



The Right Funds for Reinvestment

ERWIN DE LEON

Current economic and social realities make it hard for public education to thrive and succeed, but organizations that support public education are helping many communities reinvest in our shared future.

President John Adams, a former teacher, wrote in a letter to John Jebb in 1785:

The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and be willing to bear the expenses of it. There should not be a district of one mile square, without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the public expense of the people themselves. (Adams 1856)

Sadly, we have not collectively taken on the responsibility of educating all our children. There is a lack of political will to compel people to pay enough taxes to support public schools (Kober 2007). Public education has therefore failed to meet its mission of advancing the common good.

Nonetheless, communities can still band together and support public schools and school districts. Kober (2007) reminds us that in the 1830s, “little by little, public schools took hold in communities, often because the local people, rather than politicians, demanded them.” It is contingent upon communities now, as it was then, to ensure and sustain public education

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for all its members. Public schools will continue to flounder unless we all pitch in. In this article, I describe the growing number of local nonprofit organizations that are mobilizing their communities to do just that.

CHRONIC FUNDING SHORTAGES

These are trying times for public schools. As many Americans remain unemployed or underemployed and most of us live in constant anxiety about our financial future, state and local coffers remain bare. Programs and services have been cut across the board in most municipalities, and public education has not been spared.

In order to succeed, American students need a solid educational foundation from our schools. The knowledge-based U.S. economy relies more and more on highly skilled and educated workers. Among the fastest-growing occupations listed by the Bureau of Labor statistics are biomedical engineers, network systems and data communication analysts, home health aides, financial examiners, and medical scientists.¹

Public schools can give poor and minority children a leg up, but the system can also set them further back. Public schools, especially those in urban areas that have more than their fair share of poor and minority children, are ill-equipped to meet their needs (Foote 2005). Funding cuts, increased accountability, and changing demographics are additional strains on these struggling schools.

A survey of school districts nationwide by the Center on Education Policy paints a bleak picture for schools. Districts anticipate continued funding shortages through the current

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1 Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Fastest-Growing Occupations," www.bls.gov/emp/ep_table_103.htm.

academic year, resulting in less resources and diminished capacity for a majority of public schools (Kober & Rentner 2011).

During the 2010-2011 school year, seven out of ten school districts experienced funding cuts; this academic year, eight out of ten expect funding decreases. Among those that anticipate shortfalls, six out of ten plan to cut teaching staff and five out of ten intend to let go of administrative or support staff while five out of ten expect to scale back, postpone, or altogether stop reform initiatives. Cuts in other areas are also projected by school districts. Sixty-four percent plan to reduce or eliminate purchases of instructional materials or technology and equipment. Close to half are considering reducing or eliminating professional development. Roughly forty percent anticipate having to eliminate extracurricular activities and student support services.²

These cuts will make it all the more challenging for strained public schools and in particular for low-performing ones trying to meet stringent accountability standards set by No Child Left Behind. Diane Ravitch (2011) points out that

it is almost always the work of an inspiring principal and a dedicated staff, whose efforts are enhanced by professional development, a strengthened curriculum, a culture of collaboration, greater access to resources, better supervision, reduced class size, extra instructional time, and other common sense changes

that truly make a difference – the very elements school districts will forego due to funding shortfalls.

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2 At the time of the survey, about 31 percent of these districts had not yet decided where to cut spending, so it is possible that since then districts have decided to make more cuts in these areas.

A DISPROPORTIONATE EFFECT ON POOR AND MINORITY CHILDREN

All this does not auger well for poor and minority children who populate urban public schools.

A UCLA study that examined the impact of the recession on public schools and working families lays out how budget cuts disproportionately impact high-poverty schools³ and students. Schools have come to rely more and more on fundraising in order to supplement inadequate budgets, leaving students in poor communities further behind those in wealthier communities. Schools in more-affluent neighborhoods are able to raise the funds necessary to avoid cuts in staff and programs, while those in low-income neighborhoods are unable to do so. In California, for instance, high-poverty schools were four times as likely as low-poverty schools to experience teacher layoffs. These schools were also three times as likely to eliminate summer school (Rogers et al. 2010).

The latest figures show that for the 2008-2009 school year, approximately 22 percent of elementary students and 8 percent of secondary school students attended high-poverty public schools, up from the 20 percent of elementary students and 6 percent of secondary school students who did so the prior school year (NCES 2011).

While 54 percent of public school students nationwide were White in the 2008-2009 academic year, only 14 percent attended high-poverty schools. African American and Latino students, in contrast, were overrepresented in

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3 The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines high-poverty schools as those where more than 75 percent of students are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) program. The percentage of eligible students is a proxy measure for the concentration of low-income students within a school.

high-poverty schools. African American children made up only 17 percent of students overall, yet 34 percent went to these schools. Latino children, 21 percent of students overall, were even more likely, at 45 percent, to be in high-poverty schools (NCES 2011).

In the 2008-2009 academic year, the distribution of students in high-poverty schools also varied by location. Twenty-nine percent of students go to school in urban areas and 58 percent of them attend high-poverty schools. In contrast, 35 percent of all students attended schools in suburban areas, but only 23 percent were in high-poverty schools. A lower proportion of students in rural areas attended high-poverty schools; of the 24 percent of all students in rural areas, only 11 percent attended high-poverty schools (NCES 2011).

INCREASINGLY DIVERSE STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS AND RESEGREGATION

The racial and ethnic diversity of America's children has been steadily increasing. At the turn of the century, a majority of all public school children were White (61 percent) and a minority were African American (17 percent) and Latino (16 percent). A decade later, the percentage of White students decreased to 55 percent and African Americans to 15 percent, while Latino students increased to 22 percent (NCES 2011). It is projected that twelve years from now, more than half of all children will be of color and that by mid-century, four out of ten children will be Latino, up from two out of ten today. In contrast, four out of ten children will be White, down from five out of ten today (FIFCFS 2011).

American public schools, however, are resegregating. Four out of five Latino students and seven out of ten African American students are in

predominantly minority schools⁴ (Children's Defense Fund 2011). Latino and African American students are more likely to be concentrated in urban schools than suburban or rural ones, even though more children attend suburban and rural public schools than urban ones.

CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS: A SPECIAL CONCERN

Children of immigrants⁵ are of particular concern because they are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population. They account for nearly the entire growth in the country's child population during the past two decades, and as of 2010, one in four children in the U.S. is part of an immigrant family (Fortuny, Hernandez & Chaudry 2010).

This considerable demographic shift will have major social, political, and economic implications for the U.S. In less than a decade from now, when baby boomers have reached the retirement ages of 65 and older, the current cohort of immigrant children will comprise a large proportion of new workers and voters who will bear the responsibility of supporting the aging boomers (Hernandez & Cervantes 2011).

It is crucial, then, to provide quality education for children of immigrants.

Since the nineteenth century, public schools have been integral to the social, political, and economic integration of immigrants. Through public schools, new Americans have been introduced to their native-born neighbors, have

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4 That is, public schools in which at least three-quarters of students are children of color.

5 Children of immigrants, children in immigrant families, or immigrant children are defined as those with at least one foreign-born parent. The children may have been born abroad (first generation immigrants) or in the United States (second generation).

learned how to be responsible citizens, and have gained the education necessary to be productive members of society (Kober 2007; Crosnoe & Turley 2011).

A functional and successful public education system can help secure economic and social parity for immigrant children and their families by giving students a solid foundation for higher education and subsequent gainful employment. This in turn can promote intergenerational mobility for immigrant groups.

Poorly functioning and dysfunctional public schools can widen existing economic and social gaps between racial and ethnic groups and between haves and have-nots by denying disadvantaged students the educational foundation they require to progress.

Educating immigrant children, however, is and will be daunting for public schools due to the schools' diminished capacities and increased burdens of accountability coupled with the linguistic and cultural challenges unique to immigrant students.

English proficiency is a significant barrier faced by children of immigrants. Two out of five immigrant children are English language learners and three out of four live in households where no one older than the age of thirteen speaks English proficiently (Hernandez & Cervantes 2011).

In addition, many immigrants have limited financial resources. Children in immigrant families make up close to one-third of the nation's poor children and a similar proportion of the nation's low-income children.⁶ Five out of ten immigrant children live in low-income families compared with four out of ten native-born children (Fortuny, Hernandez & Chaudry 2010).

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6 Poor children belong to families whose income falls below the poverty level; low-income children belong to families whose income is below twice the federal level.

Through community organizations, individuals are able to address government and influence views on public expenditures, community roles, and parental responsibility for children.

PUBLIC EDUCATION FUNDS: A WAY FORWARD

The support needed by our public schools has long been led by dedicated and passionate individuals and the organizations they establish. The Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy's study of public education support organizations, commissioned by Public Education Network (PEN) for the benefit of PEN's National Commission on Civic Investment in Education, put the spotlight on the more than 19,000 nonprofit organizations devoted to advancing public education.⁷ These include booster clubs, PTAs, public education funds, scholarship funds, and others, which altogether spent roughly \$4.3 billion in 2007 to support public schools (de Leon et al. 2010).

Nonprofit organizations are well poised to help facilitate civic engagement and reinvestment in public education. These organizations have

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⁷ The study was commissioned by Public Education Network (PEN) as a follow-up to a 2003 study of PEN member organizations and other education support organizations. This study included 2,358 public education funds, of which 77 are PEN member organizations. The study only included associations that filed IRS tax returns. The total number of groups that support public education is most likely higher than 19,000.

always been a vanguard in advancing the well-being of children and families. They provide much-needed social services, advocate for their constituents, and provide avenues for citizen participation (De Vita, Mosher-Williams & Stengel 2001).

Public education funds (PEFs), which serve more than 20 million children nationwide, are especially equipped to bolster public schools and school districts. PEFs are founded by parents, educators, and other concerned stakeholders to assist individual schools and school districts by raising money to support programs for teacher training and support, after-school programs, and school supplies. They rally the broader community behind public education.

The support provided to schools and school districts by PEFs is crucial now more than ever as districts anticipate the need to cut staffing, reduce professional development, eliminate extracurricular activities and student support services, and make do without instructional materials, technology, and equipment.

A handful of PEFs – the local education funds (LEFs) – serve mostly poor and minority students. LEFs are members of PEN, which is a national association of education funds and individuals working to advance public school reform in low-income communities across the country.

LEFs focus mainly on populations that need the most assistance. Two out of five are located in states where 20 percent or more of children live below the poverty line. LEFs are twice as likely as other types of public education funds to assist school districts with low-income and minority students.

Achieve!Minneapolis for example, administered a \$750,000 grant in 2004 to meet the needs of sixteen urban public schools for such basics as

computers, text books, library books, musical instruments, and desks.⁸

LEFs have the capacity and resources to provide assistance to schools and school districts that have a majority of disadvantaged students. They tend to be larger than other PEFs, with more financial and staff resources. In 2007, for instance, they averaged \$2.4 million in revenues and roughly \$2.6 million in expenses, whereas other PEFs average \$156,000 in revenues and \$437,000 in expenses. LEFs also have more staff than smaller PEFs, which tend to rely on volunteers.

LEFs are plugged into their communities and view accountability to their constituents as paramount. Their governing boards are more racially diverse than other PEFs and represent a broader range of community stakeholders including business leaders, parents, teachers, school administrators, foundations, and nonprofits.

Another unique aspect of LEFs is that they are more likely to engage and devote more of their resources than other PEFs in reform efforts. These initiatives entail educating the wider community about educational issues and frequently interacting with elected officials and policymakers at all levels of government.

The LEF El Dorado Education Foundation, for instance, advocated against school district mergers in the state of Arkansas that would have maintained White majorities. In response to a state mandate for small school districts to consolidate, predominantly White districts tried to merge with other White districts, even if they did not share geographical borders. The organization successfully stemmed the resegregation effort.⁹

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8 Public Education Network, www.publiceducation.org/LEFaccomplishments.asp.

9 Public Education Network, www.publiceducation.org/LEFaccomplishments.asp.

The education and enrollment of the broader community and elected officials in promoting education reform is vital for all our children and can be life-changing for poor and minority students and their families who look to public schools as the only way to move up economically and socially. Parents bank on schools to ensure a bright and secure future for their children.

Nonprofits like LEFs can lead the charge for changes in the educational system by harnessing their resources and providing a venue for “voices of dissent” that would “encourage government and nongovernmental structures to respond to the needs of the poor, people of color, women, and others who face significant odds in their pursuit of a quality of life” (Harmon 1996, p. 5).

Through community organizations, individuals are able to address government and influence views on public expenditures, community roles, and parental responsibility for children (Reid 2001). Communities will thereby have a hand in shaping policies that ultimately affect the well-being of their children.

A POWERFUL WAY TO INVEST

Communities can't do much to alter the volatility of the financial markets or force state and local governments to cough up school funding they do not have. Communities can pull together however, under the aegis of nonprofits like PEFs, to bolster burdened public schools and school districts. Individuals, businesses, and local groups can donate to nonprofits that fill in the gaps left by funding cuts. People can join community organizations in holding local, state, and federal elected officials and policymakers accountable and in pushing for sound and substantive educational reform.

Times are indeed bleak, but the future need not be.

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COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF GROWING DEMANDS AND SHRINKING RESOURCES

Barbara Bartle

Barbara Bartle is president of the Lincoln [Nebraska] Community Foundation and former head of the Foundation for Lincoln Public Schools, a member of Public Education Network and the National School Foundation Association.

As the world moves toward a more global marketplace, as technology becomes more advanced, and as nations around the world grapple with the democratic process, public education becomes the central and grounding concept that keeps us connected and focused on the work of ensuring that all children develop to their fullest potential.

Our education system must continue to adapt so America is not left behind. While accountability soars and resources dwindle, our schools are working hard to assure that our children can compete in a global economy. It is no longer realistic to expect that public schools can financially support all aspects of exceptional teaching and learning through tax dollars alone.

As important as public schools are to our quality of life, they are, now more than ever, vulnerable to the political and cultural realities of growing demands and shrinking resources. Education faces the continued challenge of financial realities that place stress on all levels of government. Public and private partnerships are needed to continue to provide excellence in K–12 education.

Schools cannot do this work alone. A public education fund (PEF) can constitute the critical difference as it brings alumni, parents, friends, corporations, and other foundations together in opportunities to privately support continuing excellence in education.¹⁰

Here in Nebraska, for example, the Foundation for Lincoln Public Schools has provided critical support for local schools. The foundation focuses on helping private donors find effective ways to use their money to improve education. Since it began, the foundation has granted more than \$24 million in programs, scholarships, and awards. The programs have ranged from grants to school libraries to the Fund-a-Need program, which gives small grants to teachers for things like class projects and field trips. More than

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¹⁰ See the sidebar on nomenclature in Richard Riley and Linda Darling-Hammond's article in this issue of *VUE* for definitions of PEFs and other terms.

76,000 students have benefited from these private funds. The foundation has also given significant funding to Lincoln's Community Learning Centers, which offer safe, supervised before- and after-school programs, weekend and summer enrichment programs, and other supports for citizens of all ages, using the local school as the service hub.

Fifty years ago, it was cutting-edge thinking to raise private money for a tax-supported institution of higher learning. Today's cutting-edge thinking calls for private support of K-12 education. But this cannot be done in isolation. Strength will come when these organizations focus on success together. That is the power of Public Education Network (PEN) and the National Schools Foundation Association (NSFA).¹¹

In order to have credibility, PEFs must demonstrate that they meet clear, high standards. These organizations must not only support all of the children in our schools but also, through accountability and transparency, ensure the public's trust and will to support public education. By setting a priority to adhere to a measurement based on the standards for nonprofit organizations developed by Independent Sector, PEFs will affirm a commitment to serve their critical mission and lead the way toward equity and excellence for all of the children in our schools.

This is hard work. But our effort to meet the needs for our children and youth has never been more important. These are difficult economic times, but our students are depending on us. Every year, children keep growing, learning, graduating, and moving on. They will not wait for us to take a break. This is the best investment we'll ever make.

Note: For more information on the Foundation for Lincoln Public Schools, see www.foundationforlps.org.

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¹¹ Both PEN and NSFA are national membership organizations with PEFs as members. PEN's members are referred to as local education funds (LEFs).



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN BRIDGEPORT

Margaret Hiller

Margaret Hiller is executive director of the Bridgeport [Connecticut] Public Education Fund, a member of the Public Education Network.

The Bridgeport Public Education Fund, Inc., (BPEF) established in 1983, has grown in stature and credibility throughout the greater Bridgeport area through its support of good educational practices, ability to address critical issues in the school system, and ability to engage the community in thoughtful discussions of local and national educational issues. Although the work and focus of BPEF have evolved over the past twenty-eight years, the mission has remained unchanged: “to develop programs and mobilize the community for quality public education in Bridgeport.”

In the fall of 2010, BPEF produced a strategic plan that will be our roadmap for the next five years. We have focused our work on college readiness and success, community engagement, and teacher recognition based on input we gathered from the community using tools like public community conversations, student-led forums, and a survey.

Community Conversations

An understanding of the many issues that surround public education in urban areas, where the majority of students in the schools are living in poverty and have limited resources to achieve a first-class education, is key to building a groundswell of support from the business/corporate community and from our surrounding neighbors in more affluent communities. Partnering with the school district, United Way, and other non-profit partners, we sponsored a community conversation that attracted more than 350 people who wanted to provide input into the next strategic plan for the school district. Our process allowed their concerns, suggestions, and solutions to be incorporated into the new strategic plan.

BPEF has been working in the arena of public engagement for more than twenty years and has conducted conversations on many topics. We have developed an education issues guide to help inform conversations among community stakeholders on improvement in their neighborhood schools. BPEF's guide is adapted from a moderator guide originally developed by Public Agenda, which is the definitive guide for outlining the role of the moderator and the recorder, setting the timeline, and most importantly, establishing the series of questions and probes that will serve as the discussion guide.

We have modified Public Agenda's original guide many times to suit our audience and the topic. Many conversations begin with a panel discussion or a short video that lays out the framework for the conversation that will follow. We made our own "starter video" in preparation for a series of twenty-five conversations in the early 2000s in Bridgeport that were part of an initiative to empower a wider range of stakeholders to lead education reform in the district through "school leadership teams." We used parents, principals, teachers, and the superintendent to inform the audience about the purpose and implementation mechanisms of the leadership teams. As executive director of BPEF, I served as narrator. This ten-minute starter video noticeably captured the attention of participants in the conversations. Participants loved seeing people they recognized who were supportive of their difficult task in forming the leadership teams.

Student-Led Forums on the Achievement Gap

By far the most interesting conversations we have conducted have taken place in schools with students as the moderators. In 2007, BPEF joined a cohort of twelve organizations participating in an initiative sponsored by the Kettering Foundation to discuss the academic achievement gap in communities across the nation.¹² BPEF chose to focus our work on students. The student-led forums empowered students to share their opinions and concerns about the achievement gap and to share ideas for improving conditions in their schools. What to the students was a local issue became a much bigger concern as they learned that this is a huge national issue and that Connecticut, which is one of the richest states in the country, lags far behind the rest of the U.S. However, they felt that the global impact was too big to tackle, and their work continued to focus locally. They did wonder about their legislators and the "head in the sand" syndrome that seemed to lead people to ignore the big issues.

What we are not able to assess or track is the impact of these conversations on students as they leave high school and enter the world of college or work. Are they more informed? Do they read articles with more knowledge and understanding or talk about the issue with friends, colleagues, and family?

The Survey

BPEF conducted a survey among a variety of people and organizations in the greater Bridgeport area – founders, contributors, private foundations, BPEF board members, community partners, and school district staff – to assess their familiarity with BPEF's current programs. Much to the surprise and delight of the committee, our community engagement work was highly rated and thought of as the best mechanism to get the

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¹² At the conclusion of the initiative, The Kettering Foundation released the report *Helping Students Succeed: Communities Confront the Achievement Gap*, available for download at www.kettering.org/media_room/publications/Helping-Students-Succeed.

“pulse of the people” who mattered and whose lives were impacted by the discussion topic. Feedback comments included “People trust BPEF and the conversation process” and “BPEF should market their expertise in moderator training and adapting the guide to specific topics.”

A Focus on Community Engagement

Community engagement has become a strong focus area of the work of the BPEF. Our engagement work continues to focus on helping organizations discuss issues, prioritize solutions, and develop implementation plans. We are often asked to help other organizations develop consensus by adapting our moderator guide to their issues and training their people to be good moderators. We have trained moderators and worked with organizations throughout Fairfield County who appreciate our expertise and ability to help guide community conversations about issues such as early childhood, parent involvement, and violence in the schools.

Directing the work of the BPEF since 1984 has given me the opportunity to work with the entire Bridgeport community and to watch our community begin to thrive and work together. We live in Bridgeport, our daughter attended the public schools and graduated from Central High School, and my husband taught in Bridgeport. This is my community. Helping people understand issues regarding urban education, supporting best educational practices, meeting experts in the field of education through Public Education Network, of which BPEF is a member, and helping our students become successful college graduates has given me great satisfaction. I am proud of the accomplishments of BPEF, our many partnerships, and our dedication on behalf of the children in the great city of Bridgeport.

Note: For more information on the Bridgeport Public Education Fund, see www.bpef.org.

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