support a specific program or goal. Relatively small amounts of money received through a variety of “percent of sales” programs (such as a major retailer donating a portion of its sales of a particular product) were truly flexible in terms of how they could be used.

School principals had a difficult time quantifying the levels of both in-kind and monetary support, and in particular in-kind support. With that said, school principals uniformly agreed that in-kind support significantly outweighs monetary support in quantity. In addition, principals generally put greater value on in-kind support (especially volunteer support) than monetary support.

The districts in the sample generally attracted less volunteer time and fewer material donations than the schools, and therefore concentrated more heavily on monetary donations. About one-half of the districts did, however, receive volunteer support for family services that were provided at the school level. Districts, more so than the schools, generally focused on pursuing monetary donations from larger givers in order to support larger-scale, district-wide programs. Neither districts nor schools obtained paid endorsements or advertising revenue, and the majority of schools and districts explicitly stated that they restrict paid endorsements.

Use of Private Monetary Giving

Private monetary giving supports a wide range of activities that tend to fall into three main categories: current operations, technology, and capital improvements.

Schools used private monetary support most often on curricular enrichment activities, such as field trips and after-school programs. The majority of schools also used private dollars for school supplies and equipment and non-teacher staff salaries. Private monetary support generally was intended to be used in the short term, which affected how schools decided to use this support.

Districts most often used privately donated money to support curricular enrichment programs, purchase instructional material, and support professional development. A majority of districts also used private monetary support to purchase

computers and other technology. When deciding how to allocate funds or resources to schools, district staff generally stated that they distribute money according to where the greatest need exists.

Differences in Support for Schools and Districts by Socioeconomic Status

We observed some differences in the nature of private giving in schools and school districts depending on their socioeconomic status.³ Schools located in the wealthiest communities (that is, those with the highest socioeconomic status) had very strong parental support in absolute terms, relative to other schools in the sample. While there was a greater level of parental support at schools in wealthier communities, some schools in the poorer communities were also successful in raising private support, although they needed to approach a relatively wide array of private donors. The list of private givers was relatively longer for some of the lower socioeconomic schools also because those schools had options to attract private giving that were not available in the more-affluent communities. For example, many foundations and large corporations are more willing to provide resources to schools in poorer communities because of the perceived greater needs of those schools.

As mechanisms for attracting private support, developing personal contacts and relationship building appear to be particularly important to schools in the middle and lower socioeconomic communities. Those schools could not as readily rely on parental monetary and in-kind support as schools in the wealthier communities. Instead, in order to attract private support, they were dependent on a dynamic school principal who was interested in making contacts in the community to attract and maintain private support.

The wealthier schools had a strong focus on direct monetary donations, particularly from parents. At the same time, even the wealthiest schools in our sample reported that private monetary contributions accounted for less than 5 percent of their total budgets. The wealthier schools also received sizable in-kind contributions from parents volunteering their time at the schools. Schools located in communities in the middle or lower socioeconomic strata appeared to have at least as much in-kind private support as the wealthier communities, but the support came from different types of private givers. Although is difficult to get a

³We measured socioeconomic status by the percentage of students who participate in the federally funded Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program. Schools with the highest socioeconomic status in our study had the fewest participants in the program, whereas schools with the lowest socioeconomic status had the most participants.

sense of the relative size of the in-kind contributions because volunteer time is difficult to measure, the variety of private givers who contributed their time to the schools was greater in the middle- level and lower-level socioeconomic communities.

The relatively large size of monetary donations received by the two sample schools in the wealthiest communities was evident in the number and type of items the schools bought with the donations. In addition, although LEFs were found across districts of various wealth in our sample, the two highest-income districts had especially active LEFs.

Similar to what was observed at the school level, the higher-income districts relied most heavily on monetary donations, whereas the lower- and middle-income districts received a relatively large number of in-kind donations. The wealthier the district, the more programs, services, and materials the district could purchase with private monetary contributions.

Lessons Learned: Recommended Strategies for Securing Private Support

From our analyses, we are able to offer both broad strategies for securing private support for public schools and more-focused strategies for meeting specific challenges in raising private support for public education.

Broad-Based Strategies for Raising Private Support

The recommendations that follow offer some general strategies for raising support for public education.

Maintain Continual Communication. One comment that we heard from all districts and schools related to the importance of continual communication with the community at large.

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.

Finds Ways for Donors to “Get Their Feet Wet.” Several school principals noted that one effective strategy is to find ways for community members to make modest contributions to support a school, and thereby get them introduced to the school and its needs. Once volunteers saw what was happening at the schools and got to know the students, they frequently came back with more support.

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. In addition, several respondents stated that successful schools make everyone feel welcome.

Provide Training to Volunteers. Another effective strategy used by some schools was to provide orientation or training to community members who were interested in volunteering at the schools.

Know Your Resource Base. Representatives from the schools and districts discussed how the various characteristics of their communities affected how they approached raising private support. They suggested that identifying their resource base required a good understanding of their communities and what they had to offer in terms of support.

Private Support Earns 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.

The Challenges of Raising Private Support and Suggested Strategies

Schools and districts employed a variety of tactics to overcome some of the difficult challenges they faced in raising and maintaining private support.

Time Demands. At every school in the sample, most of the responsibility for raising private support rested with the principal. One school addressed this problem by seeking a grant to pay the salary of a community liaison to assist the principal.

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 local businesses. One way to address this issue is to get more than one person involved at both the school or district level and business level. One district even formalized its relationship with supporting businesses through written contracts.

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. Developing an informal verbal “contract “ with donors that specifies the level and type of giving may create a longer-term commitment.

Not Knowing How to Attract Private Support. Several school principals reported that they lacked knowledge on how to raise private support, and weren't sure how to go about gaining that knowledge. Several districts addressed this problem by making district staff available to schools within the district.

Lack of Communication Between Districts and Schools. Schools seemed to have limited knowledge of services or programs pertaining to raising private support that are available from their districts. The communication problem was successfully addressed by one district that hosts monthly meetings with the school principals, PTA presidents, and LEF director in the district.

“Donor Fatigue.” District staff and principals complained that competition among schools and fund-raising organizations resulted in local businesses being approached by multiple sources for help at the same time. Monthly meetings, mentioned in the previous strategy, not only facilitated internal communication, but also helped ensure that multiple parties were not approaching the same donor simultaneously.

Fear of Commercialization. Many district and school staff members expressed concern over the possibility of inappropriate business activities within the schools. For this reason, most districts and schools avoided exclusivity contracts with business enterprises.

Future Research

The analysis in this report offers a large step forward in our knowledge of the relationships between 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 could provide a more-representative cross-section 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, which may bring greater insights into the range of relationships existing between communities and public schools.

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

prove the existing data. In addition, the survey should probe for the various types of volunteer activities, and probe for a range of the number of hours spent by volunteers in those activities, and the quality of those hours. In addition, the survey should specifically ask school officials to provide an estimated value of in-kind gifts. Among other benefits, this information would provide a clearer picture of the degree to which districts and schools are circumventing, or not circumventing, equalized funding systems through private contributions.

Third, future research should include interviews with donors. By conducting such interviews, greater insight into why people and organizations give, and why businesses and organizations choose certain schools to support, may be gained. These interviews may also serve to verify the value of making contributions to schools.

Finally, future research should place a greater emphasis on business partnerships. More-extensive research into business partnerships would provide additional insight into how these relationships get started in the first place and how they mature over time.