



Urban School Districts and National Foundations: Making the Marriage Work

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This white paper is based on discussions held at a June 2007 session of the Aspen Urban Superintendents Network. Since 2000, the Aspen Education and Society Program has supported superintendents of some of the nation's largest urban districts in sharing promising reform strategies and considering lessons from each others' efforts.

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Urban School Districts and National Foundations: Making the Marriage Work

A man and woman meet. Sparks fly. They are attracted by their seemingly common values and goals. Each has traits the other values. After a short courtship, they marry and have children. Then, the difficulties start: differences about the children's education, arguments about how much to spend and save, troublesome in-laws, job transfers. Shared goals, communication and cooperation turn to disillusionment, finger pointing and then divorce.

Sadly, this too common story of American marriages is an apt metaphor for the relationships between urban school districts and the major national foundations that support public education: early enthusiasm, joint initiatives, unforeseen differences and difficulties, and then divorce, leaving disappointment on both sides. The relationship between school districts and foundations is often troubled. In fact, over the past few years, several major foundations have stopped funding K-12 public education in part because of the perception that their grant-making has had limited impact.

Believing that a healthy partnership between urban districts and national foundations is a critical ingredient to the development and realization of urban education reforms, the Aspen Institute Program on Education and Society and the Spencer Foundation brought together approximately 10 superintendents of urban school districts and an equal number of senior program officers from major national foundations with sizable investments in urban education. The purpose was to foster frank conversation about district-foundation relations and how these partners might work better together to improve outcomes for students.

The day-long conversation identified a handful of major issues that we believe merit sharing with a larger audience. No district or foundation – including the Spencer Foundation where one of the authors works – is immune from them. Participants pointed to five major challenges to effective district-foundation partnerships:

1. **It's hard to be honest** — both foundations and districts have incentives to over promise, to gloss over potential obstacles, and later to ignore problems;
2. **Ownership is unclear and contested** — foundations, districts and communities all have an interest and a claim;
3. **Culture, race, class go unspoken but not unnoticed** — differences in culture, race, class and experience among foundations, central office staff, and students and their families permeate the work;
4. **District and foundation capacity is limited** – failing to effectively evaluate readiness and capacity at the outset can doom an enterprise; and
5. **Long-term learning agenda is lacking** – neither districts nor foundations are proficient at continuous learning.

Urban School Districts and National Foundations

Finally, cutting across all these themes was the need to couple long-term commitments and realistic goals with high expectations for measurable outcomes in the face of the enormous complexity of district reform.

To pick up the first and last themes in the list above, it is in the spirit of honest conversations and continuous learning that we share this white paper. Our hope is that discussion of these five challenges can inform and support the difficult and important work done by urban school districts and by foundations investing in them and their communities.

1. It is hard to be honest

Honesty is the first challenge. Both foundations and districts have deep incentives to over promise, to gloss over potential obstacles, and then to ignore problems – or quickly walk away from them. Unrealistic ambition at the front-end causes problems later on. Districts could push foundations to be more realistic, and vice versa; yet, they do not. There are many reasons why it is difficult for foundations and districts to have honest conversations about program design, challenges, and expectations of success.

Most districts feel that the foundations hold most of the power in their negotiations. While the work of reform must be done through school districts, and while district budgets dwarf those of foundations, foundation funding is often the only truly discretionary funding available to allow districts to take risks and try new approaches. Foundations validate and fund superintendents' agendas, giving district leaders credibility and leverage with important constituencies. Not surprisingly, few superintendents will jeopardize foundation grants by pushing back or raising warning signs. There are unspoken pressures to report successes to school boards or foundation trustees that stand in the way of honest dialogue.

Moreover, both sides often have unspoken concerns about the commitment and longevity of the partnership effort. District leaders are often skeptical about national foundations' steadfastness to reforms in times of transition or turmoil, which are virtually inevitable given the political nature of urban school reform. Because districts often believe that foundations' loyalty to the reforms is shallow and that foundations are uncomfortable with the political nature and "messiness" of the work, they fear foundations will disinvest when quick, clear and measurable success seems unlikely or public controversy ensues. Finally, foundation program officers come and go. Each new program officer arrives with new questions and requirements, often without deep understanding of the work between the district and the foundation that has gone before.

Foundations for their part worry whether districts will stay the course on reform initiatives, especially when superintendents and elected Boards of Education turn over constantly. Long-term investments are difficult to sustain in the short-term world of urban school boards. Moreover, while foundation resources tend to be the only truly discretionary dollars available for urban school leaders, foundation officials want more significant reallocation of district funds to match the foundation's initial investment and a serious effort to transfer the work to district resources over time so the effort can continue when the grant period is ended. Although they acknowledge that district discretionary dollars are very limited, foundation officials still wonder why school leaders wait to devote budget to successful reforms until the foundations stop supporting them.

Urban School Districts and National Foundations

Foundations and districts often doubt each other's capacity to determine what needs to be -- and can be -- accomplished. Foundations may believe that districts do not prioritize. As school systems face numerous challenges and answer to multiple stakeholders, foundation officers worry that school districts have too many agenda items and do not focus on three to five top priorities. Without specifying these "must-do" items, superintendents and the districts they lead try to do everything at the highest level of priority and get lost in the attempt. Conversely, districts may believe that foundations lack the practical experience and political and cultural background to understand the work on the ground, with all the competing priorities.

These differences arise in part because foundations and districts operate in quite different contexts in regard to transparency, public accountability, and time horizons. Districts are publicly accountable for their failures and state test results make those failures transparent to the public. They operate under intense, regular short-term accountability, including weekly or monthly public board meetings, continual media coverage and community demands. Foundations often prefer to operate behind the scenes. They are accountable only to their boards, which meet in private and want to see a measurable return on investment; program officers are more accountable for the success of their grants than for the success of the schools. Some foundations also have a somewhat longer time horizon for change than do school district leaders – particularly local foundations that are grounded in a particular community.

The lack of trust arising from these differences can make productive conversation about the design and progress of reforms very difficult. In general, both sides bite their tongues – and fail to say things that need to be said.

2. Ownership of reforms is unclear and contested

A second challenge to effective partnerships is the tension over who owns – and should own – the reforms. To have long-term impact, reforms must be "owned" by the district: they must address a deeply felt district/community need, be central to the districts' goals and strategies, and be embedded into district operations rather than an "add-on." The ownership tension can play out between national foundations and a district, between a superintendent and the district as a whole, and between a district and the community. This section looks at each of these in turn as well as the role that local foundations and intermediaries can play in building bridges.

National foundation vs. district

Does the foundation come with a framework the district must work within? Does the district have its own reform strategy and accept funding only from foundations whose agenda aligns with theirs or are willing to support the district's plans? Are reforms co-designed? Can they be co-designed and co-funded?

Urban School Districts and National Foundations

Most participants on both sides agree that to have long-term impact, reforms must be “owned” by the district. Ownership best comes through a process where the reform initiatives are co-designed by the districts and their foundation partners, rather than provided by the foundation to be executed by the district or developed by the district with no thoughtful outside advice. Still, the funder/funded dynamic make honest negotiation about ownership difficult. National foundations want to “brand” their multi-district initiatives. And, given the political nature of the work, superintendents often want to take sole credit for reforms under their watch.

Districts are uncomfortable challenging the agenda a foundation brings to them. To secure funding, districts at times submit their own agendas and aspirations to the will of foundations. Or, they may not have a strong agenda, and adopt the foundation’s agenda to get the funding without deeply “owning it” and integrating it into their overall work. Either way, the initiative can remain the “foundation initiative” and fail to get traction in the school system. On the other hand, districts may not embrace agendas introduced by foundations (or anyone else), expressing a parochial sense that any initiative must be produced in the district solely by district staff, with all credit going to district leaders.

The challenge of honest conversations about ownership is intensified by the fact that large districts must often balance and reconcile the goals and frameworks of multiple foundations (local and national) that rarely speak to each other or coordinate their work while requiring districts to collaborate with multiple partners. Superintendents are faced with the time-consuming and sometimes arduous task of managing relationships with multiple foundations and ensuring that different grants from different foundations for different purposes with different theories of action effectively support a coherent district strategy.

Participants at the Aspen-Spencer meeting differed about how hard foundations should push grantees in shaping and implementing reforms. Some view aggressive advocacy of a particular theory of change, specific implementation strategies and tough accountability for results as essential responsibilities of foundation program officers that generally lead to better outcomes. In this view, the program officer must manage conflict and tension -- not avoid it -- and attempt to get districts to the point where they have developed “ownership” over strategies that might be different than their original plans. Others view this approach as unproductive or overreaching.

Nevertheless, all participants admired the few superintendents who had pushed their foundation partners to collaborate. When all the major foundations working in a district sit together with the district leadership to think through their initiatives together, foundations see the need for aligning their own expectations and demands.

Finally, some of the school system leaders wished foundations would step out front on agendas districts wanted to pursue but could not. For instance, foundations may be better able than district leadership to pursue governance changes. The bottom line is that clarity and honesty about goals, capacity, and ownership during the initial engagement between foundation and district is critical to long-term success.

Urban School Districts and National Foundations

Superintendent vs. district vs. community

Often, in funding education reforms, the primary relationship is between the foundation and the superintendent (who is often a roving leader not from the community). In their efforts to promote education improvements, how should foundations consider the role of the central office? Of the school board? Of the larger community?

Central offices: Given the rapid turnover in superintendents, unless a wide swath of central office staff is deeply engaged and knowledgeable about the funded reforms, the work will likely stall out the moment the superintendent leaves.

Boards: Boards pose a large and often-overlooked challenge. Foundations for the most part pay scant attention to building the capacity, skills and knowledge of elected and appointed board members. Foundations may have more ability and opportunity to influence how school boards function and are structured than they currently put to use – both in general and in regard to specific reforms.

Community: Schools serve their communities, yet current foundation funding tends to support systems and the educators working in systems without as much focus on building community capacity for change. Communities will resist the work if they do not have meaningful opportunity for input and validation. Moreover, as district, political and foundation leadership turns over, community leadership often remains in place. Building civic capacity for reform is key to longevity. Foundations can play a productive role by building bridges between those with the technical capacity for school reforms and community leaders with a personal stake in the reform.

Role of local foundations and intermediaries

Local foundations and intermediary organizations such as local public education funds or technical assistance providers can play an important role in developing bridges between school districts and other local players (e.g. parents and local community, elite and business community, political leaders) that have a stake and should have a voice in reforms.

Local foundations and intermediaries can also mediate between national foundations and school districts. Grounded in the local context, they can offer “translation services” to national foundations, helping them understand the local terrain and the relation of their national agendas to the districts’ needs and interests. Likewise, they can help districts develop the capacity to articulate their own needs and evaluate offers from national foundations. Of course, for an intermediary to effectively play this role, the district and the national foundation must both perceive the intermediary as knowledgeable and balanced in its view of the work and the role it plays.

3. Culture, race, and class go unspoken but not unnoticed

Differences in culture, race, class and experience among foundations, district central offices, and students and their families are an often unacknowledged challenge to effective partnerships. Foundations are perceived to be largely funded, run and staffed by elites who do not reflect the racial composition of the schools they are trying to reform. Foundation staff and their designated intermediaries may not have the cultural and practical experience to understand the work on the ground, and districts and communities may see them as out-of-touch interlopers. In addition, the organizational cultures of foundations differ markedly from those of school leaders and their constituencies. Even though many foundations employ officers and executives who have worked in urban public school systems, the perception remains that once one works in a foundation one is removed from the reality of school and district practice.

What are the implications for a community and their students when key decisions are being made by professionals from different races and economic classes? How might foundations rethink their staffing and grant-making processes to address these issues?

Some strategies that might make a difference include:

- Deliberate efforts to diversify the experience and race of foundation boards and staff;
- Pre-engagement efforts by foundations to understand the district and community culture in order to understand whether and how they can work within it;
- Efforts by foundations to consistently pose questions about race, culture and class that legitimate open conversations about these issues and their impact on the work;
- Collaboration with local foundations and intermediaries to increase local ownership and anchor reforms in the real concerns, values and ideas of the community;
- Funding more organizations that are run and staffed by people who represent the communities served.

When new leadership teams come into districts, the same questions are asked about race, economic class, and connection to the community. These issues are then extremely important for district officials and foundation officers to address as they co-construct reform agendas that will have an impact on the local community.

4. District and foundation capacity is limited

The reforms that districts and foundations agree to often require heavy lifting – putting in place strategies and interventions for improving student outcomes in a manner or at a scale rarely before accomplished in major urban school districts. Too often, both partners have limited capacity to determine whether the work agreed on is the right agenda, and, assuming it is, how to implement effectively.

Urban School Districts and National Foundations

What kind of human infrastructure do districts and foundations need to implement proposed reforms? And, conversely, what kind of capacity do districts need to keep foundations from pushing misguided reforms, or to reject funding altogether when the district isn't prepared to use the money well?

The first element of capacity is readiness. Often, when a new superintendent arrives in town, a funder offers to support an effort in the foundation's area of interest. Superintendents may say yes before it is certain that this area is central to the district's improvement strategy and that capacity exists to define and carry out that work. In such cases, success is unlikely.

The challenge is for districts and foundations to have honest conversations about alignment of district and foundation objectives and whether the district is ready to take on the work. If so, both parties must create reasonable timelines and expectations for success. Timing and sequencing are critical.

At the district level there is often limited analytical capacity to review and determine the right strategy. Similarly, most foundations lack the staff capacity to provide significant non-financial resources to districts on a regular basis. With multi-district/state initiatives managed by two or three people – and these staffers often having similar backgrounds and experience – the value-added of foundation staff to district efforts can be minimal.

Foundations may also need to increase their ability to collaborate with districts and communities as well as with other foundations. If foundations want to broaden the perspectives “at the table,” they need to have the capacity to build those relationships. Among funders, there's currently some issue-based collaboration, but there's a need for structural or regional networks. Some expressed caution about collaborating for fear that larger foundations would usurp the agenda.

In addition, leadership and staff turnover is a significant problem in both foundations and school districts. Both organizations need to develop capacity to document what they learn from the work and to root reforms more broadly in the organization and in the community, so that when people leave all the learning is not lost. For foundations, this may mean networks that help program officers learn from their predecessors and each other.

5. Long term learning agenda is lacking

The work of reform requires continuous learning. No district or foundation has all the knowledge or capacity to do the work effectively – they need to learn as they work. Yet, the typical foundation-district engagements work against making learning central and reciprocal. Thus, a fifth challenge to effective partnerships is the paucity of systematic efforts to understand and learn from mistakes.

Why is this the case? In part, this state of affairs stems from the fact that both foundations and districts feel pressure to label their efforts successes and to gloss over or walk away from failures. Foundations are often concerned with self-preservation, brand identification, and leverage. Thus, they can be risk-averse and

Urban School Districts and National Foundations

ambivalent about learning from mistakes. Districts likewise have little interest – or capacity – to examine failures. Once the initial terms of a grant are set, modifications based on what has been learned through implementation are often seen as failure rather than transparency and continuous learning. The tendency is to say everything is going well, even when all the parties know there are problems.

As a result, there is little systematic effort to build and carry out a long-term learning agenda. Warning signs of failure are ignored because neither foundation nor district wants to jeopardize the investment in the chosen strategy. In addition, once an initiative has run its course and new leaders arrive on the scene, there can be incentives to label prior initiatives “failures,” even if they have had very successful aspects that should be studied and shared. As a result, neither foundations nor districts are successful in learning from what worked and what did not.

Funders and districts can take steps to make continuous learning and improvement central to their joint enterprise. Deliberate and public efforts by grant makers and grantees to analyze failures can both tease out lessons that inform future efforts and perhaps embolden others to critically analyze their work and avert mistakes-in-the-making.

Similarly, on-going initiatives can be designed to incorporate reviews and mid-course corrections. Funders can support formative evaluations that provide regular data to all the stakeholders and are used explicitly for continuous improvement, rather than “gotcha”. They can also identify and empower “truth-tellers” who can provide warning signals as projects start to go off track and who can ask the “big questions” about whether they have chosen the right strategy.

Creating a learning enterprise ultimately requires foundation and district willingness to recognize that long-term commitment over a rocky pathway may be necessary to attain results. There may be a need to modify timelines and plans in the face of the complexity of the challenge.

Making the marriage work

This discussion has taken a 10,000-foot view of the issues foundations and districts face in forging productive working relationships. Obviously, context matters enormously; how these issues manifest themselves and can be addressed varies district by district and foundation by foundation. There is no recipe for success and the conversation among superintendents and foundation leaders reflected that. Nonetheless, several general lessons emerge.

First, the initial engagement period where the foundation and the district determine whether there is a match is critical to the ultimate success of the partnership. At these early stages both district and foundation should be frank about their goals, their readiness and capacity to undertake and sustain the work, their predictions of achievable progress and potential risks ahead. Both district and foundation should be prepared to go beyond polite “make nice” conversations and to push and push back to co-construct an agenda (or to decide that the match is not to be).

Second, long-term sustainability depends on district ownership of the reform. While foundations may present reform agenda to districts or co-construct reforms with them, ultimately the work of reform must be done by the district. If the district does not “own” the reform, it will not last. Importantly, here the term district does is not defined solely as “superintendent,” but also includes school board, district staff, families and community. Local foundations and intermediaries can often play an important “bridging” role to anchor reforms in the community’s concerns and values.

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

Finally, the work of improving student learning in urban districts 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 analyze their work and avert mistakes-in-the-making. Similarly, on-going initiatives can be designed to incorporate formative evaluations and mid-course reviews used explicitly for continuous improvement rather than “gotcha”. Creating such a learning agenda for every initiative ultimately requires foundation and district willingness to recognize that a long-term commitment over a rocky pathway, with an ability to adapt over time, is necessary to attain desired results.