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# Challenges and Potential of a Collaborative Approach to Education Reform

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## Summary

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This report documents a formative evaluation of an effort begun by the Ford Foundation to develop collaboratives in eight urban centers from fall 1999 to spring 2003. The effort continues to evolve today.

### **Collaborating for Education Reform Initiative**

After years of attempting to improve education outcomes for all students and not seeing the fully desired results, the Ford Foundation had become frustrated with traditional approaches to reform. Through internal discussions and examination of other initiatives, the foundation staff became convinced that specific sites could make quality teaching in all classrooms a reality by employing a combination of tactics, such as effectively linking the different levels of pre-K–12 to higher-education systems; promoting informed public dialog, debate, and consensus-building around school reform options; promoting professional development for faculty, staff, and administrators; promoting district and state policy changes; and enhancing the role of parents and caregivers. This strategy for school improvement emphasized changing the organization and culture of schools, their relationships with their stakeholders, and the systems in which they are embedded. The Ford sponsors believed that the more coherent, steady, and coordinated these multiple approaches were, the more likely they were to succeed where other disjointed or discontinuous efforts had failed.

The Ford Foundation translated this belief into a strategy for reform: *local collaboration*. This philosophy grew out of, in part, sharing lessons from other foundations' experiences with collaborative efforts including the Annenberg Challenge Grants and the Pew Charitable Trust's Systemic Initiative. But, it was also a result of the Ford Foundation's own previous efforts at collaborative formation supported from 1991 to 2000 called the Urban Partnership Program (UPP).

Based on its own experiences with the UPP initiative and knowledge of other reform efforts, the Ford Foundation chose to encourage the development of collaboratives of community-based organizations in urban settings to address systemic barriers to high-quality teaching and learning. By basing the impetus for reform largely outside of the public school central office, the Ford Foundation hoped to avoid the pattern of failure of reforms that originated solely from the central office and were led by a "transformational," and often brief-tenured, superintendent. These internal efforts often dissipated when district leadership turned over. Ford envisioned collaboratives with multiple member organizations that could outlive the administrations of public officials. Furthermore, Ford hoped that collaborative supported reforms would also potentially avoid the failures associated with internally mandated reforms that are not supported by the community or by school personnel. By working from the outside inward and by involving school staff in planning and constructing the interventions, Ford sponsors hoped that buy-in and commitment to reform efforts would increase.

Thus the foundation began a new initiative, called the Collaborating for Education Reform Initiative (CERI), by issuing a series of planning grants in July 1999. As stated in the request for proposals (RFP), "system-wide reform efforts require effective coalitions among organizations which are committed to systemic educational reform over an extended period of time and who project their efforts to the state-level" (Ford Foundation, 1999, p. 1). In school years 1998–1999 and 1999–2000, it extended implementation grants to organizations in eight communities to begin implementation of CERI. These sites were Cataño P.R., Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., Denver,

Colo., the District of Columbia, Jackson, Miss., Miami-Dade, Fla., San Antonio, Tex., and Santa Ana, Calif. As part of this effort, the foundation asked the developing collaboratives in these areas to work initially in a cluster of schools within the district—usually a feeder pattern of elementary schools, middle schools, and a high school. At the same time, Ford expressed its expectation that collaboratives would create systemic changes across the entire district.

The composition and focus of the eight collaboratives differed substantially. At the time the initial grants were awarded, the number of collaborative members ranged from five in one site to 19 in another and included local colleges and universities, community-based organizations, advocacy groups, educators, parents, and concerned citizens. By design, the award amounts of \$300,000 per year were not intended to fund a districtwide reform effort. Rather, given the existence of community-based organizations in each setting that were interested in education improvement, the funds were intended to be used to unite community-based organizations and other organizations, such as the central office, in a way that could produce greater improvement and a stronger, more consistent focus on the reform agenda. As such, a major expected outcome was strong interorganizational linkages that enabled stronger implementation of the school improvement effort in a community.

## **RAND's Formative Evaluation**

In fall 1999, RAND began a formative evaluation of the effort. The evaluation had three purposes: to provide feedback to sites to improve their efforts, to provide information to Ford to inform its decisions about support and funding provided to sites, and to document for the public the challenges and possible successes of this approach to improvement. The research questions were the following:

- Did sites show progress toward desired outcomes?

- Could lessons learned or promising practices be discerned from the experiences of individual collaboratives or the group as a whole?
- Could collaboratives be effectively created by such an outside influence as the Ford Foundation to sustain education improvement efforts?

This report describes RAND’s findings concerning the progress made by those sites selected by the Ford Foundation and the lessons learned to date—i.e. four years into the effort to build collaboratives intended to sustain focused reform. The report should help other community organizations, policymakers, and those responsible for the education of our children to understand whether a collaborative approach to education reform might be useful in their communities.

## Methodology

The foundation proposed an initiative that was context-specific—i.e., set in real-life communities. It did not impose a uniform set of interventions but rather expected collaboratives to create and implement interventions relevant to their goals and the needs of their communities. As such, CERI was a development effort suitable for a qualitative research approach that included descriptive analysis.

We chose an embedded case study approach, using mixed methods as appropriate for this challenge, and viewed each collaborative and its surrounding community as a single embedded case. To assess the individual and comparative progress of sites, we collected and analyzed multiple data sources including RAND-developed teacher and student surveys, extensive field interviews, documents, such as newspaper articles and printed materials provided by collaborative members, and quantitative data supplied by districts and schools.

During the course of the study, we, in conjunction with others involved in the initiative, developed and agreed to a set of five dimensions along which we would judge the progress made by individual

sites in establishing well-functioning collaboratives that promote improved learning. These dimensions were based on a review of literature on collaboratives and the specific goals Ford had set out in supporting the formation of collaboratives. They included the following:

- The level of development of interorganizational linkages.
- The level of development and implementation of plans for providing high-quality teaching and learning in the cluster.
- The level of development and implementation of plans for systemic changes in policy.
- The level of independence achieved by the collaborative.
- The level of change in student outcomes as a result of collaborative actions.

## Findings

We found that the CERI effort to date resulted in several functioning collaboratives as defined by the first four dimensions listed above. The latter dimension, change in student outcomes, could not be clearly demonstrated in many cases in part because of data limits and in part because of the lack of elapsed time. In answer to our first research question, the sites showed variable progress with regard to the different dimensions. The following points summarize the progress made.

- Dimension 1: All of the grantees developed networks to share information and to act cooperatively with each other. Four of the eight grantees, those in Cataño, D.C., Jackson, and Miami, made comparatively strong progress toward the formation of deeper organizational linkages as defined in the literature on collaboratives. San Antonio had difficulty operating jointly and crafting joint products, functioning cooperatively instead. The Santa Ana grantee created a well-functioning partnership to bring grant money into the area. Grantees in Denver and Char-

lotte made weaker progress in the development of organizational linkages.

- Dimension 2: Although never fully implementing all of their activities, four grantees contributed to the development and implementation of visions of high-quality teaching and support in their locales (Cataño, D.C., Jackson, Miami). The others, each with less-developed organizational linkages, made weaker progress toward implementation at least in part because members did not agree on the vision or did not pool their resources to implement it.
- Dimension 3: Three of the grantees, those in Cataño, D.C., and Jackson made progress toward policy changes and/or toward expanding policy influence. The collaborative in Miami-Dade did not see its work in terms of systemic change and did not move deliberately toward ensuring districtwide support of changes to policy. Four grantees—Charlotte, Denver, San Antonio, and Santa Ana—were at the planning stages of policy changes.
- Dimension 4: Cataño and D.C. took significant steps toward sustaining the collaborative and its CERI focus through a combination of opportunistic and deliberate actions. Santa Ana also took steps to bring in significant grant funding, but this was directed toward other initiatives. Others were in the planning stages or had perhaps drawn in some minor funding supports.
- Dimension 5: Very little improvement on student achievement that could be attributed to the grantees was evident across most sites. Jackson, Miami, and Santa Ana, however, might be credited with some test successes. Cataño might be credited with increasing the percentage of children staying in school through the middle school years. Test scores there, however, did not paint a consistent picture of progress.

In terms of lessons learned, we identified several factors that were responsible for the difference in progress across sites. Much of the difference in progress could be traced to the difficulties of creating collaboratives themselves. Our data revealed that, in combination

with other factors, significant time and member interaction were necessary to build the levels of trust for collaboratives to function. Other factors that we found important to progress included the following:

- Inclusion of stakeholders integral to the local context and able to contribute to the collaborative's goals.
- The perceived legitimacy and authority of the lead organization.
- How collaborative members worked together.
- The characteristics of and action by the collaborative leadership.
- The fostering of the collaborative's legitimacy and reputation over time.
- The matching of goals to the local context.
- The adept use of data to inform theories of action and activities.
- The habit of continuously reflecting on work and the use of data to alter strategies as necessary.
- Early attention to a plan for institutionalizing systemic change, including strategies for sustaining the collaborative as well as sustaining and scaling-up the reform agenda.

While progress was made and some promising collaboratives have developed, none has reached the final outcomes that the funders desired. This, while disappointing, holds out some hope: that collaborative building, while a long and possibly arduous process, is one with some significant promise.

## **Observations on Improving Efforts at Collaborative Building**

Further lessons from this effort point to actions that, in hindsight, the foundation could have conceivably controlled and that might have contributed to a slow start for some sites. We suggest that future efforts at collaborative formation provide for:

- Stronger planning and coordination among foundation staff.

- Clearer communication of expectations at the start of the initiative.
- Technical assistance in the use of data for diagnosis of problems, strategic planning, development of activities, and feedback, especially during the planning stages.
- More routine and regular convenings and data-sharing aimed at providing sites with opportunities to learn about progress generally and their progress compared to others.

In answer to our last research question, we conclude from all of the above that indeed collaboratives can be deliberately formed with support by outside funders, such as the Ford Foundation. However, it is not a certain process. Adopting the above suggestions cannot guarantee strong progress but might reduce the barriers to strong collaborative formation, such as those faced by the sites in this study.