

CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

A SERIES OF STORIES, RESULTS,
AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM
SEVEN YEARS OF
EDUCATION INVESTING BY
THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



THE ANATOMY OF **INFLUENCE**

THROUGH ITS EDUCATION INVESTMENTS, THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION HELPS ENSURE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE GRADUATE FROM SCHOOL PREPARED TO SUCCEED AS ADULTS BY SUPPORTING QUALITY SCHOOL CHOICES AND STRONG SCHOOL/COMMUNITY/FAMILY CONNECTIONS.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's education program invests roughly \$4.2 million per year. In an effort to make its relatively modest investments have maximum success, the Foundation strives to influence education policy and practice on a national level.

"The Foundation's goal is to make a contribution to influencing the policy environment in order to create more favorable conditions that improve outcomes for young people," said Bruno Manno, senior associate for education at Casey. "This includes analyzing existing policy and studying what is happening on the ground, then making recommendations that improve policy and help young people graduate ready to succeed as adults."

This publication looks at the various influence activities the Foundation's education program has supported in the past seven years. It also explains the logic behind this diverse set of investments, and it presents stories about two different influence investments that have led to concrete outcomes.

Influence Strategy Overview

According to Casey's education influence strategy, gathering evidence of promising and proven practices is where the hard work of influence all begins. The next steps are to identify target audiences, create messages based on the evidence, engage the audiences, and deliver messages in an accessible form.



“The Working Commission on Choice focused on understanding how choice works, rather than on ideology. The report showed that choice is an opportunity, if you do it right.” *Dr. Paul Hill, Center on Reinventing Public Education*

Gathering Evidence

Every year, Casey invests in organizations that document evidence about promising policy and practice and communicate it to audiences that can improve outcomes for children. Evidence is derived from strategic research, policy analysis, and program evaluation, so the Foundation supported activities in the three major choice arenas: district schools, charter schools, and vouchers.

To set the stage, Casey collaborated with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to fund the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education, a panel of experts that reviewed choice policy and practice in the United States and made recommendations for how to do choice better. The Brookings Institution published the results in a widely distributed report, *School Choice: Doing It the Right Way Makes a Difference*. Published in 2003, this report helped shift the national climate of opinion regarding school choice policies.

On District Schools

With Casey funding, the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington has conducted groundbreaking studies on school district finances and a portfolio approach to managing district schools. This work has influenced a number of major urban districts, including New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and New Orleans.

In another project, Casey contributed to a multi-author examination of special education policy and practice. In advance of the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2005, Progressive Policy Institute and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation published a book of this research and the resulting recommendations, and Congress incorporated many of its suggestions into the revised law.



SELECTED INFLUENCE RESULTS

- Supported the first national leadership organization for charter schools.
- Supported the first national charter research institute.
- 30+ publications on evidence-based school improvement policy and practice.
- 4 evidence-based improvements in the national special education law.
- 6 state charter laws improved.
- 4 cities have improved teachers' union contracts.
- 3,700 people who work for improved education policy and practice convened each year by nine organizations.
- 300 parents trained each year to understand student achievement data and No Child Left Behind.
- 700 philanthropists trained each year in effective education grantmaking practices.
- 40 community workers trained each year to lead after-school programs that improve student achievement.
- 300 charter teachers trained each year to improve outcomes for English language learners.

“Timing is important. Anticipate the issues, and give decision-makers information they can use, in an accessible form, when they need it.” *Andrew Rotherham, Education Sector*

Education Trust, another Casey grantee, is a national policy analysis and advocacy organization that works to close the achievement gap and establish equity in public education. In addition to making policy recommendations at the federal level, Education Trust trains parents to understand and use federal laws and student achievement data to advocate for quality public schools at the local level. Casey funding has enabled Education Trust to create resource materials for parents and community members.

In addition, the Foundation has supported research on the thorny subject of union contract provisions that might hamper school efforts to hire the best possible teachers for new jobs. A study by the New Teacher Project brought to light specific elements of union contracts that stymie school hiring. As a result, union contracts have been modified in four major urban districts — Baltimore, Memphis, New York, and Washington, DC.

On Charter Schools

Casey also supports research and analysis of charter schools. The Foundation helped organize a group of donors to support the National Charter School Research Project at the University of Washington, which focuses on critical topics such as improving student achievement in charters. Because the Project highlights both strengths and weaknesses of charter efforts, it has become the national “go to” organization for fair and balanced charter research.

In Washington, DC, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools analyzes state and federal charter school policies and student performance data in order to make evidence-based recommendations to improve state and federal charter laws. With funding from Casey and others, the Alliance has directly influenced charter law revisions in multiple

Collaboration Between Researchers and Advocates Brings Change to Denver Schools

An unusual collaboration between a national research institute and a local community organizing group has contributed to positive changes in the way an urban school district thinks about how it distributes its resources. Flexible funding and a quick response time on the part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation made the collaboration possible.

For three years, Casey had supported the efforts of Metro Organizations for People (MOP) to build public will among parents and community leaders concerned about the achievement gap in Denver's public schools. Working with MOP, citizens learned to understand data and use it in conversations with public officials, journalists, and philanthropists.

MOP leaders discovered that public officials were as confused by the Denver district budget as they were, so MOP asked Casey to recommend someone to help decode the budget. Casey referred MOP

to Dr. Marguerite Roza at the Casey-supported Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington.

Roza had already done a lot of research on district budgets and concluded that a weighted student funding formula is one good way to fairly distribute resources among schools. Roza researched Denver's district budget and then presented her findings to MOP leaders.

MOP commissioned and then launched an accessible publication based on Roza's research at an event in Denver that attracted a diverse audience and garnered significant local media coverage. The Denver school district is now considering a student-based budgeting approach.

This unique collaboration points to some interesting lessons. First, when community groups partner with credentialed research institutions, public

officials take community members very seriously. Second, a local advocacy group can rally diverse players to a research publication launch event and increase the impact of research. Third, the experience showed that when research results are translated into common language, diverse audiences, including parents and community leaders, can use research effectively to ask for changes in policy.

“Decision-makers respect people with credentials. By partnering with a reputable research institute, community people can get taken very seriously, which can lead to real gains for our children.” *Mike Kromrey, Metro Organizations for People*

A Modest Grant for Special Education Research Leads to National Policy Change

By making a modest investment in a series of research papers and a conference on special education, Casey contributed to significant improvements in the national special education law.

In 2000, Casey gave a grant to Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) to help fund a conference on special education and to commission several conference papers for it. The conference papers became the book *Rethinking Special Education for a New Century*, published by PPI and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

The 2001 book, which included diverse ideological viewpoints, was widely disseminated to Capitol Hill offices just as the Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act came up for reauthorization. Three contributors to the book subsequently served on the President's Commission on Special Education.

The commission report included recommendations that tracked closely with those in the book. Many of these recommendations made it into the revised legislation, including new funding for prevention activities, allocations to cover the high cost of services for severely disabled children, and a requirement that children receive evidence-based interventions.

This effort offers important lessons for people who want to influence national policy. First, the book was able to set the context for the debate because it came out before the reauthorization conversation

started. Also, the book presented information in accessible language and brought solid evidence to bear on questions that legislators wanted answered. Finally, ideological diversity among book contributors legitimized the volume on both sides of the aisle.

states and has also developed recommendations to improve the charter provisions in the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The Alliance pursues a proactive communications strategy on charter issues and has successfully injected a more nuanced, balanced view of charter schools into national and state news coverage.

In another project, Casey support to Progressive Policy Institute and Education Sector led to a series of in-depth case studies of charter schools by state. These studies contribute multi-dimensional data and analysis of charter school performance to fill out the annual snapshot provided by the national standardized test given to fourth and eighth graders in public schools.

On Vouchers

The Foundation has funded a variety of voucher evaluation efforts in order to bring evidence to bear in the national debate about vouchers. The Urban Institute has studied Florida's school accountability system, which includes a voucher component. In Washington, DC, Georgetown University is leading an ongoing qualitative study of families and students in the DC voucher program to augment data and analysis coming out of the federally mandated quantitative evaluation of the program.

“Think critically about your audience from the start of your research project, and use common sense to figure out how to reach its members.” *Dr. Marguerite Roza, Center on Reinventing Public Education*

For the Big Picture

To encourage the use of new, non-ideological language in the national school improvement conversation, Casey supports the work of Education|Evolving in Minnesota. A project of the Center for Policy Studies in Minneapolis, Education|Evolving has developed a concept called “open sector” to guide education policy discussions. “Open sector” makes the case for a system of new, innovative schools that would operate parallel to the existing school system and create opportunities for collaboration and competition.

Communicating Clear Messages to Targeted Audiences

Great evidence isn't worth much if you fail to identify your target audiences, formulate your messages, and communicate them effectively. Casey's influence grantees have developed a number of great ways to spread the message to the Foundation's target audiences of donors, civic and community leaders, policymakers, and families.

Building Public Will

Building public will, or mobilizing citizens to learn about and urge policymakers to take action on an issue, is an effective way to create pressure for change on public officials. It typically includes face-to-face trainings for citizens, ongoing coaching from community

organizers or advocates, and dissemination of data and policy information in common language that diverse people can understand and use.

In Denver, support from Casey allowed Metro Organizations for People to gather and train inner-city school parents who then put pressure on the school district to find a way to make school budgets in affluent and poor neighborhoods more equitable.

In Kentucky, an advocacy group called the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence received Casey funding to educate and rally citizens to urge state government to implement promised school reforms. Persistent citizen pressure proved essential for keeping implementation of Kentucky's contentious 1990 school reform legislation on track.

Getting People Together

Getting people together to network, brainstorm, and share best practices via conferences, meetings, workshops, and trainings is another good way to spread the message. The Foundation supports many gatherings each year. Philanthropy Roundtable, Grantmakers for Education, and the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers all convene philanthropists.

National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, NewSchools Venture Fund, and Black Alliance for Education Options gather education thinkers and practitioners. National Council of

“The idea is to use convenings to allow people to learn directly from one another, not just from the convener.”

Julie Petersen, NewSchools Venture Fund

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN MEASURING INFLUENCE

- Is your influence activity evidence-based and well articulated?
- Who is your target audience?
- Is your audience consuming and using your work?
- Is anything changing as a result? Are school outcomes improving for children? Is the achievement gap closing? Are young people graduating ready to succeed as adults?



La Raza brings together charter school teachers and principals who work with English language learners. National Urban League assembles community workers who teach after-school programs. Education Trust convenes parents and community members, and Teach For America gathers its alumni and helps them move into school leadership positions.

Publishing and Disseminating Documents

Without exception, every influence grantee publishes and disseminates documents both online and in the world. Casey support has enabled many grantees to publish case studies, research results, policy analyses, issue briefs, and program evaluations. Some create training materials, implementation handbooks, resource manuals, and guidebooks. A number of grantees have established national reputations for their virtual communications, including Education Sector and Education Trust.

Having Face-to-Face Meetings

Face-to-face meetings are an essential component of any influence strategy. Serving on boards is one way to spread the message in person. For example, National Council of La Raza's vice president for education sits on many boards in order to make sure that the needs of English language learners are part of major education policy discussions. Many grantees also do speaking engagements for target audiences and make their slide

“Make use of electronic technology to distribute publications. It’s less expensive than printing, it’s easy for many users to access, and it makes it possible to update your publication.” *Jon Schroeder, Education |Evolving*



LESSONS FOR INFLUENCE ORGANIZATIONS

- Make sure that evidence about what works drives your policy work.
- In politics, immediate imperatives shape decision-making. Give policymakers actionable ideas, because they want to know what they can do right now.
- Anticipate the issues and get out in front with evidence and concrete suggestions.
- Give decision-makers information when they need it in an accessible form.
- Collaborate with other groups with overlapping interests.
- Be a credible and useful source of information.
- Stay focused on the end goal. Work with both sides of the aisle. Avoid an “allies and enemies” mind set.
- Reach diverse audiences through national and regional networks.
- Keep your finger on the pulse of what the media are covering and tie that into your communications strategy.
- Public officials change with elections, so keep your contact list updated and interact often.
- When presenting research findings, figure out the key points and let go of the rest.
- Write documents well. Hire journalists and other professional writers. Be deliberate about dissemination. Make effective use of electronic technology for distribution.
- Not everyone will read a 60-page report. Produce a short version, and use short documents as show-and-tell tools during one-to-ones.
- Integrate your publication into discussions at conferences, workshops, and trainings.
- Be honest about what you don't know.

presentations available on their websites. In addition, the importance of talking to decision-makers and their associates one-to-one cannot be overestimated. Perhaps the most time-consuming of all influence activities and also the most difficult to measure in terms of impact, one-to-one conversations play a key role in swaying opinions.

Communicating with the Media

No influence strategy is complete without press releases, press conferences, and rapid response to calls and inquiries from journalists. Casey influence grantees make it a point to cultivate relationships with reporters and help them do their jobs when it comes to writing education stories. One organization, the National Charter School Research Project, has recently published a guide to help journalists interpret charter research and ask researchers the right questions.

Next Steps for Casey and Influence

Casey's education program will continue to refine and move forward with its influence investment strategy as it focuses its other resources on district feeder patterns, networks of charter schools, and continuity in public education from pre-kindergarten through college.

LESSONS FOR DONORS

- Be willing to step out of your world. Be open-minded to practices that might not fit your ideological viewpoint.
- The policy process is long and involves many actors, so clearly define your contribution and understand how it fits into the bigger picture. No single program activity can close the achievement gap on its own.
- To influence policy and practice, invest in organizations that gather evidence and communicate it effectively to targeted audiences.
- Provide flexible funding and consistent support to grantees over a period of years.
- Support organizational development and infrastructure costs.
- Set aside some flexible, discretionary funds each year so you can respond quickly to emerging opportunities.
- Increase your influence by contributing more than money. Make intellectual contributions when asked, including assisting grantees with strategic thinking, serving on grantee boards and advisory groups, and facilitating meetings and trainings.
- Look for gaps in the field and fund organizations that fill them.
- Make friends with program officers at other foundations.
- Co-invest with bigger donors.
- Participate in national networks.
- Connect grantees to resources and others in the field. Encourage grantees with overlapping interests to collaborate.
- Be honest about what you don't know.



CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP
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