

TIME TO GET IT
RIGHT
A STRATEGY
FOR URBAN EDUCATION

Based on the KCRT report created by
The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change



EXPANDING CHARITABLE HORIZONS

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EXPANDING CHARITABLE HORIZONS

Education and employment are the pivotal systems that can transform lives, communities and cities. As the report commissioned by the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation, *“Time to Get It Right – A Strategy for Higher Education in Kansas City”* put forth:

[Kansas City] has a long, dismal history of lack of opportunity for its African-American citizens, most of who are stuck in the blighted urban core. The same lack of educational opportunity is spreading to Kansas City’s Latino population. Together these groups are one-third of the city, and they are growing faster than other groups. Kansas City will not be a great city for anyone if the city continues to fail its African-American and Latino populations. The only way to address this problem is by providing educational opportunity. This is Kansas City’s—and America’s—greatest challenge.

In response to this call for action, the Community Foundation convened a Kansas City Roundtable on Access and Opportunity (KCRT) of civic, education and community leaders. The KCRT provided community input to support the development, implementation and monitoring of a quality urban education pipeline from early education to college readiness that will prepare individuals to be successful in the global knowledge economy. As the *“Time to Get it Right”* report stated, the KCRT affirmed that

academic excellence must be achieved throughout the entire region. However, the KCRT also strongly suggested a focus on the two largest urban districts (Kansas City, Mo., and Kansas City, Kan.).

The Community Foundation invited the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change to help lead the discussion for the KCRT because of its experience in tying efforts to achieve the goal of improved social and community outcomes with strategies to promote racial equity. The KCRT began with in-depth telephone interviews with key education, business and civic leaders. That initial group was then expanded to include teacher, parent, congregation and other representation. This large group of nearly 80 stakeholders worked over a two-day meeting in June 2006 to contribute ideas to a strong urban education strategy.

All parties recognized that no single consultant, superintendent, curriculum or program can provide a quick fix because there are no quick fixes. There are exciting innovations and highly effective ways of supporting families, educating children and preparing a workforce. But in order for such innovations and practices to be conceived and take root, long-term commitments of creativity, hope and elbow grease will be required. As noted in the *“Time to Get It Right”* report, this will require an unprecedented level of civic leadership.

The result of this effort is not so much a comprehensive plan, but a framework with which to construct strategies and tactics to strengthen urban education.

The day-to-day realities in Kansas City require that those who care about urban education be responsive and nimble. Some issues raised by the KCRT received swift attention, while others require further strategy development and possibly additional resources and forms of expertise.

This document highlights only some of the recommendations emerging from this first stage of work by the KCRT. The final and full report of the KCRT process produced by the Aspen Institute will be available online at www.gkccf.org.

Next Steps

The staff of the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change devised a set of general recommendations for supporting the work of urban education in Kansas City. These recommendations, just a few of which appear here, are based on the Aspen Institute Roundtable’s expertise in inner-city revitalization and on the analysis of interviews conducted with the KCRT’s planning group, as well as discussions and materials produced during the June 2006 meeting.

- **The Community Foundation must focus on urban education for the long haul.** The formation of the KCRT itself was the first step in the process of building the kind of civic capacity needed to make lasting improvements to the Pre-K to post-graduate educational pipeline. The KCRT was an important first step, bringing

together a committed, creative and ambitious group that can form the core of any future effort. The Community Foundation is uniquely positioned to convene local and national resources to amplify the voices and activities of those passionate about education. However, it is currently perceived by some as an elitist organization and it must take the necessary steps to be widely recognized as a champion of community life for *all* Kansas Citians.

- **Create a sustainable planning, implementation and evaluation framework for the work undertaken by the KCRT** in partnership with national thought leaders, Kansas City area colleges and universities, education leaders and teachers, and students. Designing a research and evaluation framework to keep track of the urban education pipeline will help ensure the right data are collected and analyzed for maximum educational reform. The following will support progress and innovation:
 - Provide an action-oriented framework for carrying out the suggestions put forth by KCRT participants, setting realistic goals related to the suggestions and keeping track of their progress;
 - Include student participants in ways that will expose them to real learning opportunities, methods for structuring thinking and research, contact with community leaders, and exposure to essential community processes;
 - Include university resources in a mutually beneficial way; and
 - Contribute to the national-level

discourse, thinking and strategies for improving education and employment outcomes.

- **Establish a racial equity monitoring and review process** that provides national and local review and input for all racial equity indicators, even those indicators beyond the education pipeline (housing, neighborhood, health, etc.). The purpose is to ensure that urban education works to address inequity. There are several efforts in Kansas City that could support this process, which must be broad-based across racial and ethnic lines and accepted as a trusted monitor of Kansas City's racial equity progress.

The Aspen Institute has recommended that the Community Foundation develop a framework for supporting these recommendations with the aim of providing a safe and productive space for those working to improve urban education to come together to strategize and keep track of progress.

Above all, the work in urban education must not be constrained by convention.



Desired Outcomes and Recommendations from KCRT Participants

The KCRT meeting held in June 2006 produced more than 100 desired outcomes and recommendations for improving the Pre-K to post-graduate pipeline in Kansas City. The final report organizes them into six categories. Each has an overall desired outcome that captures the vision and a number of component recommendations for reaching the outcome.

The overarching goal for all the work can be expressed in the following way:

Kansas City is an excellent place to live and to raise children for all people. Education and employment opportunities in Kansas City are among the best in the world, and are based on ideals of equity, individual well-being, fairness and community.

This goal can be accomplished if the community embraces the following principles that surfaced at the KCRT:

- **Connect, communicate and collaborate across institutions for a strong pipeline.** The complete education-to-employment pipeline in Kansas City is strong, dynamic and effective. All institutions along the education pipeline have the foundational capacities and will to connect with all other points along the pipeline in support of Kansas City students and workers. There is a comprehensive and inclusive structure for dialogue between the education, labor, business and civic communities in Kansas City that allows them to communicate, strategize and act together on a regular basis.
- **Build a culture of supportiveness and high expectations.** Quality education for all people is upheld as a social priority in Kansas City. The entire community—families, schools, congregations, employers, community organizations and all others—works to promote and support education as a high priority cultural value in Kansas City.
- **Provide students with healthy environments in which to grow, learn and flourish.** All students at every point along the education to employment pipeline in Kansas City have access to a wide range of excellent educational opportunities. Students in Kansas City have positive attitudes about school and education and rarely, if ever, drop out of school. Students feel safe and are encouraged to tap into their individual creativity and are provided with the supports they need to develop their personal well-being and the well-being of their communities.
- **Support quality teachers and faculty.** Quality teachers/instructors are necessary at every stage of the pipeline. Teachers in Kansas City are valued professionals whose compensation and tenure is commensurate with their individual outcomes as they relate to preparing children to be self-fulfilled, contributing members of their communities. High quality professional development opportunities are clearly defined and are consistently available to all teachers.
- **Facilitate and support positive adult involvement.** Parents, grandparents and mentors in Kansas City understand their role and responsibility in student learning and know how to access resources that promote the optimal development of children. A positive adult is always included as part of the equation—the team—involved in promoting the well-being of children and achievement of excellence in education.
- **Support evaluation and data collection for learning and growth.** The education to employment pipeline in Kansas City is a dynamic system in which all Kansas Citians have a role to play. All information and data are of high quality and are accessible to all. Kansas City has a culture of constant evaluation of its educational

and employment outcomes that allow decision-makers at every level—from superintendents to principals to CEOs to voters—to make decisions that will be of maximum benefit to individuals and to the community at large.

There is recognition that many of the recommendations put forth by the participants at the June 2006 meeting are already in place in Kansas City—whether in full or in part. There is also recognition that there are effective schools, positive initiatives and quality programs operating in Kansas City right now but that they need to be supported and strengthened so that they can reach a critical mass of children and families required to create the kind of change needed to get Kansas City communities on an upward track.

The purpose of the KCRT is not to be yet another player on a crowded but too often disjointed field of play. Instead, the Kansas City Roundtable on Access and Opportunity is intended as a catalytic tool for coming together to strategize, act and amplify the voices of those who care deeply and act in the cause of education and community life in Kansas City. Following is a selection of the more specific recommendations that came from the participants of the June 2006 meeting. This selection is also reflective of work that has taken place between June and November of 2006—some of which, we are happy to report, was a direct outgrowth of the June KCRT convening. The Community Foundation looks forward to continued community dialogue focusing now on the specifics of the next phase of this work.

Early Childhood Education

- Support the KCMSD and KCKSD in their ongoing work with early childhood programs to establish and monitor “kindergarten readiness” standards.
- Sustain and increase support for the Quality Rating System of the Metropolitan Council on Early Learning to drive quality and improvement in early education.
- Support the efforts of the State of Kansas to establish Universal Voluntary Pre-K and expanded access of programs for children birth to age three; create a coalition of statewide partners to drive a similar effort in the state of Missouri.
- Support activities of public libraries, book stores, pediatricians and other outreach efforts that encourage early literacy. Facilitate increased funding for initiatives that provide free books and educational outings (museums, botanical gardens, nature centers, theaters, etc.) to low and moderate income families.
- Establish early-learning professional standards and oversight that ensures professionals are appropriately credentialed and compensated according to skill level.
- Organize early learning professionals, parents and civic leaders to lobby for policies and measures that boost early-learning quality, affordability and accessibility.

- Increase support for efforts that make access to standards and educational information and resources available to home and independently managed daycare providers such as church-based centers.
- Establish a coalition of foundations and corporations to help support college-bound scholarships specifically for high-school students interested in pursuing early learning careers within Kansas City.

K-12 Education

- Support the collaborative efforts underway between local higher education institutions and urban school districts working to establish and monitor K-12 curricula and “college readiness” standards.
- Support regular meetings of district and teachers’ union leadership to forecast trends and needs and plan for them collectively.
- Work with principals and all other relevant partners to establish a solid and sustainable balance of principal accountability, principal control (hiring, curriculum, etc.), and district support.
- Work with all relevant partners to establish a fair, high-caliber compensation and tenure structure that holds teachers accountable to the highest standards and supports them in raising student outcomes.

- Work with relevant partners to ensure that state academic standards mirror or surpass the highest in the nation; align curricula with state standards which are also established and monitored.
- Support drop-out prevention strategies that begin with 9th graders.
- Increase the recommended 2.5 GPA requirement for new teachers to 3.0.
- Begin growing the urban educator field earlier by offering academic career themes in high schools that focus on the field of education.
- Support educator externships as a component of teacher development.
- Establish standards and measures for outcomes-based professional development and make participation a requirement of educators and administrators at all levels.
- Ensure that each school building has a professional dedicated to parental involvement and that their goals and responsibilities are clearly defined yet flexible enough to meet the needs of that building’s parent community.
- Increase philanthropic support directly to districts to fill gaps not reachable by existing funds (i.e.: increase giving to the existing Kansas City, Missouri School District’s Excellence Fund; establish a similar effort for Kansas City, Kansas School District)

Out-of-School Time

- Support the efforts of school district leaders and out-of-school time providers in promoting academic achievement. Consider aligning curricula with out-of-school program content.
- Implement a system similar to the Quality Rating System for early learning programs that rates the quality of out-of-school programs.
- Support and expand efforts that make high-quality tutoring highly accessible in neighborhoods (i.e.: community learning and tutoring centers, churches, community centers, libraries, etc.).
- Provide students with real-life learning experiences, for example, out-of-school-time programs that feature job shadowing opportunities.

College / Post-Secondary

Specific recommendations to strengthen higher education institutions were provided in *“Time to Get it Right – A Strategy for Higher Education.”* The KCRT supported those recommendations and offered the additional thoughts below to support the educational pipeline.

- Establish partnerships between higher education institutions and school districts that provide students and families with early awareness about college preparation.

- Support increased excellence and accountability in the institutions that train professionals in the field of urban education.
- Pursue policy changes and engage the business community to reduce the financial burden on students and families. Increase scholarships and employer reimbursements to ensure that cost is not a deterrent for a student wanting to pursue higher education.
- Support workforce development programs that adequately educate individuals for careers and professional advancements within growing sectors of the regional and global economy. These programs should be tied to post-secondary certification/degrees.
- Sustain support for and promote excellence within the Institute for Urban Education at UMKC.
- Establish criteria for culturally healthy campuses and monitor progress made with regard to the cultural climate for students and employees.

Throughout the Education Pipeline

- Enhance and expand programs that provide parental involvement education, training and support. Help to ensure that parents at all stages have access to and know about a wide range of family, education, health, job training and parenting support services.

- Educators are adequately credentialed to be effective at teaching to the established standards for which they are assigned.
- Promote and expand the current “211” system to serve as a hotline for education-related resources.
- Increase the aptitude of educators and administrators for communicating and working productively with all consumers and constituents of public education.
- Recognize superior educator outcomes performance in a broad and public manner.
- Work with media to increase awareness and to publicize and celebrate success at each stage of the education pipeline.

KCRT meeting participants also agreed that **awareness of the legacies of racism and consistent efforts to promote and act with equity and fairness** is an essential component of creating a new and better Kansas City.



How will Kansas City get the work done?

The scope of the work, the number of recommendations, and the range of participants needed to achieve the goals may seem overwhelming at first blush. While there is no doubt that this is an ambitious undertaking, reviewing and acting on the recommendations need not be overly complicated.

The work of the KCRT participants helped to craft norms for meetings and initiative generation. The full report highlights how this process can be used for specific initiatives underway in Kansas City. Although this approach seems evident, it is not happening.

The following are recommendations for approaching meeting and initiative planning to facilitate trusting relationships that tighten the educational pipeline, increase linkages and reduce duplication or overlap.

- **Take Initiative for Change:** We may know the problem, but what is the solution? Actions can range from convening a meeting of the major actors in the particular field of education, while others could include public policy changes, media relations or, even more specialized undertakings, like curriculum alignment.
- **Ask Who Needs to Be at the Table:** Meetings are often held in Kansas City without thought as to the potential linkages and benefits of collaboration.

Further, all are encouraged to include students as active participants in nearly every category of action.

- **Make a Racial Equity Checklist:** All are encouraged to consistently take into consideration the need to build awareness of structural racism, as well as the importance of creating strategies that build racial equity.
- **Gather Information:** It is important to have a ‘head start’ on thinking about all of the different elements that need to be understood, at least in part, in order to embark on concrete action. In many cases this means acquiring or taking an inventory of existing work in a particular area. Hopefully those who have pertinent information and data on the education pipeline will willingly share their information resources. While this may seem intimidating, it should not be difficult, especially since much of the information already exists and the real task is to identify and access it.
- **Establish the Timeline:** Establish clear expectations on how long the goals will take at the beginning of the planning.
- **Determine the Cost:** Economic realities shouldn’t limit possibilities, but need to be taken into account. The best laid plans will sit on the shelf if there is no clear revenue mechanism to make them a reality.



In Summary

Like every other major city in America, Kansas City has lived through economic and production shifts, as well as racial tensions and upheavals. Located in one of the wealthiest regions in America, Kansas City has been, for some, a profitable place to be. But Kansas City’s wealth has never been equitably distributed and, in fact, the wealth of some has come at high cost to others. One of the most pernicious aspects of Kansas City’s inequity is that it has always sorted along racial lines. Communities have not emerged so well from the legacy of this racial division, the effects of which are most apparent in the continued segregation of Kansas City’s neighborhoods and key opportunity institutions, notably the public schools.

Why has Kansas City not been able to build strong stable communities in which all our children—regardless of racial,

ethnic or economic backgrounds—are well-educated, enjoy gainful careers, and can contribute to their communities? Foremost among the complex of reasons is the historical interrelationship between education, race and class in America. Virtually anywhere in this country, if a community wants to fix education it must take on race and class, and if a community wants to address racial and class disparities it must take on education.

While this fact of American life has been widely recognized by scholars from all points of the political spectrum, and while many within the broader public know this intuitively, it is nevertheless very difficult to reach a consensus on what should be done. Some of the dynamics of the meetings of the KCRT itself pointed to the high degree of difficulty, especially as people tried to communicate across long-running racial divides. Understandably, old suspicions, frustrations, and misunderstandings were present. But, in what will hopefully be the fighting spirit of Kansas City, the group at that meeting resolved to confront these challenges and difficulties head-on.

The challenges associated with undoing racial disparities are daunting. The intertwined nature of race and education can be emotionally painful for those with the courage to take it on, and engaging in any activity around race and education carries with it the responsibility to develop a respectful process that works through all obstacles with authenticity. Finding a place to begin

can seem overwhelming, since neither “education” nor “race” can be viewed and addressed from narrow institutional perspectives. The surrounding context of laws, historical precedent, policies, practices, cultures and “common sense” animate these areas. Each must receive careful attention since it is this broader social context that keeps failing public education and employment systems alive and suppresses better visions from emerging.

Why shouldn’t Kansas City be a place renowned for its excellent public education system where all children can excel and reach their full potential? Why shouldn’t Kansas City’s neighborhoods be shining examples of safe, supportive and healthy communities where children and families thrive? We know this does not describe the Kansas City of today. However, it can describe the Kansas City of tomorrow!