

**Locating Local Education Funds:
A Conceptual Framework for
Describing LEFs' Contribution to
Public Education**

**Prepared for
Public Education Network**

By

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***Research for Action (RFA)** is a nonprofit organization engaged in education research and reform. Founded in 1992, RFA works with educators, students, parents, and community members to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for all students. RFA work falls along a continuum of highly participatory research and evaluation to more traditional policy studies.*

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INTRODUCTION

Local education funds (LEFs) have been formed across the United States over the last fifteen years with the goal of supporting and challenging public school districts to do a better job of serving low income children and their families...It is difficult to describe the work of these organizations [local education funds] succinctly, because they often operate purposefully as “invisible hands,” brokering partnerships among diverse groups, and because their locally adapted work embraces a rich and flexible mix of initiatives. (Useem, 1999:1)

With support and leadership from the Public Education Network (PEN), local education funds (LEFs) have worked for two decades to 1) educate and mobilize their communities so that citizen voices are influential in education policy discussions; and 2) support effective partnerships between school district insiders and outsiders to improve the quality of children’s education. However, as Useem’s study of local education funds points out, it has been difficult to identify the many roles that LEFs play in their communities, the work that they undertake, the obstacles that they encounter, and the contributions that they make. Useem also suggests why the work of LEFs defies simple description. As brokers, LEFs work behind the scenes and in partnership with others, which contributes to their invisibility as catalysts and supporters of educational improvement. LEFs also are highly adaptive organizations that typically customize their change strategies to particular communities. Such attention to local context results in tremendous variation in the organization, work, and accomplishments of LEFs. At the same time, the highly individual nature of each LEF often obscures the overarching values, purposes, and goals that these organizations share, thus obscuring a collective identity.

As they mark 20 years of work in public education, LEF and PEN leaders are prescient in their insistence on further research into the role and accomplishments of local education funds in shaping the landscape of public schooling. In August 2003, at the request of PEN, Research for Action (RFA) began work on developing a conceptual framework for: 1) understanding the role and work of LEFs and the many factors that influence what they do and how they do it; and 2) assessing their contributions to public education. This framework will be used to guide future empirical research on LEFs and to develop tools that LEFs themselves can use in a process of self-assessment. Continued research and assessment will provide public education stakeholders with credible evidence and a deeper understanding about how LEFs carry out their missions and demonstrate successes. At the same time, it will provide firm ground for LEF and PEN leaders to chart the next generation of work.

In an effort to locate LEFs within the constellation of organizations working to improve public education, RFA staff has reviewed the considerable body of writing and research on LEFs and begun an examination of the vast literature on U.S. nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations of other countries. However, in keeping with the theme of PEN’s 2003 conference - Reclaiming Democracy: Intermediaries, Local Education

Funds, and Public Education - we more narrowly focus this paper by linking LEFs to the emerging literature on intermediary organizations in school reform. We posit that LEFs are a kind of intermediary organization because they fulfill three primary functions of all intermediaries: 1) they broker between organizations and constituencies; 2) they add value to the organizations with which they work; and 3) they offer a credible and nimble vehicle for action. We also discuss the organizational attributes of LEFs that distinguish them from other types intermediaries.

A second purpose of this paper is to offer the beginnings of a conceptual framework for describing the activities of LEFs. The framework recognizes the two arenas in which LEFs work: the civic arena and the school/district arena. When complete, the framework will identify outcome areas, show the strategies that LEFs employ in each area, and how they articulate with PEN's seven strategic interventions. We suggest eight areas of influence and offer examples of strategies used to forward efforts in each. These will be revised based on empirical research to be conducted during the winter and spring of 2004.

A third purpose is to underscore the importance of local context in understanding and assessing the work of LEFs. Any conceptual framework must include a way of accounting for local variation. Again, we have drawn from the research and writing on LEFs to identify the kinds of local factors that must be taken into account as we seek to explain the roles that LEFs play in their communities, the work that they undertake, the obstacles that they encounter, and the contributions that they make.

In the final section of the paper, we set the stage for the larger study. We identify important questions to be asked and explain how we think the study will contribute to the knowledge base on: 1) local education funds; 2) intermediary organizations working in public education; and, 3) education reform as an enterprise that requires strong civic involvement as well as school/district capacity.

WHAT KIND OF AN ORGANIZATION IS A LEF?

The number of organizations working outside of schools and school districts for improvement of public education has grown enormously in the past twenty years (McDonald, McLaughlin, and Corcoran, 2000, Kronely & Handley, 2003, Rothman, 2002, Honig, 2003, Lampkin & Stern, 2003). Their diversity also has increased to include a wide range of organizations: universities, business associations, civic groups, community organizing groups, school foundations and a range of service providers. Observers have offered a variety of explanations for the increase in the number of organizations seeking to strengthen public schools. As the federal government's role in social provision and funding of local development gradually diminished over the past 20 years, private and philanthropic organizations stepped in to fill the gap (Blank et al., 2003, Lampkin & Stern, 2003). During that same period, growing concerns about the quality of public education have led to a recognition of the need for external organizations to help increase resources, coordinate services, and represent the voices of minorities and low-income constituents (Fruchter, 2003, Hirota & Jacobs, 2003). The business and philanthropic communities also have called for alternative vehicles through which to funnel resources to schools. Local education funds are among these outside organizations responding to these concerns. Indeed, interest in LEFs has grown as citizens, policymakers, and practitioners have recognized that deep and lasting school improvement requires multiple institutional players who are able to champion high-quality reforms, working inside the system as management coaches and outside as political advocates (McDonald, McLaughlin, and Corcoran, 2000).

LEFs have been categorized in a variety of ways. One basis of categorization is their IRS designation as "education support organizations". This classification is useful for defining the arena of organizations working outside of schools to improve education. However, it is too broad for gaining insight into the unique role of LEFs play in this arena, because it masks significant distinctions among organizations that fall under this designation. For example, LEFs function more independently of the school districts and are more likely to work in low-income areas than school foundations, another type of education support organization (see the Urban Institute report by Lampkin & Stern, 2003 for a detailed analysis of these distinctions). The other term that's been used to describe LEFs is intermediary organization.

We reviewed the small but growing literature on intermediary organizations and found it useful for articulating the work and contributions of LEFs. Several analysts already have categorized local education funds as intermediary organizations (Honig, 2003, McDonald, McLaughlin, and Corcoran, 2000, Kronely & Handley, 2003, Bodilly, 2001). As we begin empirical research on LEFs, our working hypothesis is that they are a kind of intermediary organization because they serve three central functions that we found across the literature: they broker between organizations and constituencies; they add value to the institutions with which they work (Honig, 2003); and they are credible and flexible vehicles for action. In the following discussion, we elaborate on these core functions and relate them to LEFs. We also discuss ways in which intermediary

organizations differ and use these dimensions of difference to identify distinguishing characteristics of LEFs.

Toward defining intermediary organizations

At this early stage of conceptualization, the definition of intermediary organization remains slippery. Intermediary organizations work for public school improvement, but sit outside districts and schools; they are not part of government. Unlike business associations or universities, for example, their primary mission is to bring about change that strengthens public education. Fundamentally, intermediaries' role is to stimulate change. From the literature on intermediary organizations, we have drawn three central functions that intermediaries serve in this role as change agents, and our analysis of the literature on local education funds indicates that these same core functions also are central to LEFs.

Intermediary organizations broker between organizations and constituencies. They serve as connectors among types of organizations and different constituencies. Terms that have been applied to describe this role include “broker,” “facilitator,” and “convener” (Useem & Neild, 1995, Jobs for the Future & New Ways to Work, 2003, Blank et al. 2003). For example Honig (2003) states that intermediaries “occupy the space in between at least two other parties” (p.8). McDonald et al. (2000) state that intermediaries “live at the boundaries of the educational system...[and] cross the boundaries dividing the various parties whose actions affect children in schools” (p.6). At a minimum, they bring together two constituencies or organizations but, because of their position “in between,” they have the potential to bring together a wide array of perspectives and resources. For example, LEFs bring school district personnel together with constituencies external to the district, including the business community, researchers from local universities, or parents. LEFs have been a vehicle through which the district has accessed the resources and expertise of these groups as well as a mechanism through which these groups have learned about and been able to influence change in the district.

Intermediary organizations add value to the efforts of the parties they connect. That is, the intermediaries perform a function that the organizations they work between could not perform alone. LEFs add value through their ability to cross institutional boundaries within and outside of school districts as well as through the credible and flexible infrastructure they provide for partnerships.

Intermediary organizations offer a credible and flexible vehicle for action. Because they work outside the unwieldy bureaucracy of the public sector, intermediaries can be nimble and efficient in carrying initiatives forward. Their organizations are ongoing and have tangible resources (staff, offices, equipment, etc.) as well as routinized ways of operating (financial accounting procedures, communications/outreach activities, etc.) that can be used to facilitate initiatives jointly undertaken with other institutions and individuals. They provide a credible vehicle that increases the comfort level of individuals and entities that want to become involved. At the same time, they are flexible and able to adapt to the needs of their constituencies. For example, Useem (1999) found that LEFs can “write grants, secure donations of services or funds, mount programs, make payments

to vendors and program participants, expand or contract staff size, and produce evaluations of their work faster than other traditional institutions” (Useem, 1999: 3).

Describing variation in intermediary organizations

Despite these commonalities, intermediary organizations differ in significant ways. The literature suggests ways to think about dimensions of difference among intermediaries:

Duration Some intermediary organizations are created to be temporary, supporting the implementation of specific initiatives. Others are created to be permanent organizations with long-term, evolving goals.

Connection to community Some intermediaries have a particular geographic focus and are based in the setting they serve. Others are not geographically limited in their work and are not based in the locales in which they work.

Affiliation with a network Some intermediaries function independently while others work as part of a network that provides strategic guidance, resources, and opportunities for collaboration and mutual learning.

Content of work Intermediaries work in a wide range of areas including school-to-work, youth development, workforce development, public education, and community development. Intermediaries also vary in breadth of their focus; some target one issue, while others take on a multi-issue agenda.

Constituencies Intermediaries vary in the number and types of constituencies with which they work.

Complexity of relationships The nature of the relationship between partner constituencies and institutions varies across intermediaries. Some relationships are short-term and tightly focused; others are long-term relationships likely to have multiple, broad goals that change over time. The role intermediary organizations assume in these relationships (e.g., convener, coach, “critical friend”) also varies.

Locating LEFs in the range of intermediary organizations

Given these dimensions of variation, where do LEFs fall in the range of intermediary organizations? Using the above dimensions, we can begin to distinguish LEFs from other intermediaries in the following ways:

Local education funds are permanent organizations. They are created for long-term work with a school district and their goals evolve and change over time. They have a permanent infrastructure including a board of directors, paid staff, and incorporation as a nonprofit organization. However, LEFs cannot take their permanence for granted. Organizational survival is an underlying goal that shapes the allocation of resources and the nature of relationships with key constituents.

LEFs are local organizations. Their mission is the improvement of public education within a particular geographic area and they have a long-term relationship with the schools and districts within that area. However, this geographic area varies in size, ranging from one district to one city, a region, or even a state. LEFs are highly influenced by their local context, constantly assessing the political landscape, then adapting and strategizing within the opportunities and limits that it offers. As local organizations, LEFs may be more pragmatic in their approach than a national intermediary (Kronley & Handley, 2003). Because they are locally-based, LEFs' value as agents of change is their ability to adapt innovation to the needs and contours of the local setting. They also contribute to the sustainability of reforms because of their commitment to a local community.

LEFs are affiliated with the national Public Education Network. PEN is a network of 87 Local Education Funds around the country. Affiliation with a national network allows local organizations to step out of their local context and broaden their perspective through a cross-fertilization of ideas from local experiences nationally. Such a perspective can offer new models and standards that organizations can adapt to their local setting. Our review of the literature and websites suggests there is a range in the degree to which local organizations align themselves with the national network.

LEFs focus their work on a single issue: public education. Their purpose is to stimulate change that improves public education, particularly in low-income communities. They do this through building civic capacity (Stone, 2001), as well as school and district capacity to implement reforms.

LEFs work with a wide array of constituencies, but their primary constituent is the district. Unlike many education intermediaries, LEFs have relationships at multiple levels and multiple sites across school districts. They relate to the central office and school board members as well as local principals and teachers. LEFs also relate to a wide array of constituencies external to the district. For example, many LEFs work closely with the business community and provide a vehicle through which business can channel resources and expertise to the school district. Business leaders have been involved in the formation of many LEFs (Lies & Bergholz, 1988) and business leaders have significant membership on many LEF boards (PEN Annual Survey, 2000). LEFs also focus on engaging parents and other community groups in the work of the school district. LEFs may link the resources and expertise of universities, social service agencies, and local foundations to the school district. Finally, some LEFs attempt to convene all of these disparate constituencies for the betterment of public education.

LEFs have a complex relationship with their key constituent – the school district. Their relationships within a district are complex because, from time to time, their mission to improve student achievement requires critique of the district and schools. At the same time, their existence depends upon their relationship with the district. Useem & Neild (1995) describe this relationship as that of a “critical friend.” LEFs vary in how they manage their complex relationships with school districts; some are closely allied with the

district while others operate with more independence and take more risks in critiquing the district.

In summary

Our analysis suggests that the concept of intermediary organization offers a useful lens for articulating the nature, role, and contributions of LEFs. We have preliminarily explored here: 1) how LEFs assume three central functions of intermediary organizations; and, 2) how LEFs can be distinguished from other kinds of intermediary organizations. In the following section, we take an additional step by laying out a framework for describing the work of LEFs. Later in the paper, we will argue that the distinguishing characteristics of LEFs, coupled with the three core functions that LEFs share with other intermediary organizations, position LEFs to play a potentially uniquely valuable role in improving public education.

WHAT IS THE RANGE OF LEFS' WORK?

Intermediaries of all types aim to change the status quo. LEFs' evolution from a "support role ... to one of working for systemic reform and school restructuring" (Useem & Neild 1995: 176) fits this imperative to change public education for the better. Working in an era marked by a complex web of education reforms and declining faith in the public sector, LEFs are under pressure to explain their role and "justify support for their work" (Jehl, 2003).

The purpose of this research effort is to develop a framework for understanding the work of LEFs and for assessing their contributions to school reform in local communities. The framework we present below represents our early thinking and provides us with a map that will form a basis for the next phase of the project: empirical research. As we explore the territory in more detail, the contours and markers on our map are likely to change.

Our framework identifies eight areas in which LEFs' the outcomes of LEFS work can be categorized. We derived these areas from reading across case studies of LEFs. We grouped together outcomes that are similar in theme. From these groupings, we named a set of broad outcome areas. These eight areas articulate the implicit outcomes that PEN's seven strategic interventions point to (PEN, 2003). Ultimately, these outcome areas can lead to specific outcome measures that LEFs can use to identify and describe their accomplishments.

We found that the eight outcome areas clustered in relationship to the two arenas in which LEFs' work contributes: the civic arena and the school/district arena. Working in both arenas certainly supports the classification of LEFs as a kind of intermediary. In their role as broker, LEFs operate between schools or school districts and groups operating in the civic arena that wish to contribute in some way to public education. Work in the civic arena contributes to strengthening civic capacity to mobilize community interests for public school improvement. Work in the schools and district arena contributes to strengthening school and district capacity to provide a high quality education for all students.

Both civic capacity and school/district capacity are critical, ultimately, to student learning. Civic capacity addresses the many obstacles outside of schools that stand in the way of improving student learning – insufficient funding, weak public will, contentious city and state politics – to name a few. Clarence Stone and his colleagues analyzed school reform in several cities and identified "civic capacity" as an important predictor of reform efficacy and staying power. They found that,

Civic capacity concerns the extent to which different sectors of the community – business, parents, educators, state and local officeholders, nonprofits, and others – act in concert around a matter of community-wide import. It involves mobilization, that is, bringing different sectors together, but also developing a shared plan of action... To be lasting, civic capacity

needs an institutional foundation for interaction among elites and a “grassroots” base through which ordinary citizens are engaged (Stone, 2001).

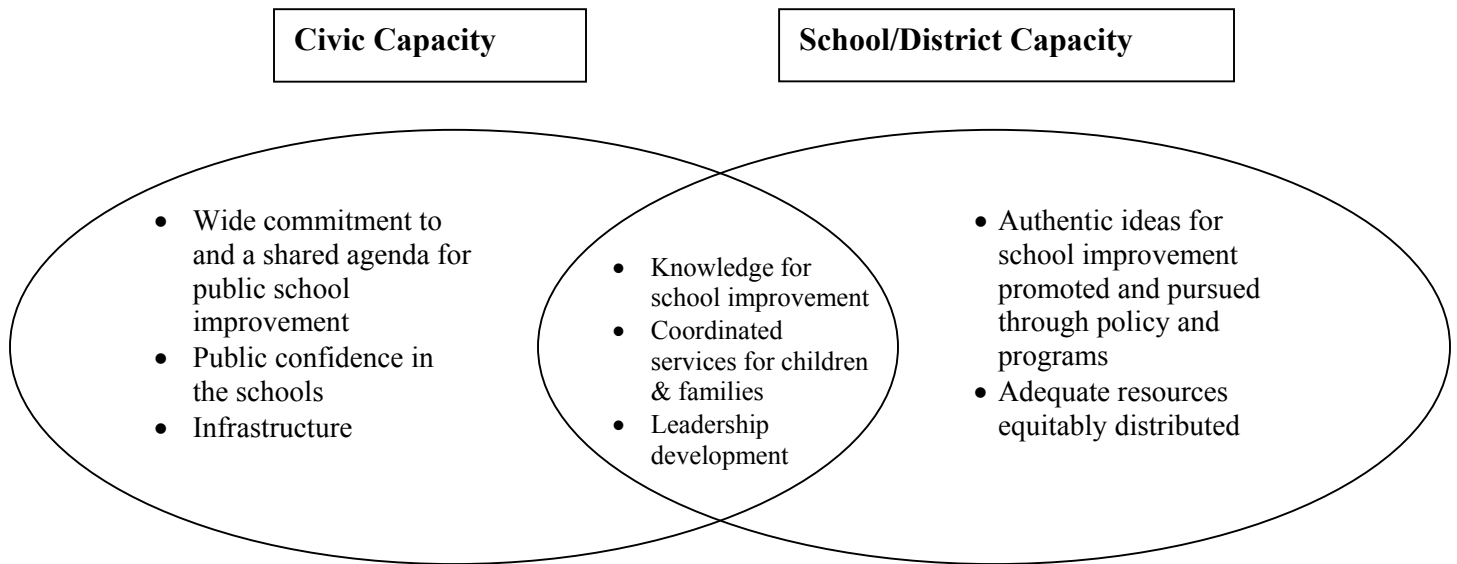
There is a growing base of knowledge about what constitutes school capacity and the conditions that support high quality instruction and improved student learning. These include:

- 1) Adequate resources, including a stable and qualified staff and sufficient materials (Anyon, 1997).
- 2) An orderly and caring school environment.
- 3) Well-coordinated curriculum across the grades and instructional strategies that help individual students meet challenging standards. (Smith, M.S. & O’Day, 1991).
- 4) School leadership that creates an environment focused on student learning and the ongoing professional learning of teachers. (Bryk et. al., 1998).
- 5) Solid partnerships with parents and community members in support of educational improvement (Saunders & Epstein, 2000).
- 6) A professional community of teachers that is founded upon shared accountability for teachers’ and students’ performance, that is open to new ideas, and that encourages collaborative learning. (Darling-Hammond, 1996)
- 7) Ongoing coherent and consistent professional development, including opportunities for staff to examine collectively what students are actually learning and to make appropriate instructional adjustments. (Darling-Hammond, 1997).
- 8) School staff members understand what is being asked of them, and can make changes in response to improve their educational practices and raise student achievement.

School district capacity involves such factors as the ability to set an overall direction that is well understood by staff at all levels of the district; the ability to use data to make decisions about allocating resources and program directions; leadership that supports ongoing innovation and learning; coherence across levels of the district that supports program implementation and communication of clear expectations for student learning; coordination with relevant services in the community; and a responsiveness to public and community concerns.

Below is a diagram that identifies either outcome areas and shows how each is related to building capacity in the civic arena and the school/district arena. We also show how work in some areas contributes to both civic and school/district capacity.

Diagram 1: Conceptual Framework for the Outcome Areas of LEFs’ Work Iteration 1



This framework is not prescriptive for the work LEFs should be doing, but rather descriptive of the kinds of outcomes they have achieved. Certainly, LEFs differ in the areas where their work is concentrated, partly as a result of their unique organizational landscape and the range of efforts or opportunities that exist in a local setting. This conceptualization helps us consider how their work contributes to creating conditions that support school improvement. Below, we discuss each of these outcome areas. We provide a definition of the term, list characteristic LEF strategies, and give brief examples.

Outcome Areas

Area 1: Wide public commitment to and shared agenda for public school improvement

Many LEFs undertake strategies that contribute to building a community-wide agenda and commitment to school reform. Useem notes, “The work of the LEFs is grounded in the belief that meaningful progress in education will be achieved only when key stakeholders communicate and collaborate with one another” (Useem, 1999: 6). LEFs provide a forum for different constituents to find common ground for improving education outcomes, forging plans, and mobilizing constituencies to support implementation. Participation in forums can also build commitment to and joint ownership of new programs among a wide array of community participants. Ideally, commitment to change must be deep as well as wide in order for an effort to be sustained and authentic (Cuban & Usdan, 2003, Hess, 1999). Because LEFs often have relationships with staff at multiple levels within school districts, they can contribute to generating this depth of understanding. Below are some examples of LEF strategies (from former and current LEF members) that can lead to wide commitment and shared agenda for school reform.

- *LEFs engage community members in public conversations to build consensus and a common sense of purpose.* The Education Fund in New Orleans created an Education Round Table, made up of representatives of 25 organizations, for reform of the New Orleans school board. They developed qualifications for board members and distributed a questionnaire to candidates that raised public awareness of suitability for the school board (Useem & Neild, 1995).
- *LEFs build constituencies for advocacy and action.* Parents United for DC Public Schools mobilized parents to advocate for improvements. Their legal work and advocacy efforts made public education one of local government’s top three priorities (Speicher, 1992).

Area 2: Public confidence in the schools

In a recent book looking at school reform across six cities, the authors quote a member of the Portland Oregon Board of Education in 1915 who said, “There is no better constructive publicity for a city than to be known over the entire country as a city of good schools” (Cuban & Usdan, 2003: 147.) While building confidence is not an end in itself, many school reform observers have noted that public confidence in the schools can generate public support for investment and motivate politicians to keep education high on their agendas.

Among the functions LEFs were created to perform was to “restore and build public confidence in the schools” (Lee, 1998). Many LEF strategies build public confidence in the public schools by bringing expertise that builds legitimacy, attracts national attention, and links the district with national projects such as the Annenberg Challengeⁱ or important foundation initiatives (Useem, 1999). Characteristic strategies include:

- *LEFs monitor or assess the effectiveness of school districts.* The Public Education Fund in Providence, RI, established a widely representative commission to carry out an independent assessment of the public schools. The report led to restructuring and personnel changes that garnered political and business support and new resources (Useem & Neild, 1995).
- *LEFs bring groups with expertise in particular areas to lead or implement reform programs.* For example, the Philadelphia Education Fund worked to bring the Johns Hopkins University’s Talent Development project for middle and high school reform to the city (Useem & Neild, 1995).

Area 3: Infrastructure

Civic mobilization for school reform is most likely to occur when there is long-standing organizational infrastructure to institutionalize the participation of civic actors. Where civic involvement is *ad hoc*, civic mobilization is weaker. Comparative studies of school reform note that where stable organizations exist to carry out programs and create forums for discussion, reforms are more likely to move forward (Stone et al., 2001: 99). LEFs use infrastructure in the following ways:

- *LEFs institutionalize business participation in school improvement efforts.* Both the Boston Plan for Excellence and Pittsburgh’s Allegheny Conference Education Fund provide infrastructure that sustained strong business participation and a broad coalition of community actors in school reform.ⁱⁱ
- *LEFs serve as a conduit for funds to the district for national initiatives.* Examples include the Annenberg Challenge in Los Angeles, New York City, and Boston and more recently, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in several LEF communities including Seattle, Cleveland, and Baltimore.

Area 4: Knowledge for school improvement

Different actors in the community need knowledge in order to participate fully in efforts to improve schools and to hold the schools accountable for delivering on promises. Teachers and other school professionals also need knowledge to improve their practice and make good decisions about the allocation of resources and personnel. School districts, teachers, and parents need to know about promising practices and to understand their fit and effectiveness in a particular setting. Finally, school district central offices need to know what is going on in the field while people at school sites need a sense of the

big picture (Honig, 2003). Strategies that LEFs have used to provide information about school performance to a wide range of stakeholders include the following:

- *LEFs carry out or sponsor evaluations and assessments of school districts.* The Greater New Orleans Education Fund, in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders, conducted an assessment of the public school district that was shared with the city and led to the development of a district-wide reform plan (Greater New Orleans Education Fund, <http://www.gnofn.org/~gnoef/>).
- *LEFs write and disseminate reports that address the need for policy changes.* The Philadelphia Education Fund's OERI Teacher Quality Initiative issued a report on teacher quality that it disseminated widely. PEF and other community-based groups used the findings to advocate for policy change at the district level (Public Education Network, 2001).

Area 5: Coordinated services for children & families

Providing services to families and children in a comprehensive way is not a new idea. Since the early 1990s several national and community foundations have launched programs under the rubric of comprehensive community initiatives, theorizing that the problems of low-income communities were a result of failures in the connectedness of institutions rather than in individuals themselves. In the education arena, comprehensive community initiatives have taken the form of schools that serve as community centers and offer multiple services to adults and youth, after-school programs, and programs to forge closer ties between schools and parents. These efforts address the isolation of schools from their communities and the fragmentation of services while providing supports that could potentially improve student achievement.ⁱⁱⁱ LEFs have been involved in these initiatives in the following ways:

- *LEFs coordinate services for children and families.* The Providence Education Fund worked with other nonprofits in Providence, RI, to coordinate family centers in 18 schools that offer continuing education for parents, educational supports for children, and social services for entire families (Useem, 1999).
- *LEFs build pathways to college for high school students.* The Philadelphia Education Fund runs a College Access Program in 27 Philadelphia high schools (Useem, 1999).

Area 6: Leadership development

School reform research points to the importance of developing strong leadership for reform across the civic and school/district arenas. Leadership development empowers parents and community members to participate in efforts to improve neighborhood schools (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002, Mediratta & Fruchter, 2002, Shirley, 1997). Professional development activities also contribute to a cadre of leaders in schools and a leadership culture that supports ongoing collaboration (Spillane, 1996, Stone, 2001).

LEFs have contributed to developing leaders in both the civic and school realms. Their strategies have included:

- *LEFs have supported the development of teacher networks* in a number of cities including Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Chatanooga. Teachers in these networks often take on leadership roles in school reform efforts (Useem, 1999).
- *LEFs support citizen participation in the political arena.* The Washington Parent Group Fund created a parent training institute that offered parents the skills they need to work with school staff and administrators (Raphael & Anderson, 2002).

Area 7: Authentic ideas for school improvement promoted and pursued through policy and programs

As a kind of intermediary organization, LEFs draw on a deep well of knowledge and experience about teaching and learning. Their embeddedness in local communities gives LEFs the ability to adapt reforms to local conditions, making them more likely to be successful and sustainable. They also promote a culture of experimentation and openness to new ideas (Useem, 1999). As organizations with a long-term commitment to local districts, LEFs grapple with how to assure reform is actually implemented and sustained. Consequently, some LEFs have shifted their work from promoting specific innovative projects at the level of teachers and schools to direct involvement at higher policy levels in order to ensure that local efforts result in lasting systemic reform (Useem & Neild, 1995; Puriefoy, 1994, Public Education Network, 2001). LEFs strategies for authentic school improvement include the following:

- *LEFs promote, design, and implement whole-school change efforts.* In collaboration with the district, the Boston Plan for Excellence developed a four-year reform initiative to embed a standards-based approach in two cohorts of schools called 21st Century Schools. Boston's public schools adopted the plan as a model for reform in all of its schools (Neufeld & Guiney, 2003, Lee, 1998).
- *LEFs promote policy change to support high quality curriculum.* The New York City, New Visions for Public Schools has supported the establishment of small schools that encouraged experimentation with new assessment strategies. Their example resulted in system-wide innovations in math assessments and achievement reporting (Useem & Neild, 1995).

Area 8: Adequate resources equitably distributed

Do public schools need more money or should they use the money that they have more efficiently and effectively? Often, the business community and state-level politicians argue that schools should be more efficient and effective with existing resources, while grassroots groups and nonprofits demand more resources and illuminate funding inequities within and across districts. In a climate where public spending on social

services is shrinking as demands for accountability grow, schools need both more efficient systems and more resources. LEFs can provide external pressure and assistance in garnering new resources from national foundations and corporations as well as management assistance that may free up money spent on administration for use closer to the classroom. LEF strategies may also include mobilizing citizens through the power of the vote to support bond referenda or candidates favoring equitable distribution of resources. Strategies for providing new resources have included the following:

- *LEFs bring funding and resources from national foundations.* Several LEFs became Annenberg Challenge sites during the mid- to late 1990s bringing outside funding as well as leveraging resources from local sources. LEFs have also brought resources to schools by participating in national initiatives, such as Library Power, which refurbished libraries in low-income schools (Useem, 1999).
- *LEFs energize constituents to gain funding for public schools through participation in the political arena.* To draw attention to the pressing need for school funding in Portland, OR, the Portland Schools Foundation coordinated a public march that turned out 30,000 citizens. The public outcry led to the establishment of a statewide public education lobbying organization that calls for stable adequate school funding (Raphael & Anderson, 2002).

In Summary

We have described eight broad outcome areas that we believe capture the varied work of LEFs. The eight areas are not entirely exclusive and the strategies that contribute to outcomes in one area may also contribute in another. The Providence example shows how a LEF's strategy of conducting a comprehensive district assessment also was a catalyst for assuring adequate public funding. Work in each of the eight areas contributes to building civic capacity, to school and district capacity, or to both. Linking the strategies to broader outcomes offers some insight into how the constellation of work that an LEF performs can contribute to school improvement and student learning.

Context is critically important to understanding the work of LEFs. The strategies they use and the outcome areas in which these strategies cluster vary tremendously from setting to setting and at different points in their histories. As local organizations, their strength is in understanding local needs and opportunities. As flexible organizations, LEFs also take a variety of organizational forms that can change over time. Being locally focused and flexible helps to shape LEF choices about where to focus the organization's energies. The next section takes up the question of how factors in the local setting shape the range of work across LEFs and the specific kinds of outcomes that they have.

WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR VARIATION AMONG LEFS?

In the previous section, we presented a conceptual framework for understanding the work of LEFs. However, an overall framework should not mask the wide variation that exists among LEFs in the strategies they use, the specific outcomes they work towards, and how they think about and articulate what they do. How LEFs respond to challenges in their local settings provides insight into the key influences on their development and character as organizations. Examining how these influences shape the work of LEFs helps to make sense of their variation.

A recent membership profile of approximately 80 local education funds (PEN Membership Profile, 1/24/03) highlights the “wide variation in the size and scope of the individual organizations.” Our review of the literature points to two spheres of influence that affect how LEFs define and carry out their work: 1) influences that are related to the internal organizational characteristics of LEFs, and 2) influences in the local context of the community and school district. Although we can describe how each sphere shapes a LEF’s work, it is important to note that the two spheres actually work in dynamic relationship to one another. For example, when a foundation drastically reduces its funding support for local public education, its decision reverberates inside a LEF organization, affecting the number and functions of staff members. This, in turn, influences the work that the LEF undertakes. Below we lay out a number of critical factors in both the organizational setting and the local context that influence LEFs’ work.

Influences related to organizational characteristics of LEFs

A LEF’s origins and stage of organizational development are important influences. The roots of a LEF and its founding constituency significantly shape the organization’s focus and strategies. Some LEFs began when civic-minded volunteers sought to secure additional resources for struggling public schools. Difficult economic times and tightening school finance systems led some communities to form private educational foundations to raise and distribute money. In such cases, LEFs derived their legitimacy from their ability to garner much-needed resources. In other communities, business leaders played important founding roles. In these cases the interests of business – a better-educated workforce, innovative management practices, and fiscal accountability – were often the prominent goals of LEFs and their legitimacy and authority derived from the economic power of corporations. In still other cases, advocates for students and their families led the efforts to establish LEFs. These LEFs frequently sought to hold their districts accountable for providing a quality education to students who had been traditionally disadvantaged in the education system. For example, Parents United for DC Public Schools was formed by an attorney and parent who directed the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights. This organization had been working with parents on a local level to help fulfill its mission to “provide high quality pro bono legal services to victims of discrimination and poverty.” The expertise of the founder led the organization to focus primarily on legal strategies as it tried to address the problems of DC public schools (Speicher, 1992). In contrast, the San Francisco Education Fund was formed to carry out an agenda formulated by the San Francisco Public Schools

Commission, a cooperative effort of the board of education, the state superintendent of public instruction, and civic and corporate leaders. A major recommendation from the commission was to address the growing isolation of schools from the community. Members of the commission formed the planning group that conceived and organized this LEF (Lies & Bergholz, 1988).

Transition from founding directors (first directors of early LEFs established in the 1980s) to newer executive directors is a necessary evolution that poses both opportunities and challenges to the work of LEFs. A survey of LEF leadership reports, “The median number of years executive directors have held their positions is four years” (Raphael & Anderson, 2001: 22). Differences between newer and longer-term executive directors impact the work of the entire organization. For example, the survey found, “Those [executive directors] in office for more than four years spend less time establishing or maintaining district relations than newer directors. Newer executive directors might spend more time than longer-term executive directors on activities that allow them to establish themselves in the community in their new role as director” (Raphael & Anderson, 2001: 14).

In an article about the changing role of LEFs, the authors report that longer-lived funds that “have established a reservoir of goodwill and trusting relationships through their work over the years are often well positioned to recommend new practices and then to follow up with help in implementation.” In contrast, they note, “Some of the newer partnerships, such as New York City and Chattanooga, which were formed in the late 1980s, jumped quickly into a policy-oriented approach and skipped over the lower-key stage experienced by older funds” (Useem & Nield, 1995: 179).

The values, expertise, experience, and networks of an LEF’s board and staff leaders — and the degree to which leadership is distributed within the organization — are an important set of influences. Founding executive directors and board members have played critical roles in charting the direction of LEFs. However, the “hands-on” involvement of early board members appears to be changing. The leadership survey cited above indicates that LEF board members’ involvement is decreasing, and that this shift could well be a healthy sign as board members exhibit greater confidence in the capacity of their executive directors and staffs to accomplish goals (Raphael & Anderson, 2001).

The LEF leadership study notes that many of the early founders tended to be white, female, highly educated, and “engaged in community politics through local political organizations, such as the League of Women Voters” (Raphael & Anderson, 2002: 10). In contrast, recent directors are less likely to live in the communities their organizations serve and more likely to spend their time establishing relationships (Raphael & Anderson, 2002). The study does not speculate on whether this shift results in a different LEF agenda or practices, and calls for more research.

In addition, the study “Leading Ways” (Raphael & Anderson, 2002) suggested that a potentially useful framework for understanding the role and contributions of LEFs is the concept of “adaptive leadership” (Heifetz, 1994). Adaptive leadership emphasizes the

mobilization of people throughout the organization and invested outsiders in the critical tasks of identifying challenges and solving problems. LEFs capacity for strategic planning/thinking is a strategy that contributes to their success in creating and sustaining systemic education improvement. (LEF directors ranked strategic planning second in the skills necessary for success in their jobs (Raphael & Anderson, 2001)). There is likely to be considerable variation in the degree to which LEF leaders are both adaptive and strategic.

The size, site of operation, revenue streams, staffing structures, and technological resources of LEFs are important elements of organizational infrastructure that influence what a LEF does and how it does it. Needless to say, there is considerable variation in infrastructure. The average organization in PEN's membership "has a revenue of \$685,000 and about four staff members" (PEN Membership Profile, 1/24/03). Useem (1999) points out that "LEFs were set up to be fast-moving, nimble, non-bureaucratic, and able to take on areas of work that posed greater organizational or political challenges to large and inflexible school bureaucracies (p. 3)." But a threat to such flexibility is the ongoing struggle to remain fiscally strong and to broker successfully for the resources needed to remain independent. Leadership in LEFs report they increasingly focus on issues of "management fundraising and coping with internal organizational challenges" (Raphael & Anderson, 2002: 8).

Revenue streams are critical and struggles to maintain relationships with funders and other providers of key resources can contribute to an organization's shift into "maintenance and survival" mode. Struggles to remain independent and broker resources for support are on-going. Useem notes that LEF boards and staff "wrestle constantly with questions of strategy, trying to figure out how to target their time and money in order to leverage their broadest long-term impact on educational practices and policies" (Useem, 1999: 25-26). Despite the need to be more strategic, executive directors of smaller organizations lack the time or staff resources for strategic planning (Raphael & Anderson, 2001: 15) LEFs forced to deal with issues of resources and time, tend to limit their focus on a few areas of work. She points to the specialties of particular LEFs – college access programs in Philadelphia and Bridgeport, public engagement work in Charlotte and eastern Kentucky – as examples of how leadership makes choices about where to focus the work to fit the organization's capacity.

Influences related to the local context of LEFs

Characteristics of the local environment can also affect how LEFs operate and the choices that they make. LEFs vary considerably in the breadth and complexity of their service area, whether they operate in urban or rural settings. Forward in the Fifth, the LEF in Berea, KY, serves 39 counties in Appalachia, including a congressional district with the lowest percentage of high school graduates of any district in the country. In contrast, New Visions for Public Schools in New York City, works with one district, New York City, but it happens to serve 1,200 schools and a very diverse population of 1.1 million students. In addition to structural features of the local settings in which LEFs work, there are local climate and cultural factors that affect their work. For example, the

business and political environments or the strength of local foundations and nonprofit sector organizations varies from place to place. Here we reference a few critical characteristics of local context among the many that can influence the strategies LEFs use.

The strength of the business community shapes the character and authority of LEFs. Communities differ in the degree to which the business community is organized and committed to civic participation. Larger economic forces of globalization and deregulation have made business more mobile than it was for much of the 20th century and many communities have lost major employers or find that their local banks are managed distantly. Businesses have clout in communities precisely because they are essential to economic health, but they are not tied geographically as they once were. In some locales, despite these trends, the business community participates actively and directly in civic life and contributes generously to charitable causes. In others, the business community is fragmented and contributions are related more directly to corporate interests.

Pittsburgh is an example of a city where the business community actively participates in the civic arena and has had a long-standing, strong organizational presence. The Allegheny Conference on Community Development drove urban revitalization projects and eventually turned its attention to improving the public schools. It lent an executive to head a new organization that became one of the first LEFs, the Allegheny Conference Education Fund. The fund has operated over the years to build strong collaborations between the business community and the public schools. Its legitimacy and authority in education reform stemmed in part from its association with the business community. This added to its ability to maintain public confidence in the schools despite fluctuations in district leadership and changing local economic fortunes (Portz, Stein & Jones, 1999; Lies & Bergholz, 1988). In contrast, Philadelphia's business community is fragmented and has not had a strong institution to mobilize its resources in the civic arena. There is relatively little representation of business on the Philadelphia Education Fund's board. As a result, it has few activities focused on business collaboration and draws few resources from the business community (Useem, 1999).

The Boston Plan for Excellence in Public Schools (BPE) was created in a context of pre-existing partnerships between the business community and other education stakeholders. The Boston Compact, a partnership of business and education leaders, had been meeting for several years to provide increased college and career opportunities for graduates of Boston public schools. In addition, Mayor Thomas Menino was committed and involved in the educational issues and Superintendent Thomas Payzant was open to external organizations. These factors allowed the BPE more leverage than other LEFs may experience in their local community (Lee, 1998). With an engaged business community, LEFs can more easily sustain their efforts over time and have greater success at focusing their work on policy or systemic issues (Useem & Neild, 1995).

The culture and leadership of the local school district(s) shapes the relationship that LEFs have and the nature of their work. Much of the writing on LEFs points to the complex and varied relationships that LEFs have with local school districts. A defining characteristic of a LEF is its relationship with the district. In some settings, LEFs have forged close relationships with districts and in others they have had more difficult interactions. As Useem and Neild (1995) describe, some districts reach out while others are hostile. In some settings, LEFs have been able to establish the role of “friendly critic” while in others they have had to play a more neutral role in order to maintain a relationship. The relationship that a LEF has with the district directly influences the strategies it can use and the areas where it can focus at policy level. Of course, with changing political and district leadership, the LEF relationship with the district can change as well. Useem points out that the flexibility of LEFs allows them to work at different levels, so they can maintain relationships with schools even when their relationship with the central office needs work. The story of the Boston Plan for Excellence is one where the LEF gained increasing insider status as a result of taking on the Annenberg Challenge role. However, as Neufeld and Guiney describe in their narrative of the Annenberg Challenge effort, BPE’s increasing insider status brought with it a set of challenges that threatened its ability to preserve its independent position as broker of resources (2003).

The local organizational landscape influences the agendas and work of LEFs. As we have noted elsewhere, the number of new organizations working to support and improve schools has grown; LEFs are not alone in contributing to the capacity for school improvement. For example, community organizing groups, service providers, or school to work intermediaries all work toward school improvement. As local organizations, LEFs are able to assess the organizational landscape they are working in and are flexible enough to shape themselves in relationship to strong organizations in their environment. The mix and strength of other local organizations influence the activities and mission that a LEF adopts.

Among the tools for constituency building in PEN’s *Guidebook of Strategic Interventions for Community Change* are the principles of community organizing. Community organizing groups have proven to be effective at building a strong base of involved citizens. In settings with strong community organizing and advocacy groups, LEFs may be able to partner with them to accomplish their constituency-building goals. The El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence, although not an LEF, offers an example of collaboration where the local Industrial Areas Foundation affiliate keeps the interests of community members in the picture. The New York City Annenberg Challenge group, New York Networks for School Renewal, included a range of groups. Along with the local LEF, New Visions, New York ACORN, part of a national network of community organizing groups representing thousands of low-income residents contributed its grass-roots perspective to the Annenberg Challenge effort in New York City.

Useem asserts that partnering is a key LEF strategy “for accomplishing goals and navigating treacherous political waters...” (1999: 5). The Bridgeport Public Education Fund identified an urgent need to address problems of children in the community. The

most expedient way to coordinate services for children and families was for the fund to partner with a local child advocacy coalition and another organization that specialized in preventing substance abuse. These three organizations share board members, advise one another, and work closely together to avoid duplicating efforts. For example, one of the partners addressed the need to build community awareness through its reports on the status of children in the community. Useem comments that in Bridgeport, “the urgency of the community’s problems calls for a coordinated response” (Useem, 1999: 6).

In Summary

Acknowledging the tremendous variation across LEFs, in this section we suggest that there is a set of factors that influence and shape their work. These factors are related to internal organization and external forces in the local context. By looking at how some of these factors systematically influence the choices that LEFs make, it is possible to begin making sense of the wide variation in LEF stories. As our research proceeds, we will continue to develop our understanding of the factors that shape LEF activity in local settings.

CONCLUSION

Research on intermediary organizations provides insight for situating Local Education Funds in the range of organizations working to improve public schools. Like other intermediaries, LEFs serve as brokers, operate as flexible organizations, and add value when they coordinate school improvement efforts. LEFs occupy a distinct space among intermediaries in that they are long-standing organizations with strong local ties that have a single focus on improving education. They bring to their work both a perspective of depth and quality and a belief in the value of innovation and experimentation. They also attract a wide array of stakeholders and they have long-term, multi-faceted relationships with local school districts. Because of their distinguishing characteristics, LEFs are well-positioned to contribute to public school reform efforts that are both deep and broad.

LEFs undertake a wide range of work and this paper offers a preliminary framework for conceptualizing that work and its potential outcomes. The framework identifies eight outcome areas that can contribute to building capacity in both the civic and school/district arenas to support school improvement. LEFs use a variety of strategies that contribute to civic capacity, school capacity or both, and LEFs vary in the degree to which they emphasize work toward building “civic capacity” and work towards building “school capacity.”

The strategies, focus, and contributions of LEFs are shaped by their local context and their unique organizational characteristics. We explored some of these influences, such as the origins of LEFs, the local business climate, and nature of leadership both inside the district and in the local community. By understanding the sources of variation among LEFs, we expect to deepen our understanding of the choices they make.

This paper lays out a preliminary framework for thinking about what kind of organization LEFs are, why they vary, and the contributions their work makes to improving public schools in local communities. The findings reported here represent the first stage of a larger research project to describe the work and contributions of Local Education Funds to school improvement in their communities. We will be interviewing key PEN and LEF staff as well as other individuals who can present a range of perspectives on LEFs’ work. The framework linking strategies to outcomes in the civic and school arenas and ultimately to school improvement will help us to structure the empirical research in the next phase, but we expect to refine the framework in light of our field research, interviews, and input from other key stakeholders.

Questions that remain for future work include:

- Does the category of “intermediary” offer a useful frame for describing LEFs as organizations? Are there other organizational frames we should consider?
- How do LEFs describe their own work and accomplishments? Do the outcome areas we have developed capture all that LEFs do?
- How does local context present opportunities and challenges for the work and contributions of LEFs?

- Where do LEFs fit in the constellation of work in a particular community; that is, what role do LEFs play in an overall local effort to improve public education? What contributions do other kinds of groups make and where do the efforts of organizations fall short? Are there other roles that LEFs could play?
- How does the work of LEFs to build civic capacity and school/district capacity combine? How do the eight outcome areas relate to each other?
- What are the different theories of change held by LEFs and how do they relate to PEN's theory of change? Is there an overarching theory of change that we can identify?
- What do LEFs gain from their affiliation in the national PEN network? What other affiliations do they have? What other kinds of support do they need?

Across the country in the last 20 years, leaders interested in the well-being of their local communities have committed themselves to improving public education. The many organizational strategies that have emerged illustrate the complex environment of school reform. We have focused here on LEFs' work in that environment. As locally-based organizations, they are both subject to and agents of change. LEFs can draw on their strengths as local organizations that convene a wide array of community players. Our review of the literature also indicates, however, that they can be fragile. They are vulnerable to changes in the local environment – a new superintendent, an industry move. Fortunately, LEFs are not alone in their settings or nationally in working toward the challenging mission of school improvement. PEN, in its publication *Communities at Work*, notes that LEFs should not see themselves as alone in the effort to change public schools to meet high standards of quality. “No single organization, no matter how well-organized or how representative of the community, can create systemic change by itself (p. 4)”. LEFs must be able to activate support for their work in both the civic and school/district arenas if they are to realize progress. We are looking forward to the empirical phase of this research effort in order to further understand the role that LEFs play in this rich and complicated environment of school reform.

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ⁱ The Annenberg Challenge was an unprecedented gift of \$500, 000 to American public schools from philanthropist, Walter Annenberg.

ⁱⁱ There have been numerous case studies of Boston's school reform endeavors (John Portz, Stein & Jones 1999; Cuban & Usdan 2003; Cibulka & Boyd 2001; Lee, as well as Guiney & Neufeld) that have told the story of the Boston Plan for Excellence contributing to the momentum for positive school reform in that city. One set of scholars make the point that it was "the support of the influential Boston Plan for Excellence in the Public Schools (the local education fund) has been of singular importance to these (school reform) efforts" (Cuban & Usdan, 2003)

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