

Portland Schools Foundation

Case Study: Calling the Question Portland Schools Foundation (PSF) Portland, OR

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Public Education Network (PEN) is a national organization of local education funds (LEFs) and individuals working to improve public schools and build citizen support for quality public education in low-income communities across the nation. PEN and its 83 LEF members work in 34 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico on behalf of 11.5 million children in more than 1,600 school districts, seeking to bring the community voice into the debate on quality public education in the firm belief that an active, vocal constituency will ensure every child, in every community, a quality public education.

The Portland Schools Foundation is an independent, community-based organization with the mission of mobilizing ideas, leadership, political support, and money necessary to ensure a first-rate education for every child, in every public school, in every Portland neighborhood. To do this, the Foundation:

- Invests in teaching and learning. Provides venture capital to principals, teachers, and parents to accelerate academic achievement.
- Mobilizes the community. Marshals the talent and resources of parents, citizens, and businesses to strengthen every public school.

Overview

Procuring resources for public school reform can be a powerful focusing incentive. The Portland Schools Foundation (PSF), a sophisticated LEF with a strong leader, has learned how to leverage its funding and relationships to call the question and bring local and national attention to bear on local educational issues.

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Background

In 2000, PSF launched the “Closing the Opportunity and Achievement Gap for Every Child” initiative. Its vision was to ensure that Portland would work as a community to make “every school become a vibrant learning community where every child is learning and achieving at high levels.” After identifying a lack of commitment and leadership from the city school board and school system administration, PSF began holding a series of community forums to discuss priorities in education. These forums re-engaged the public in advocating for policy change and moved the strategic plan forward. Meanwhile, PSF also encouraged broad-based engagement around its action agenda to ensure teaching quality by creating an alliance of key parent- and community-based organizations. PSF worked with the education community to establish district- and superintendent-supported community coalitions and advisory committees to guide development of policy targets and implementation.

This work facilitated conversations in Portland around the achievement gap and use of data to drive reform inside the schools. Portland began collecting data by student groups for the mayor’s office and community groups even before No Child Left Behind called for disaggregation by subgroups. During this part of the work, the community determined that teacher support was crucial to improving schools and closing gaps for all students. Likewise, PSF believed that teaching quality was at the heart of any LEF’s work.

Throughout the public engagement process, PSF advocated strongly for funding for the Portland schools. Despite the statewide trend to cut taxes, the citizens of Portland voted to tax themselves to support their public schools in 2003, and voted down a ballot measure that would have repealed the tax in 2004. PSF also worked toward electing a new majority to an ineffective school board. In 2004, a newly elected school board voted unanimously to work toward closing the achievement gap and improving the Portland schools. Soon thereafter, the school board hired a new superintendent, Vicki Phillips, based on her reputation as a school leader in teaching and learning.

PSF’s Advocacy:

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More recently, adequate and stable funding for PPS again became a problem. The measure giving

the schools \$90 million in local funding expired, reducing the PPS budget from \$391 million in 2004-05 to about \$330 million in 2006-07. This budget gap has already resulted in five schools closures and the elimination of 245 teacher positions. More school closures and teacher layoffs are expected.

PSF has been diligent about partnering with national organizations to procure funding and resources so that the work of the district can move forward. The Meyer Memorial Trust donated funds for district redesign and community engagement. The Spenser Foundation invested in developing capacity for independent data analysis. PSF recruited the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to invest heavily in secondary school reform, district redesign, and community engagement. Additionally, PSF has worked closely with Barnett Berry, President of the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) to understand and frame issues of teaching quality within the district.

Building on the Annenberg Relationship – The Teaching and Learning Review

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation supported the work of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University to conduct a full “Teaching and Learning Review” of programs and services available to students in Portland’s middle and high schools. This initiative, launched jointly by the district and PSF, was designed to help the community take stock of the educational assets available and build internal capacity. Teams comprised of district staff, school-based leaders, community partners, and Annenberg staff worked together to address three key questions:

1. Where is effective teaching and learning occurring? How can that work be acknowledged, supported and built upon?
2. Where is there a need for added investment and improvement?
3. What immediate and longer-term actions can the central office, school leaders, families, students, and community members take to strengthen the quality of teaching and learning?

During the months of February 2006 and March 2006, six trained teams conducted two-day reviews of curriculum and instruction in three representative Portland middle schools and high schools. The first day focused on educator practice; the second on how students learn. Teams collected information by reviewing school profiles, observing classes, and interviewing individuals and groups of students and staff.

Though the report’s release has been delayed, the collected information will eventually be used to make recommendations about what is working well in Portland middle and high schools and what needs support or merits replication. It will also identify barriers to teaching and learning that need addressing and will be used for planning for SY2006-07.

The Power of Networking – The Story of the Center for Teaching Quality

Through support from the Public Education Network (PEN) and Goldman Sachs' Teacher Quality initiative, CTQ has worked with PSF to expand the scope of work on teacher quality within the district and has provided PSF with good research and additional professional and funding connections.

Commissioning a Framework to Improve Teaching Quality

PSF understood that Berry and the CTQ have a national presence and wanted to learn from that. They asked CTQ to take a step back from Portland and to think about what *any* district could do to get the most leverage for improving teaching quality. PSF asked CTQ to create a "Top Ten" list for assessing the effectiveness of the school community in ensuring teaching quality.

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During the spring of 2005, CTQ conducted a number of focus groups and interviews with key union and district officials, middle and high school principals, and teachers. The interviews were to provide CTQ, PSF, and PPS with information about the teaching quality measures and supports that were already present in the district. The interviews focused on recruitment and hiring, teacher education, professional development, and how the district could encourage its most effective teachers to teach in hard-to-staff schools. CTQ took the information gathered in the interviews, analyzed it, and developed a blueprint for how the Portland school community could develop a system that would improve teaching quality. The framework was devised as a conversation-starter with the district and the community: what were the most pressing teaching quality issues facing the public schools and how could the community systematically address those challenges? CTQ commended PPS for its commitment to benchmark itself against "such a comprehensive model for teaching quality."

Attempts to Gather Data on Support for New Teachers

In order to improve the mentoring, induction and retention of new teachers in the district, CTQ, in partnership with the PSF, PPS, and the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT), developed a teacher survey. The survey asked new teachers about the type of supports available, the availability and effectiveness of mentoring and teacher preparation, career plans, and basic demographic and teacher assignment information. It was generally agreed that the survey was a high quality instrument and plans were made to introduce the survey to teachers for two weeks in March 2006. The contract negotiations that year were particularly strained and the LEF made the decision not to "ruffle any feathers;" the survey was put on hold. As a compromise, the union did agree to allow data collection through focus groups. Berry conducted a handful of focus groups with teachers on what kinds of support system existed in the district and how teachers felt these could be strengthened.

New Teacher Induction

Portland, like many urban districts inducts hundreds of new teachers every year. PSF recognized that the district's new teacher induction program could be improved, and commissioned Berry to drill down and figure out what a state-of-the-art model for teacher induction would look like. After hiring Berry and putting CTQ in touch with the appropriate district staff, PSF exited the discussions.

CTQ and the district have been working to develop a district-wide teacher induction and mentoring program.

Since that time, CTQ and the district have been working to develop a systemic plan for an improved district-wide teacher induction and mentoring program based on previous research and focus group findings. Using data gathered in the focus groups and in the Annenberg Teaching and Learning Review, the CTQ put out *New Teacher Induction: Investing in What Matters Most for Teachers and Students in PPS*.

Resources Begat Resources

With the support and leadership of Berry, the George Lucas Education Foundations (GLEF) formed a collaboration with PSF and the district. GLEF provided a \$35,000 in-kind contribution toward the production of a video. The DVD featured one of PPS's high quality, high-performing schools – Faubion Elementary School. The video profiled the elementary school and focused on teacher leadership and building a professional learning community “that believes that all children are capable of learning at high levels.” The eight minute video is linked to GLEF's global website and is used by Berry in national presentations. While teacher quality is not the sole purpose of this DVD, this work exemplifies the power of combining data and images in addressing school reform and teaching quality issues. As CTQ comes to better understand Portland's political needs and challenges, it has provided PSF connections to research on teacher quality and national education experts.

Lessons Learned

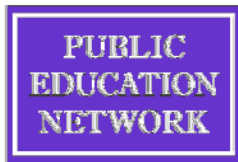
By participating in the Teaching Quality initiative, the Portland Schools Foundation felt “smarter and more aware of how critical teaching quality is to improving education.” PSF, like many educational organizations had been “nudging around the edges” until the Public Education Network and Goldman Sachs urged them to learn more about and focus on teacher quality. By participating in this initiative, PSF had access to funds and human resources such as Barnett Berry at CTQ, William Miles at PEN, and the Annenberg Institute staff, which allowed it to focus on teaching quality more strategically and forcefully.

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Procuring these resources equipped PSF with tools and relationships that facilitated the LEF’s role as a key partner in accelerating the work. However, as with the teacher survey, PSF also learned how easily the work could be delayed or halted. It is difficult and trying work to maintain pressure and community support on the district so it will enact necessary changes. Despite a relatively successful public engagement campaign and many policy wins, PSF still struggles to build “fire in the belly” of the community to make the district do more of the necessary work quicker.

Portland Schools Foundation

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Our Vision

Every day, in every community, *every* child in America benefits from a quality public education.

Our Mission

To build public demand and mobilize resources for quality public education for *all* children through a national constituency of local education funds and individuals.

PEN's Theory of Action

The national office of PEN issued a broad and ambitious charge to LEFs by developing a theory of action for the policy initiatives in 2001. The theory of action asserted that the combination of public engagement and specific school reform goals would result in sustained policy and practice and the public taking responsibility for public schools. It argued that too many school systems lack accountability to their local constituencies, and that the reforms undertaken by school professionals or brokered in back rooms without public engagement are likely to be faddish and ephemeral.

The theory of action identified three categories of the public: policymakers; organized groups; and the public at large. For each, it spelled out strategies and tactics by which LEFs cultivate public engagement: advocacy with policymakers; community strategic planning with organized groups; and community organizing with the public at large. The theory of action went on to provide examples of these strategies in action. It ended with a vision of the long-term goal:

...to create public demand for good public schools and to have this demand actually improve public schools. When we're done, we envision communities with a substantive education agenda making real changes in student achievement. We envision a strong community voice outside the schools — with its own power and constituency — that argues for improvement and helps guide changes. We envision robust community organizations that always are in the process of building new leadership and sustaining involvement. And we envision an accountability system that places shared responsibility for success with everyone in the community. (p. 11).