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Continuing Challenges and Potential for Collaborative Approaches to Education Reform

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Summary

Introduction

After years of grant making, Ford Foundation staff strongly believed that a school district central office could not reform itself; rather, they believed that reform could be promoted by relying on collaborations among organizations *outside* the district central office to sustain reform. This belief grew out of other foundations' experiences with collaborative efforts and the Ford Foundation's own previous efforts at collaborative formation from 1991 to 2000 in the Urban Partnership Program (UPP). Thus, the foundation wanted to promote an education reform strategy based on *local collaboration among community organizations*.

Based on these premises, the foundation began a new initiative in 1997–1998—the Collaborating for Education Reform Initiative (CERI)—by issuing grants to organizations in eight communities and providing the sites with funds, guidance, and technical assistance to develop collaboratives and carry out activities to improve teaching and learning. CERI's collaborative activities were directed at three possible community groups: the district, a feeder pattern or cluster of schools in a district, and the larger community, such as parents and voters.

In 1999, the foundation asked the RAND Corporation to formatively assess CERI to provide sites with feedback to improve their efforts, provide information to inform the foundation's decisions about support and funding to grantees, and document the challenges and possible successes of this approach to school improvement. During this period, RAND tracked the sites' progress toward CERI's goals and

reported on the first five years of the effort in 2004 (Bodilly, Chun, et al., 2004).

In 2004, the foundation reorganized CERI by dropping five of the original eight grantees and adding two new ones (for a total of five):

- the Alianza Metropolitana de San Juan Para La Educación in San Juan, Puerto Rico. This collaborative of several community-based organizations (CBOs) and a major university sought to promote student achievement by *scaling up a school improvement model developed under CERI 1 and demonstrated in Catano, Puerto Rico, and by creating the first education policy institute on the island.*
- Ask for More (AFM) in Jackson, Mississippi. This new collaborative was created in response to CERI 1 and led by a CBO called Parents for Public Schools (PPS) that chose to promote student achievement by *developing and demonstrating best practices in a specific feeder pattern and then scaling these up to the district.*
- Austin Interfaith (AI) in Austin, Texas. This CBO with ties to church congregations is dedicated to improving the lives of underserved minorities and proposed work with other CBOs to *build a teacher pipeline to provide high-quality teachers to hard-to-staff schools.*
- DC VOICE in Washington, D.C. This private, nonprofit organization was created during CERI 1 with the goal of *providing research-based advocacy for improving the supports offered in the district for improved teacher quality.*
- Grow Your Own (GYO) in Chicago, Illinois. This combination of CBOs led by the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) proposed to *develop a pipeline of high-quality teachers for hard-to-staff schools.*

This new incarnation of CERI went forward with these five grantees until 2009. With the restructuring, the foundation emphasized collaborative activities designed to affect district and state education policies but, unlike in CERI 1, offered very little technical assistance to the sites. The foundation expected the collaborative activities to result in changes in teaching and learning in the schools in the local school

districts. Specifically, the foundation had laid down a new set of goals for the five sites:

- Develop interorganizational linkages to the point of becoming a well-functioning collaborative and achieve financial independence.
- Develop and implement plans for improving the quality of teaching and learning.
- Develop and implement plans for systemic changes in policy to support improved teaching and learning.
- Develop a unique voice for underserved communities outside of the central office to air concerns about educational services.

Our Research Purpose and Approach

In 2004, the foundation asked RAND to track the sites' progress toward CERI's new goals and provide feedback to the foundation and the five grantees, documenting any lessons that others might learn from this effort. The research questions addressed from 2004 to 2009 were as follows:

1. Did grantees show progress toward desired outcomes?
 - a. Did they develop collaborative interorganizational linkages and find sustainable funding?
 - b. Did they choose reasonable interventions that might be expected to have impact?
 - c. Did they make progress in promoting teaching and learning, in promoting policy initiatives, and in acting as a "voice in the community"?
2. What lessons or promising practices resulted from the experiences of individual collaboratives or the group as a whole?
3. Did the foundation create financially sustainable collaboratives that can promote education improvement?

To help answer these research questions, we chose a replicated case-study approach, viewing each collaborative and its surrounding community as a single embedded case. We collected and analyzed data from multiple sources—including extensive field interviews; documents, such as newspaper articles and printed materials provided by collaborative members; and limited administrative data supplied by districts and schools. These data were organized thematically in relation to the research questions and synthesized to identify common and contrasting themes across the sites.

Findings

Here, we present the key findings in relation to the three research questions.

Research Question 1: Did Grantees Show Progress Toward Desired Outcomes?

Overall, we found that the second CERI effort (CERI 2) resulted in several functioning collaboratives but that those collaboratives' ability to meet their goals varied widely, something that emerges when we look more specifically at the three suboutcomes.

Did They Develop Collaborative Interorganizational Linkages and Find Sustainable Funding? At the end of the study in 2009, AI appeared to be largely self-sustaining and growing in terms of linking up to new groups to positively influence policy at the state and local levels in Texas and in terms of taking on new initiatives. Because of a very difficult state environment for nonprofits and an inability to gain traction in a very rapidly changing environment, the Alianza was functioning as a “network of CBOs” interested in reform rather than as a collaborative. The other three sites appeared to be in a state of “reflection and planning,” having accomplished some goals but being in the process of deciding “where to go from here.” Chicago’s GYO and Washington’s DC VOICE had some ability to sustain themselves, and each was actively pursuing an agenda with partners. The Jackson AFM

collaborative could not be sustained without external funding and had not identified such sources successfully.

Did They Choose Reasonable Interventions That Might Be Expected to Have Impact? The sites had difficulty choosing appropriate interventions that showed promise in having an impact on student performance and in being able to be scaled up. Although all five sites appropriately identified the needs of the schools in their communities, the interventions they selected to address the problems were often not clearly connected to a research literature showing proven results. Furthermore, many of the interventions, such as the development and implementation of a teacher pipeline targeting school and community members in poor inner-city areas, required resources and time beyond the period of the foundation grant to fully implement and show empirical results, which posed significant challenges, especially when they were asked to become self-sustaining in the recessionary market of 2008–2009.

Did They Make Progress in Promoting Teaching and Learning, in Promoting Policy Initiatives, and in Acting as a “Voice in the Community”? In terms of making progress toward promoting teaching and learning, only three of the sites—AI, the Alianza, and AFM—chose interventions that were somewhat designed to have a direct impact on teaching and learning. Usually, these interventions included professional development for leaders, teachers, counselors, and parents. One exception was AI’s effort to create a cluster of district schools, with greater flexibility and autonomy than other schools in the district. The sites also varied in their ability to implement their chosen interventions, and those interventions’ impact on teaching and learning also varied by site. By 2007, the Alianza stopped providing professional development to its districts, and respondents there noted that the Alianza’s long-term impact was insignificant. AI’s efforts to create an independent cluster of schools failed to be approved, but AFM was able to promote principal collaboration and articulate greater vertical alignment of district curriculum.

All the sites attempted to affect state or local policies to support quality teaching and learning. Two of the grantees—AI and AFM—showed significant progress in this area, especially in terms of chang-

ing school behaviors. Working with others (e.g., sister organizations, teacher unions, churches), AI influenced the state legislature to pass a bill that limited the percentage of time that schools were allowed to spend on testing students, thus directly affecting teacher behavior. Interventions implemented by AFM in a high school feeder pattern known as the Lanier cluster were adopted by the school district. Another intervention in AFM involved principal-to-principal collaboration within a feed pattern, which produced changes in how school leaders collaborated and shared information.

GYO ran a grassroots organizing campaign, successfully ensuring the passage of an Illinois initiative to develop and implement a teacher pipeline. However, this policy's effectiveness at improving student outcomes depended on many factors, including the retention rate of teacher candidates and the length of time to their graduation and placement in Chicago schools. At the time of our last visit, in 2009, the teacher pipeline's impact on teaching and learning was not promising. None of the GYO candidates had graduated and started teaching in Chicago public schools. In fact, many were still taking classes at the community college level.

DC VOICE's efforts to affect policy diminished over time because of the mayoral takeover of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) in 2007. Finally, the Alianza had not established a viable, well-functioning policy institute, which was a major goal of its grant.

When we look at the collaboratives becoming a voice for the underserved and underrepresented, only AI became a strong voice in education reform at both the local and state levels through its partnership with other strong organizations and community mobilizing efforts. Two other sites made progress, but on a lesser scale. DC VOICE developed and engaged leaders from underserved populations in educational issues through mobilizing activities within the District of Columbia. AFM became the voice of the community on specific issues pertaining to collaborative approaches.

Research Question 2: What Lessons or Promising Practices Resulted from the Experiences of Individual Collaboratives or the Group as a Whole?

Looking across the sites, we identified several themes pertaining to building and sustaining collaboratives; promoting quality teaching, learning, and policy initiatives; and developing the voice of reform.

The study found that the sites' abilities to develop and sustain strong collaboratives were facilitated by several factors, including strong leadership that could promote shared goals among the members, a positive funding environment, and the ability to produce information, funding, and progress that were valuable to members and stakeholders. Several factors hindered collaborative development and sustainment, the most crucial of which was a severe change in the financial environment.

Furthermore, collaboratives that were able to influence teaching and learning or educational policies were those that had amiable relationships with the central office or strong stakeholder support (or both). Other factors identified as critical for promoting teaching and learning include the adoption of "reasonable" interventions that were proven to be effective and aligned with identified educational goals and contextual needs, selection of interventions aligned with collaborative expertise, continuous monitoring of the performance of interventions, and the use of collaborative approaches for implementing interventions.

Regarding the development of constituency voice, factors the study identified as important include collaboratives' consistency of and adherence to their mission over time to increase public confidence in their work, and collaboratives' involvement of a broad segment of the community that has legitimacy and power in the education policy arena.

Research Question 3: Did the Foundation Create Financially Sustainable Collaboratives That Can Promote Education Improvement?

In answer to the last research question, we conclude that collaboratives can be deliberately formed with support by outside funders, such as the Ford Foundation. However, it is not a straightforward process, and

the financial sustainability of the grantees' initiatives remained highly uncertain in the recessionary environment.

Lessons from this effort point to actions that foundations and collaboratives might take to ensure a more-successful effort, especially in uncertain environments. Specifically, we suggest that future efforts at collaborative formation promote the following actions:

- More-clearly communicate expectations at the start of the initiative and more-carefully consider the alignment between goals, interventions, available resources, and the time frame of the initiative.
- Make use of data to diagnose problems, conduct strategic planning, develop activities, and provide feedback, especially during the planning stages.
- Conduct more-routine and regular meetings and promote data sharing across sites aimed at providing opportunities to learn about progress in general and comparative progress.
- Pay attention early on to future fundraising by the collaboratives, and provide foundation supports for these efforts.
- Foster the development of a foundation collaborative process and the adoption of such processes by collaborative leaders.

Adopting these suggestions cannot guarantee strong progress, but doing so might enable stronger collaborative formation.