



The National Commission for Civic Investment in Public Education

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The work of a growing number of public education funds shows the power of public will and commitment, but the need is urgent to redouble civic investment in public education.

On behalf of the members of the National Commission on Civic Investment in Public Education, the board of directors of Public Education Network (PEN), and the 19,000 public education support organizations across America, I thank Warren Simmons and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) for the opportunity to present PEN's decade-long pursuit to build a field and set standards for a group of nonprofit

organizations working to improve their public schools. We also thank the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Prudential Corporation for their support of this work.

INTRODUCTION

The fifteen members of the National Commission for Civic Investment in Public Education have performed an extraordinary service for this nation and for America's schoolchildren. The Commission's work was ably led by co-chairs Richard W. Riley, former U.S. Secretary of Education (1993–2001) and Linda Darling-

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Hammond, world-renowned education scholar and professor of education at Stanford University. Other members included leaders from the corporate, philanthropic, and nonprofit sectors; educators; researchers; and public education support organization leaders from around the country. Together they shared a commitment to expand civic knowledge and support of public education through citizen involvement.

The technical problem that PEN established the National Commission to address was a lack of consistent standards for the growing number of nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations – typically local education funds (LEFs), comprising PEN’s own network, and a larger array of public education funds (PEFs), independent foundations, or “school foundations” (see sidebar on nomenclature) comprising what may fairly be described as a new national field. The field is distinct from older public education support organizations, like PTAs, in that its members’ primary purpose is to increase pub-

lic and financial support for public schools. Now, some twenty-five years into the field’s development, it was time to make sure that these organizations were more fully accountable for their work.

At the time of the National Commission’s creation, PEN was concerned (and remains so) that inequality of household wealth and income in the country was increasingly replicated within our public school systems as schools in wealthy communities started PEFs to provide amenities that were not available in less-affluent schools. Given the power of persistent economic, social, and political trends, the growth of these groups is only likely to accelerate in number and exacerbate inequalities between students from affluent families and those from poor families. An analysis conducted by Rob Reich, associate professor of political science and ethics in society at Stanford University, appearing in this issue of *VUE*, illustrates this problem.

A NOTE ON NOMENCLATURE

Many terms are used – not always consistently – to describe the different types of organizations in the relatively new field of independent foundations and “school foundations” described in this article. Throughout this issue of *VUE*, we will use the following definitions:

Public education support organizations (ESOs): Nonprofits exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code set up to aid local public schools, including such organizations as parent-teacher groups and alumni associations. The Urban Institute’s report *Who Helps Public Schools* (de Leon et al. 2010) identified more than 19,000 such groups.

Public education funds (PEFs): The largest group (2,147, or 11 percent) of ESOs, dedicated to assisting public schools and districts (de Leon et al. 2010). More than a thousand PEFs are members of the National School Foundation Association (NSFA). For more on NSFA, see the sidebar by Jim Collogan in Erwin de Leon’s article in this issue of *VUE*.

Independent foundations or school foundations: Used interchangeably with *public education funds*.

Local education funds (LEFs): The 77 PEFs that are members of the Public Education Network. Exception: Rob Reich’s article in this issue of *VUE* uses *LEF* synonymously with *PEF*. Note: The Urban Institute report refers to LEFs as “PEN members” and other non-PEN PEFs as “non-PEN members.”

Clearly, the work of the National Commission on Civic Investment was needed. Its tasks were to:

- determine the scope, size, and practices of public education support organizations (ESOs);
- establish and recommend standards, principles, and practices to ensure public accountability of these organizations;
- promote the use of the standards to the ESOs that currently comprise the field.

The combination of these strategies resulted in research on the field and the development of standards for a fast-growing group of ESOs to guide the development of these organizations and assure schools, communities, corporations and foundations, volunteers, and civic organizations of their efficacy and accountability.

What do we know now about these ESOs? The National Commission turned to the Urban Institute's Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy based in Washington, D.C., for more information. Some brief demographics of the field include:

- In 2007, there were 19,306 ESOs, of which 2,147 are PEFs. Within this group of PEFs, 77 were PEN members (LEFs).
- The number of PEFs has grown substantially over the last decade; there were 2.5 times as many PEFs in 2007 as in 1997.
- More than 20 million children in the United States are served by PEFs.
- PEFs support a wide range of activities, but their primary goals are to enrich or expand educational programs and improve student achievement.

We also learned that PEFs operated differently from other ESOs, and PEN's LEFs operated differently than other PEFs.

- Although PEFs accounted for 11 percent of all ESOs in 2007, they generated 29 percent of all revenue for ESOs – that is, \$1,241,300,000. LEFs, which composed less than half a percent of all ESOs in 2007, generated 4 percent of all revenues, or \$170,200,000.
- LEFs are twice as likely as other PEFs to assist school districts in which a majority of students are from low-income homes and are racial/ethnic minorities.
- LEFs are significantly larger than other PEFs and tend to have larger governing boards. Moreover, the governing boards of LEFs are more racially and ethnically diverse compared to other PEFs.
- LEFs interact more frequently with public policymakers. At the local level, LEFs interact with elected officials during the year. In contrast, about 20 percent of other PEFs never interact with elected officials. At the state level, nearly all LEFs interact with elected officials at least once during the year, compared with 43 percent of other PEFs that never interact with elected state officials.
- Nearly all LEFs collect some type of performance data, while only two-thirds of other PEFs do so.

By November, when this publication is released, PEN member LEFs will not only have adopted the standards proposed by the National Commission, but will also have adapted the standards more specifically to LEFs, recognizing the impact LEFs have in addressing and meeting the needs of low-income students and minority students in low-performing schools – for instance, making the standards even more stringent with regards to equity.

THE BEGINNING OF A NEW NARRATIVE ON CIVIC INVESTMENT IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

In addition to the challenge of reporting on ESOs and developing standards, the National Commission chose to address a spiritual challenge: to re-engage Americans in rebuilding and strengthening their public schools. The Commission decided to create a new narrative on civic investment in public education that would educate, inspire, and require the nation to build systems of public schools all across America that are worthy of our children and secure our democracy. The challenges and the opportunities facing America today demand that we tell ourselves a new story and act, act, act to save our nation.

For eons, military strength has been the primary measure of a nation's power and status. History books are replete with descriptions of astoundingly powerful military battles that built and sustained the Greek, Roman, Ottoman, and British empires. Through these military conquests the victors expanded the geographic reaches of their empires – they acquired land, gained access to valuable trade routes, built commerce and increased wealth, installed new leadership, and expanded the base of loyal and faithful people who would become a part of the conquering nation state. In other words, a strong military delivered land, fealty, commerce, wealth, and super-power status.

However, the founders of the American enterprise proposed another tool to build our new, democratic nation: education.

After winning independence from England, American leaders turned their attention to building the nation. Founders looked in two main directions to accomplish this

task – well-formed structures of government and the character of the citizenry. The search for the first led to the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. The second spurred leaders to propose plans for public education. (Fuhrman & Lazerson 2005, p. 2)

Founding father John Adams promoted education for the masses and viewed education as the public's responsibility:

The education of a nation, instead of being confined to a few schools and universities for the instruction of the few, must become the national care and expense for the formation of the many.

Yet it would take nearly a century after the establishment of the Republic in 1787 to formalize the relationship between education and the public: the first public school wasn't established until 1832, and the first election of a school board, along with the first allocation of public funds for public schooling, did not take place until the middle of the nineteenth century.

Nonetheless, the Founders' belief that an educated citizenry is the bedrock of a democratic society echoes through the centuries, adding another metric to define what certifies a nation's status in the global hierarchy of power. Simply put, intellect counts. To be a super-power means that a nation must have a standing army of intellectually capable and educated patriots.

A STANDING ARMY OF INTELLECTUALLY CAPABLE AND EDUCATED PATRIOTS

The founding fathers were prescient in their belief about the timeless role of public education to strengthen our nation and our democratic way of life. Educational competency played a critical role in the founding of America and in sustaining and advancing our demo-

cratic way of life for all who came to these shores. Social, political, and economic pressures such as globalization, rapidly changing demographics, immigration, and the interplay between domestic and international policymaking make it very clear that in twenty-first-century America, higher levels of knowledge and skills are a prerequisite for individuals to live with any level of satisfaction and competence in a democratic society, engage with government, advance our democratic way of life, and be effective workers in the rapidly changing world of commerce.

The technical task and spiritual work facing Americans today is clear: to educate all of our children for the twenty-first century. Attaining that goal is going to call for a movement equal to that of actions undertaken by the abolitionists and suffragettes in their successful attempts to convince the nation that the enslavement of blacks and the disenfranchisement of women were so incompatible with the nation's stated democratic principles and beliefs that if left unchallenged, they would compromise the nation's future.

Today, we face a similar challenge in the widely disparate performance of our public schools – in some instances, the outright failure of our public schools to educate all of our children – which, if left unchallenged, disenfranchises large numbers of children from the American dream, dilutes our democracy, and compromises our nation's future. What can be done to attain the goal of educating our children? How do we educate Americans to value the benefits of quality public education, and how do we inspire them to extend those benefits to every child in every community across our nation?

The members of the National Commission on Civic Investment in Public Education believe that the public education support organizations described in this issue of *VUE* play essential roles

in both the improvement of public schools and educating and engaging the people of this nation in their schools. Their existence stands as one measure of so many Americans' intent to provide high-quality public schools.

The Commission members remind us that three powers are clearly within the *public's influence and control*:

- creating demand for and setting expectations for excellence in public education;
- ensuring accountability through elected officials and effective school governance for the vision of quality public education; and
- providing adequate and stable financial resources for quality public schools.

Coordinated and aligned actions in these three arenas will create a system of public education that fulfills the nation's needs and builds its aspirations. And that is why the members of the National Commission on Civic Investment in Public Education felt it was essential to restate the case and issue a new call for civic investment. However, the very worthy work of these ESOs cannot supplant (nor is it their intention to do so) the power of public will and public actions to leverage the fundamental and structural changes that must take place in public education systems across this nation to build the standing army of educated patriots that will move themselves and their nation forward.

REFERENCES

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