

## EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: September 30, 2008

Published in Print: October 1, 2008

### COMMENTARY

## Urban Districts and National Foundations: Making the Marriage Work

By Paul Goren & Judy Wurtzel

A couple meets, marries, and has children. Then common goals and values turn to finger-pointing and divorce. Sadly, this too-common story is an apt metaphor for relationships between urban school districts and major national foundations that support public education. Early enthusiasm often turns to disappointment. In fact, several major foundations have stopped funding K-12 public education, disappointed with their grantmaking's limited impact.

Believing a healthy partnership between urban districts and national foundations is critical, the [Aspen Institute Education and Society Program](#) and the [Spencer Foundation](#) convened approximately 20 urban

superintendents and senior foundation program officers to talk about how they might better collaborate. Participants identified five major challenges to such partnerships and offered some suggestions about how to address them. No district or foundation (including the Spencer Foundation, where one of the authors works) is immune from the following:

**It's hard to be honest.** Honesty is the first challenge. Foundations validate and fund superintendents' agendas, giving district leaders credibility and leverage with important constituencies. Not surprisingly, few superintendents will push back or raise warning signs. In addition, district leaders are often skeptical about national foundations' steadfastness during transition or turmoil, which are virtually inevitable in urban school districts. Adding to this, foundation program officers can come and go. Each new program officer has new questions and requirements and often limited understanding of the history of the work.

In foundations, there is similar concern about districts' staying the course, especially when superintendents and school boards turn over constantly. Moreover, while foundations provide the only truly discretionary dollars available for urban schools, they generally do not fund an initiative forever, seeking instead a serious effort to transfer the work to district resources over time.

These factors often produce a fundamental lack of trust that makes honest conversation

[← Back to Story](#)

*From Edweek Press*

**CREATING  
THE CAPACITY  
FOR CHANGE**

**ONLY \$14.95!**

[CLICK HERE](#)



Learn more about America's shifting education policy and the current state of K-12 education by reading "Creating the Capacity for Change"

about the design and progress of reforms difficult. In general, both sides bite their tongues.

**Ownership is unclear and contested.** A second challenge is the tension over who owns the reforms. National foundations often arrive with their own agendas and need to “brand” their multidistrict initiatives. To secure funding, districts may surrender their own aspirations to the foundations’. Or, lacking a strong agenda, they adopt the foundation’s to get the funding. Either way, the initiative can remain the foundation’s and never gain traction in the district.

On the other hand, districts may not be open to agendas introduced by foundations, expressing a parochial sense that any initiative must be produced in the district, solely by district staff members, with all credit going to district leaders. The challenge of ownership is intensified by the fact that large districts must often balance and reconcile the goals and frameworks of multiple foundations that rarely speak to one another or coordinate their work.

Generally, the primary relationship is between the foundation and the district superintendent, who is often a roving leader. Thus, ensuring ownership by the central-office staff, the school board, and the community is an additional challenge. Looking specifically at community ownership, it’s notable that foundations tend to support districts more than community capacity for change, even though community leaders are likely to remain long after the superintendent and the school board turn over.

**Culture, race, class—unspoken but not unnoticed.** Differences in culture, race, class, and experience between foundation personnel, central-office staff members, and students and their families are an often-unacknowledged challenge to effective partnerships. Foundations are largely funded, run, and staffed by elites who do not reflect the demographics of the schools they are trying to reform. Often lacking practical and cultural experience in local communities and operating with workplace cultures very different from school districts’, foundation staff members and their designated intermediaries may be seen as out-of touch interlopers.

**Limited capacity.** Districts and foundations often agree to highly ambitious reforms, promising to improve student outcomes in a manner or at a scale rarely before accomplished in urban schools. Too often, however, both partners have limited capacity to implement—or even to determine the appropriateness of—the chosen reforms.

When a new superintendent arrives, for example, funders support the foundations’ areas of interest. But success is unlikely if the new superintendent says yes before he or she is able to realistically assess the fit between the district’s and the foundation’s agenda, implementation capacity, and timelines. Moreover, while foundations are often thought to have significant capacity, program officers typically manage multiple initiatives in numerous locations simultaneously, limiting time and attention in any one setting.

**No long-term learning agenda.** A fifth challenge is the paucity of systematic efforts to learn from mistakes. No district or foundation has all the necessary knowledge, yet the typical norms oppose making learning central and reciprocal. Foundations, often concerned

with self-preservation, brand identification, and leverage, can be risk-averse and ambivalent about learning from mistakes. Districts likewise have little interest or ability to flag implementation weaknesses or examine failures. Grant modifications based on implementation experience are often considered failures rather than continuous learning. Moreover, once an initiative has run its course and new leaders arrive on the scene, they may label prior initiatives “failures” even if they had very successful aspects that should be studied and shared. As a result, there is little learning from what did and did not work to inform the next effort.

---

Given these five challenges, how might we strengthen foundation-district partnerships? A few lessons emerge.

First, the initial engagement period, in which the foundation and the district determine whether there is a match, is critical. At these early stages, both sides must be frank about their goals, their readiness and capacity, their predictions of achievable progress, and the potential risks ahead. Both should be prepared to push, and push back, to construct together an agreed-upon agenda—or to decide that the match is not to be.

Second, long-term sustainability depends on district ownership of reforms. Reforms must meet real district needs, be central to the district’s goals and strategies, and be integrated concretely into district operations, rather than simply being an add-on. Importantly, here the term “district” is not defined solely as “superintendent,” but also includes school board, district staff, families, and the community. Local foundations and intermediaries often can play an important bridging role to anchor reforms in the community’s concerns and values.

Third, race, class, and experience are often the “elephant in the room.” These attributes of the people who govern, lead, and staff foundations, districts, and other partners might go unspoken, but they do not go unnoticed. Foundations can make a difference by consistently posing questions that make possible open conversations about these issues and their impact on the work. They also can work to diversify the experience and backgrounds of their boards and staffs, and fund more organizations that are run and staffed by people who represent the communities being served.

Finally, effective reform requires organized and systematic methods for foundations and districts to learn from doing. Deliberate and public efforts to analyze failures can both tease out lessons and embolden others to critically assess their work and avert mistakes in the making. Similarly, ongoing initiatives can be designed to incorporate formative evaluations and midcourse reviews to be used explicitly for continuous improvement, rather than as exercises in “gotcha.”

This work will require a willingness on the part of both foundation and district to recognize that attaining the desired results will take a long-term commitment to traversing a rocky pathway, and with an ability to adapt over time.

---

*Paul Goren is the senior vice president of the Spencer Foundation, in Chicago. Judy Wurtzel is*

*the co-director of the Aspen Institute Education and Society Program, in New York City.*

Vol. 28, Issue 06, Pages 28-29