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## **A Partnered Approach to School Change in a Rural Community: Reflections and Recommendations**

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# A Partnered Approach to School Change in a Rural Community: Reflections and Recommendations

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## Introduction

Efforts to improve U.S. schools are critically important to preparing students with skills to adapt to new technologies, enter the workforce, and become ethical, engaged citizens. Many decisions about education policies and practices are made at the local level, by school boards and administrators. Community-based foundations, therefore, are in a unique position to support and work with schools in taking a comprehensive, systematic approach to improving the lives of children and youth.

Aside from the obvious asset of financial resources, foundations are able to be strategic in their efforts and offer lengthy, ongoing support — a commitment critical to success. Foundations can become conveners and thought partners, bringing in outside perspectives and resources to tackle some of education's most thorny challenges. In doing so, they can improve learning experiences, well-being, and long-term outcomes for young people. This work has broad implications in small communities: Local education systems drive the economic landscape by training the future workforce.

Despite these opportunities, foundations face many challenges in engaging with local schools. Consider the measurable goal of raising student achievement, which involves a range of factors: school readiness, home environment, school leadership, cultural norms for achievement, and others (Kania, Kramer, & Russell, 2014). Some elements, like home environment and school

## Key Points

- With so many education policies and practices made at the local level, community-based foundations are in a unique position to support their local school districts in taking a comprehensive, systematic approach to improving the lives of young people. This article describes a research–practice partnership designed to produce school improvement in a rural community in western Virginia and reflects on a three-year collaboration among The Alleghany Foundation, two school districts, and the University of Virginia.
- The partners identified challenges and strengths within the school districts and the community; gathered and analyzed existing district data and new findings from interviews and surveys of stakeholders; identified problems and promising programs to address them; and developed and communicated a plan for action. Now, the schools, working with the foundation and the community, are implementing that plan.
- The collaboration provided clear evidence that sustained change will occur only if it aligns with the goals of school leaders and fully engages members of the community, and it sheds light on the unique challenges and strengths present in a small rural community that will influence foundation work. The process also produced five recommendations for foundations that seek a partnered approach to school change.

## *In engaging in this work, the foundation, school, and university partners learned important lessons about the challenges of creating inclusive community change.*

readiness, may be outside of the scope of the traditional K–12 foci but have critical implications for student performance. Cultural norms for achievement, on the other hand, may be so deeply entrenched in tradition that making headway might seem impossible. The quality of school leadership and curricular initiatives are closely linked to schools' strategic planning, which is directed by the school board and tethered to high-stakes accountability standards. Given these intense conditions, school leaders may not welcome foundations as yet another voice in decision-making.

As Easterling, Arnold, Jones, and Smart (2013) observe,

Highly successful collaboratives — the ones that generate synergistic, community-wide impacts — do more than align the activities of members. They also find smarter, more comprehensive ways of addressing the issues that are at the root of whatever problem they are working to solve. (p. 108)

The goal of generating synergistic, community-wide impacts motivated The Alleghany Foundation to initiate a partnership organized around a broad but central question: How can it engage with the education community and fund a process of school improvement that is coherent, measurable, and sustainable? In engaging in this work, the foundation, school, and university partners learned important lessons about the challenges of creating inclusive community change. Some of these lessons are specific to the community, but many are more general and bring important perspectives to broader issues concerning philanthropy in small communities.

In this article, we describe an ongoing partnership and the seven steps taken as a result of this partnership. Then, we present three key observations that have broad implications for foundations striving for inclusive community change. We close with five recommendations for foundations striving toward a partnered approach to school improvement.

### **Context for the Work**

The Alleghany Foundation is one of approximately 300 health conversion foundations in the U.S. (Niggel & Brandon, 2014), with assets of \$60 million and disbursements of between \$2 million and \$5 million per year. Over the past three years, the foundation has invested between 25 percent and 50 percent of those funds toward education in the region. The consistent focus of the foundation's education committee has been to move the schools "from good to great" — to create a world-class education system in a small, rural area.

The Alleghany Highlands region has a population of 21,400 and is served by two school districts: Alleghany County Public Schools (ACPS), with about 2,000 students, and Covington City Public Schools (CCPS), with about 1,000 students. The districts' students are predominantly white (88 percent and 76 percent, respectively), but both enroll a significant number of African Americans (6 percent and 14 percent) and students from other ethnic groups. Roughly half of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, suggesting considerable poverty in the area. Student enrollment in ACPS declined 9 percent over the past four years, leading to significant funding and staffing challenges. Enrollment in CCPS is small, leading to limited course options for high school students. Both districts saw turnover in superintendents over the past several years (and during the course of this partnership).

It may be surprising that there are two separate districts serving a relatively small region, and prior to the start of the partnership there were intense debates about a merger. "There is a longstanding rivalry between the two school divisions," one of the superintendents observed.

While small, they are surprisingly typical of the nation's school districts and representative of rural districts. Of 13,768 U.S. school districts, ACPS is larger than the median and CCPS is only somewhat smaller (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Twenty-four percent of U.S. students attend rural schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), and rural communities pose unique strengths and challenges that need to be considered in the context of school-improvement efforts. Rural areas have difficulty recruiting and retaining talented teachers (Miller, 2012) and obtaining professional development opportunities (Nugent et al., 2017). Small and shrinking enrollments have large impacts in school districts, which may contain only three to five schools and struggle to meet student needs. Evidence for what works in rural schools is sparse; most education research focuses on suburban and urban schools (Autio & Deussen, 2017).

But rural schools have important strengths. Rural areas often have close-knit communities — families and students know administrators and teachers outside of school, and schools can be a center for community life (American Youth Policy Forum, 2010). Existing “place attachment” in rural schools can improve instructional relevance by leveraging students’ immediate community activities into instruction (Biddle & Azano, 2016).

In 2014, The Alleghany Foundation initiated efforts to engage with schools by gathering and listening to teachers from both districts. An education consultant to the foundation, who is also a member of the community, interviewed teachers to learn more about what they saw as opportunities to help move their classrooms “from good to great.” She then gathered a small group of teachers from both districts to identify programs for professional development that would help address the needs they identified. A few possible programs surfaced, and learning trips to investigate them involved teachers, principals, school board members, superintendents, members of the foundation’s education committee, and other participants. One such program, the *Responsive*

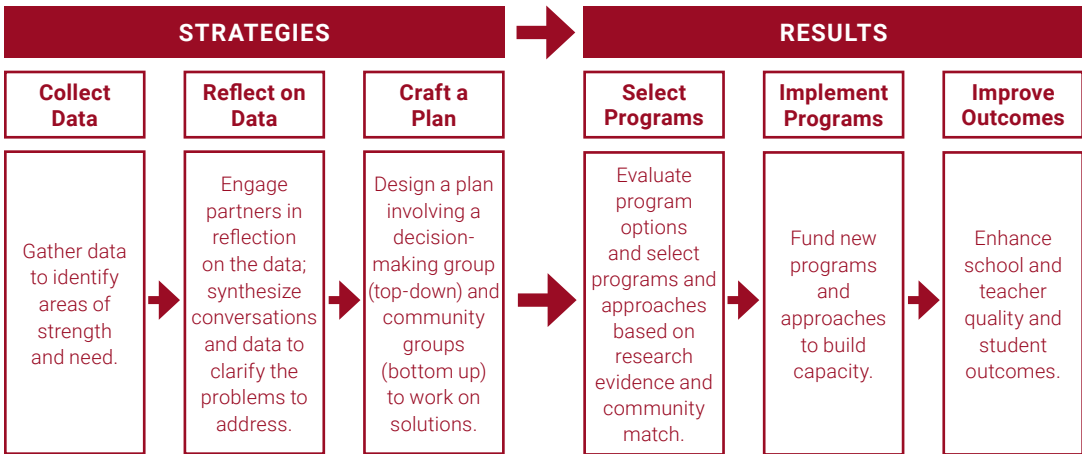
*There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement. As a result, it is essential to engage people at all levels of an education system to create change in that system.*

*Classroom*® approach, led the foundation to the University of Virginia (UVA) to meet Sara E. Rimm-Kaufman, who had just completed a large, randomized, controlled trial of the approach (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014). The ensuing conversation exposed a challenging reality: There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement. As a result, it is essential to engage people at all levels of an education system to create change in that system.

Rimm-Kaufman was seeking new opportunities to translate research to practice in schools. UVA is a large state university located 110 miles east of the Alleghany Highlands. U.S. Department of Education training grants available at UVA opened up possibilities to engage students and postdoctoral fellows in the partnership work without any additional cost.

The initial conversation among the foundation, school district, and university partners occurred at a particular moment when the education research field was showing new interest in public scholarship involving two elements: translation and engagement. Translation involves effective and accessible communication of research findings to stakeholders who need this information; engagement involves research that is done in partnership with stakeholders to solve pressing, tangible problems (Oakes, 2018). Also during this period, the pendulum in education research was swinging away from a narrow model focused on establishing evidence on whether programs can work, and toward a broader view that examines how to make programs work reliably and across diverse contexts (Bryk, 2015).

**FIGURE 1** Theory of Change for the Alleghany Highlands-UVA Collaborative Project



Related to these shifts, research-practice partnerships (RPPs) have emerged as a mechanism for bridging the gap between what we know works in education and what policies and practices are actually implemented in schools (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Research-practice partnerships involve a variety of stakeholders (e.g., researchers, district leaders) focused on problems of education practice for an extended period of time. The work is designed around mutual goals and involves the analysis of local data (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013) to identify challenges and guide recommendations.

This initial learning visit and the follow-up conversations with the school districts led to the creation of the Alleghany Highlands-University of Virginia Collaborative Project, by which the district, foundation, and university partners initiated a partnered process of school change. This RPP’s theory of change envisioned:

1. gathering data to identify areas of strength and need;
2. engaging partners in reflection on the data, synthesizing data, and discussions to clarify the problems to address;
3. crafting a plan for change;

4. evaluating program options and select programs based on ideas emerging from community members, the districts’ strategic plans, and evidence of effectiveness; and
5. funding of new programs and approaches, which would lead to
6. improved school quality and student outcomes. (See Figure 1.)

### Seven Steps in the Partnered Work of School Change

Our RPP began an effort to improve the experiences and outcomes of children and youth in the Alleghany Highlands. We established a series of steps, some of which emphasized the work of the university and others that accentuated the role of the foundation and districts. The process that ensued was iterative. For instance, we conducted one broad and unfocused data-collection effort and discussed the meaning of the data, then conducted a more focused set of surveys to identify problems to solve. The work was dynamic as well: At times, the district partners led and the foundation and university partners accommodated their interests; at other times, the foundation or the university led and the other partners followed. Individuals entered and exited the process throughout. Both superintendents assumed their roles after the project was

underway. As with any community project, some participants stayed engaged in the work throughout and others joined or left at various points. Despite these dynamics, systematic steps were taken to achieve our goals.

The first step involved communication, developing trust, establishing the partnership, and a small financial commitment to the UVA team to engage in partnered research. The university team met with district stakeholders and the foundation, and learned about the economic and historical contexts for school change. The foundation brought the partnership opportunity to both school boards for their approval. The university team received a small grant from the foundation, and the school and university partners established memoranda of agreement to set the stage for data-collection efforts.

The second step was a data-based scan to identify needs and select surveys to assess the lived experiences in schools. Districts are awash in data, but most of the indicators (e.g., state math and reading achievement scores) give few insights into the root causes of problems. This step was guided by a broad question: What information do we need to understand and improve schools in this region? The university team was from outside of the community and therefore brought an independent perspective; they were tasked with initial data collection. The team conducted initial brief interviews and surveys with 70 people in the community, including administrators, teachers, students, recent district graduates, parents of children with special needs, and families with young and school-age children. In this step, we strived to cover a broad area. The objective was to identify points of tension, opportunities, and areas of need to inform a more focused and systematic data-collection effort in our next step.

The research team synthesized the information and shared the findings with superintendents and the foundation education board. The group assessed the meaning of the findings and discussed what to focus on and measure in next steps. A few themes emerged, including parent involvement in schools, teachers' feelings of effectiveness, the cultural norms for achievement

*A few themes emerged, including parent involvement in schools, teachers' feelings of effectiveness, the cultural norms for achievement in the schools, program coherence and commitment to programs, and students' perception of engagement in learning.*

in the schools, program coherence and commitment to programs, and students' perception of engagement in learning. Next, the university partners identified well-validated survey measures based on emergent themes and consulted the school superintendents to make the final selection. The surveys selected had been developed by education research organizations, including the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, Panorama Education, and various others (e.g., Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, n.d.). Such surveys were ideal for tapping into the lived experience in schools from the point of view of administrators, teachers, other school personnel, students, and families.

The next step involved surveying education stakeholders to get a data-based perspective of their needs. In essence, we used data-collection efforts as a way of listening to the voices of many people in the community. We asked teachers if they believed that administrators, teachers, and parents shared a common vision of student success. Students responded to surveys about whether they tried hard in school and sensed that their teachers expected them to do their best work. Families answered questions about whether their child's school was welcoming and if they felt sure about how to communicate with teachers, administrators, and staff.

Surveys were completed by 38 administrators and nonteaching personnel, 233 teachers, and 2,135 students in grades 3 through 12. Response rates were high, representing more than 78 percent of educators and 87 percent of students in the two districts. The research team and the districts reached out to families via email, paper survey options were offered at the schools, and ads were run in local newspapers. Despite those efforts, only 133 families responded — a response rate of roughly 10 percent. Each district also shared data from other sources, including Virginia Department of Education achievement figures and information from a statewide Youth Risk and Behavior Survey.

The fourth step involved data analysis and synthesis. The university team analyzed the data and identified strengths upon which to build and areas in need of growth. For example, the surveys showed that teachers in both districts felt effective in their instruction. More than 80 percent of teachers reported they could craft good questions for their students, use a variety of assessment strategies, and engage in other instructional strategies that indicated high quality. The students themselves generally reported a high level of engagement in learning (ranging from 96 percent of third- to fifth-graders to 73 percent of high schoolers), stating that they tried hard in school, paid attention in class, and worked very hard on their studies. These were strengths to leverage in next steps.

As areas in need of growth, teachers in both districts thought their schools had difficulty creating and sustaining a coherent vision of successful student outcomes; only half believed that administrators, teachers, and parents shared a common vision of school success. And less than one-third of the teachers reported that programs and initiatives were given the time and support necessary to be successful; administrators and nonteaching personnel also expressed the need for focus on this area. This result was not surprising in light of recent turnover in district leadership and the prevalence of this challenge nationally. Yet it was an important warning, given the temptation of organizations to shift course instead of focusing

on a set of long-term goals and the sustained work necessary to reach them.

The fifth step involved engaging district leaders and community members in a process of reflection on the data, with the goal of honing in on key community problems. The results were shared with the superintendents and the foundation's education committee. The group considered whether the data made sense (or not), matched what they expected, or gave them new information. Many of the findings confirmed what the district leaders knew, gave those intuitions greater credibility, and created a sense of urgency for change. As one community member remarked, "We didn't experience shock. We felt confirmation."

One set of results signaled challenges related to engaging families with their children's schools. Educators expressed doubts about the extent to which parents held high standards for their children's achievement and pressed for better school performance. Although the majority of educators felt they were reaching out to parents to develop common goals and strengthen student learning, fewer than 15 percent of educators reported that parents supported teachers' efforts, did their best to help their children learn, and attended parent-teacher conferences when requested. Almost half (43 percent) of teachers reported a negative relationship between schools and families. Family surveys revealed negativity in both directions: Almost half of the families who responded said that schools provided too little information on how to be involved in their child's schooling and that it posed a barrier to involvement. These findings showed the various ways that schools and families were disconnected from one another despite the small size of the Alleghany Highlands community, and shed light on how to improve those relationships.

Qualitative data suggested that there are "hard to reach" families in both districts, and it is difficult to make headway on student achievement without family engagement. Despite the newspaper ads, emails, at-school survey options, and other strategies to obtain input from families, the response rate to the survey was quite low.



While district leaders implied that some families are simply too busy to reply to such inquiries, the low response rate also reflected a mix of mistrust, disinterest, and lack of engagement with schools among families in the two districts.

In step six, the university team organized the information drawn from the data and the rich responses from the schools' leadership and foundation education committee to create a set of recommendations for action. The team sought advice from an administrator outside of the community because it believed an independent and objective view was important in crafting effective guidelines. The first, overarching recommendation was to build support for improvements by launching a community-based effort to outline a vision and goals for student learning; one step toward that effort was to create an education oversight committee made up of district administrators and of foundation representatives, who would prioritize funding decisions.

Another recommendation suggested establishing five community-based work groups, each corresponding to an area in need of development: 1) a culture of adult collaboration in schools, 2) a culture that values academic achievement and respect, 3) better early childhood experiences to boost school readiness, 4) engagement of families as partners in children's learning, and 5) the quality of instruction, especially related to reading. Each work group was tasked to use the UVA report to review data; identify two or three goals and metrics of progress toward those goals; identify potential programs to implement; bring in outside experts to speak, or take learning trips; and present ideas for programs to the oversight committee for implementation by district leaders and the foundation. Based on these recommendations, the foundation would consider funding these new programs. Each work group was designed to gather between six and 10 people every month and included parents, teachers, school leaders, community members, and others concerned about education.

The university partners also conducted a systematic review of the evidence base for programs and practices that could be adopted to address

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present challenges (i.e., low norms for achievement, disconnect between families and school). This process involved identifying programs, reviewing research on those programs, and evaluating that research. Here, there were important nuances to address. Most education research has been conducted in suburban and urban areas, raising questions about the extent to which it is applicable to rural communities. The university partners not only considered the quality and quantity of research on various programs, but also examined the extent to which programs had been researched in communities similar to the Allegheny Highlands. Information about these programs were provided to the work groups as examples of possibilities to consider.

The seventh step involved communicating recommendations for action and initiating the implementation of a partnered approach to school change. The school superintendents and foundation played a key role here; the university partners assumed a background role. The foundation's education consultant worked with the district administrators to jump-start the work by creating Education First, a community group of school supporters, and by creating the five work groups.

### **Progress, Challenges, and Next Steps**

Now, after more than two years of work, we see many signs of progress. Education First holds annual summits and the ongoing meetings of community members and educators have created

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a consistent, communitywide conversation about education. The close social connection among people in the community has always been one of its strengths. Now, we see intentional leveraging of these connections to build capacity among educators and offer social capital to youth.

Teachers in both districts receive professional development training together, and many gather for monthly dinners to talk about practices they use to support students. Teachers and principals in both districts are discussing the adoption of new social and emotional learning models that fit well with the *Responsive Classroom* approach and provide sustained support for these skills from preschool through grade 12. Local businesses have begun to develop internships for high school students. Adults who have not been engaged in making decisions about education have been brought into conversations, adding new ideas and skill sets. And by mixing educators from the two districts in these work groups, they “found out that we are more alike than we are different,” said one superintendent (Snead-Johnson).

Some work groups have made dramatic gains: The early childhood group, for example, has launched fully. From the start, the group identified the goal of full enrollment in existing early childhood programs. It brought together preschool and kindergarten teachers to talk about

expectations for kindergarten readiness, which is considered a high-intensity, high-quality practice for improving the transition to school (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). The group organized training using The Incredible Years<sup>1</sup> series, and elderly adults in the community have been trained in parenting practices to be able to assist parents of young children with the greatest needs. The group is considering adopting a new preschool program, Elevate Early Education,<sup>2</sup> to increase access to affordable and high-quality preschool opportunities in the area. The early childhood group has tapped into Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library,<sup>3</sup> a program supported by the Dollywood Foundation that sends books every month to children ages birth through 5. The work group also initiated a program called Rock and Read: At an infant’s first pediatrician visit, each family receives a book, a toy, and information about developmental benchmarks that includes community resources for those whose children do not reach those benchmarks. These activities represent an important first step toward change, and the payoff in terms of school readiness could be realized within two to three years.

In the beginning, the partnership faced some daunting challenges. With new superintendents arriving at both districts, we found that the work groups were most productive in spaces outside of the scope of traditional K–12 efforts and on projects that school leaders could incorporate easily into their district’s vision. The early childhood group was able to move relatively quickly because it was coordinating among the various early childhood services in the community, which operated separately from the school districts. The work on fostering a more respectful culture through the *Responsive Classroom* approach was successful because professional development in this approach added to the schools’ efforts but did not require them to stop engaging in other activity.

After more than two years into the RPP, the next steps in engagement between the districts and

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.incredibleyears.com>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.e3va.org>.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://imaginationlibrary.com/usa>.

the foundation are taking shape. The original partnership between UVA, the foundation, and the school districts grew to include new initiatives. There are shifts among the partners in the balance of power and contribution, setting the tone for new projects to enter the scene using the partnership as a base from which to grow. Two examples stand out. First, both districts are incorporating a new effort to improve reading instruction in K-3 schools by working with a new UVA partner — one not part of the original collaboration — on a yearlong professional development effort. The work stemmed from the efforts by the work groups focused on improving instructional quality, and is being initiated and supported in a way that ensures high-quality implementation. (See Appendix.) Second, the district leaders and the foundation are moving to create a centralized oversight committee, a step that was meant to occur in year one but has taken somewhat longer. The committee will receive regular reports from each of the five work groups and consider their proposals for funding and implementation, and its centralized nature will create opportunities for each district to compare proposals with its strategic vision and either adopt or reject the new initiatives. The next much-needed step will involve evaluation of progress using many of the same measures used to identify needs and strengths.

### Key Observations

The work of the Allegheny Highlands-UVA Collaborative Project produced several important lessons about the challenges of creating inclusive community change: the ways in which school-improvement work in rural communities might be approached by foundations, how outcomes can be meaningfully measured, and what best motivates a community's commitment to change.

#### *Foundations Can Have Real Impact in Rural Communities*

Many decisions about programs and practices are determined at the local level, which opens up unique opportunities for foundations to work with rural schools to improve child and youth outcomes. As Dianne Garcia, The Allegheny Foundation's education consultant, notes,

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The Allegheny Highlands has seen a decrease of economic development and an increase of people moving out of the area to find work. Our tax base has decreased, leaving school budgets tight. Many school employees are taking on extra responsibilities and duties. This decreases opportunities for educators to try new models or go to conferences or professional development institutes.

Despite these challenges, we have seen tremendous progress because of the willingness of the foundation to fully engage with the school districts and the community in the process of systematic school improvement. As Allegheny Foundation Executive Director Mary Fant Donnan observes,

Foundations look at the work with different questions, and have the luxury that a school board might not have when having to work through operational budgets and many different mandates. Questions around a foundation boardroom table tend to be along the lines of, "What about this change will make this system better? By how much? Why? How will we know?" That leads to a different conversation from many traditional ones [that] school board members have on their agendas when many state programs are based on budgets and timelines and often siloed data sets.

It is important to note that school districts run differently in rural environs. One recommendation we have about the process of school change

*It is important to note that school districts run differently in rural environs. One recommendation we have about the process of school change in a rural area is to listen carefully to the challenges present and identify ways that they can be viewed as strengths.*

in a rural area is to listen carefully to the challenges present and identify ways that they can be viewed as strengths. For example, the CCPS central office has a small staff and the superintendent herself has a list of 11 job responsibilities, ranging from chief academic officer and director of special education to truancy officer. At first glance, the CCPS staffing issue may be perceived as a disadvantage. But it also means that all those roles can be more easily aligned with new goals in the presence of effective supports from the foundation. In another example, ACPS Superintendent Eugene Kotulka spoke of the challenge of providing the district's children "with the same opportunities that students in wealthier and more suburban school districts provide their children. Our students are more at risk due to the lack of adequate funding — salaries, equipment, [fewer] classes for students to choose." The concern raised by ACPS is an important one. Given the relatively small student body, a wisely placed influx of foundation funds and support can raise opportunities for all students in a district, not just a select few.

Foundation engagement with rural communities supports equity in education. Federal and state policies are often geared to meet urban and suburban school issues, and rural areas tend to receive less philanthropic giving than suburban or urban locales (Ashley, 2012; Norris-Tirrell, Blessett, & Knox, 2014). Despite a history of sidelining rural school considerations (Biddle &

Azano, 2016), there are new opportunities available for foundations to take action. Smart (2018) calls attention to almost 100 health conversion foundations located in the South, with \$8 billion in assets and federal mandates to serve rural communities. Further, he points out,

Like too many of their peers across the philanthropic spectrum, they hesitate to invest deeply in the kind of on-the-ground advocacy, difficult conversations, and paradigm shifts that are necessary to dismantle systems and structures that perpetuate inequity and poverty in the region.

Inclusive community change for children and youth is exactly the kind of deep investment needed to address systemic inequity.

#### *Measure Proximal as Well as Distal Outcomes*

Too often, school districts make decisions based on the accountability data they have on hand — achievement data, graduation rates, and other indicators. Although important, these data reveal little about the factors that produce these outcomes. To get at the root cause of problems, it is essential to measure the lived experience in schools — this will help in understanding student engagement, the culture of achievement, family-school relationships, and other elements of success. For example, if students do not perceive their peers as valuing academics or do not feel that their teacher communicates high expectations, they are less likely to perform well (Hamm, Farmer, Lambert, & Gravelle, 2014; Peterson, Rubie-Davies, Osborne, & Sibley, 2016).

Differentiate between distal and proximal outcomes, and measure both. Distal outcomes, such as achievement and graduation rate, represent long-term targets. Proximal outcomes, such as student engagement, are near-term, process indicators of progress. Various organizations are prepared to gather data on proximal outcomes: the Institute for Research and Reform in Education and Panorama Education, for example, offer data-based services to understand school culture. Some districts have ongoing RPPs, with ample data to be used for these purposes available from the University of Chicago Consortium for School Research and other

sources. University partners can enter into RPPs such as the Alleghany Highlands-UVA Collaborative Project. State data that measure school climate, such as the Virginia Youth Risk and Behavior Survey, may be available as raw material for reflection and improvement.

### *School Improvement Efforts Take Time*

It can take three to five years for new programs to take hold in schools. But districts often struggle to sustain efforts, with schools sometimes adopting a new initiative for one to two years and then shifting to yet another new program. Foundations can play a pivotal role in intentional school reform by sustaining and deepening practice of evidence-based programs that work in their local schools.

Our partnership clarified the importance of identifying a vision and following through with that vision for many years. Now, as new programs are introduced and embedded into the community, the foundation and schools strive to gather information on early signs of progress. If the schools signal that a program appears to be promising, the foundation seeks ways to sustain and deepen work related to that program, as opposed to simply adding programs in a fragmented way.

The superintendent of one district (Snead-Johnson) observed that it “is steeped in tradition, and change is very hard. We have a very challenging time making change.” Foundations can become consistent, reliable partners in comprehensive approaches to improve outcomes for students.

### *Balance Engaging School Leaders With Community-Based Efforts*

School improvement is a process of human change that involves shifts in direction by school leadership, changes in daily practices among teachers, and different ways of working for all stakeholders (Evans, 1996). As a result, change will occur only if people are truly motivated and have a vision of what is possible as a consequence of their efforts (Fullan, 2006). School improvement requires the presence of both “top down” and “bottom up” efforts in the community and

## *Foundations can play a pivotal role in intentional school reform by sustaining and deepening practice of evidence-based programs that work in their local schools.*

the schools. And as one superintendent (Kotulka) emphasized, “Staff members need to be part of the vision for change to make it sustainable.”

Herein lies the challenge. Although it is true that efforts to change an education system gain momentum only with a high level of community input and engagement — that is, a bottom-up approach, it is equally important that school officials lead in ways that match their strategic plans and meet local needs of their schools — that is, a top-down approach. One challenge in our partnership has been coordinating and connecting the school leadership and community work groups.

One superintendent (Snead-Johnson) describes the complexity of inclusive community change involving numerous stakeholders:

Each school district has different strategic goals due to state, federal, or school board expectations, and that sometimes causes differing opinions at the table. The Alleghany Foundation has expectations from its board members and community partners that do not always jibe with the school districts’ needs. Lay people often do not have a sense that a school division has unique challenges that cannot be changed to make it run 100 percent totally as a company or a nonprofit organization.

Despite these challenges, the pursuit is worthwhile. Foundations can opt for a range of approaches that can be viewed as a continuum of engagement. The narrowest and most straightforward method is to simply offer funds for special programs, which essentially add to what schools are already doing. A somewhat more complicated approach is to identify school

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needs and selectively fund teachers' professional development on topics of interest to the foundation and school districts. The most complex approach is for foundations to fully engage with local schools in a way that supports the schools' vision. This complex approach takes the long view and strives toward systemic changes. In doing so, foundations need to fully embrace the notion that improving student outcomes is multifaceted, dynamic and requires changes to different contexts (e.g., child care, schools) within a community.

The more complex approach is most consistent with the aspirations of collective impact, which entail committed work by a group of stakeholders, focused on a common agenda, toward solutions to a specific social problem (Kania & Kramer, 2011), and it holds the greatest potential for substantial, long-lasting change. The Alleghany Foundation has been an ambitious funder, eager to transition from a narrow approach toward supporting schools to a fully embedded and engaged strategy for creating

school improvement. Although challenging, this approach holds the greatest promise for sustained school improvement.

### Five Recommendations

We offer five recommendations based on lessons learned from the Alleghany Highlands-University of Virginia Collaborative Project:

1. Use data as a way of listening. Gather data about the lived experience in schools from many different stakeholders — including children, youth, and families — to address root causes. Be sure to seek input from members of traditionally marginalized groups (e.g., families of children with special needs, students of color). Establish regular intervals for gathering and reflecting on data. Share results from the data to initiate conversations designed to identify problems and plan future action.
2. Develop a stable, long-term, mutually beneficial partnership with a partner from outside the community. Balance input from inside and outside: Input from the community will engender motivation for improvement, while unbiased data collection, objective narration of the school-change process, and identification of new resources and programs can best come from outside sources. As one of the superintendents (Snead-Johnson) noted, “Working with the UVA partners has brought a different perspective to the table that makes it easier to have access to opportunities that did not exist in the past.”
3. Identify and fund new initiatives that both emanate from community members and fit with the district's strategic plan. Programs do not work if they are not implemented well, and buy-in from both community and school leadership are essential to their success.
4. Choose just a few new initiatives at one time, and focus on their successful implementation. For each, discuss what the initiative is expected to accomplish, consider implementation carefully, and evaluate

progress as the work continues. If new initiatives do not work, pay attention to why they failed. Did they miss the mark, or was the problem one of implementation? If they do work, deepen those practices to support sustainability rather than moving on quickly to new efforts.

5. Be patient. School improvement is a slow process. Stay keenly aware that school change is a continuous and iterative, and requires actions followed by reflection on those actions (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015).

### Closing Comments

The key challenge foundations will face as they work to support schools is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach for improving education. As Donnan, the foundation's executive director, cautioned,

A plan for action in education is not as prescribed as one might think or maybe even hope for. Part of the progress has been organizing ourselves and using working groups to dig deeper into the data and to consider existing programs, best practices, and how they might apply here. The working groups talk about the culture we have versus the culture we are trying to create. It is important to see this iterative process as a critical improvement itself.

Successful school improvement demands a change in culture. Tracking school change requires attention to process and product. Though demanding, inclusive community change can work to identify and redress the root causes of problems.

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**APPENDIX** Project Description for Move AHEAD

An important reflection on the Alleghany Highlands-University of Virginia (UVA) Collaborative Project is the extent to which the partnership is both dynamic and sustaining. One way that the partnership sustains and grows is that it leads to new collaborations. Those collaborations, even when working independently in an operational sense, retain the values of the original partnership.

For example, one recommendation stemming from the 2016 data synthesis and discussions was to enhance the quality of instruction in key academic content areas, starting with English language arts. The work group that focused on this effort included school leaders, teachers, and community members in both districts. The members began to meet regularly and consider programs to bring to the community and, as part of that discussion, asked the university partners for guidance on what next steps to take. From that initial request, they invited a colleague, Anita McGinty, to the conversation. McGinty is director of a statewide literacy initiative, Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), and was in a unique position to provide support on this issue.

After discussion, it became clear that the districts had recently invested significant money into new curriculum programs but were concerned that these were not having the hoped-for impact. At the same time, the PALS office at UVA had been studying how best to understand the ways districts were using diagnostic assessment information, in conjunction with curricular resources, for data-based instructional decision-making. A new opportunity became apparent. Alleghany County Public Schools and Covington City Public Schools were looking for support for their teacher on literacy development. The PALS group viewed it as an opportunity to learn from these teachers and, ultimately, build usable, feasible models of professional development that could be scaled up. District leaders were eager to engage.

PALS organized a retreat for the districts' superintendents, principals, K–2 teachers, and reading-committee members that focused on reading and provided opportunities for conversations among teachers. Meanwhile, the districts articulated their short- and long-term needs to the PALS team, who created six modules geared to support teachers with the ultimate goal of using the modules statewide: 1) getting to know your

class, 2) forming instructional groups, 3) planning for small-group instruction, 4) reflecting on mid-year data, 5) spelling and word study, and 6) using spring data to plan for transition. Although it is too soon to evaluate, the uptake and teacher learning appears promising.

The Move AHEAD (Alleghany Highlands Engaging in Analyzing Data) in Literacy project is ongoing, and the two-way communication within the partnership is seen on both the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, the six professional learning opportunities that are organized across the year always involve a communication from the UVA team to the schools' leadership and teachers, as well as new content for the teachers and support for their engaging in that content as grade-level teams. Each professional learning opportunity also involves a reflection by the participants, which is sent back to the UVA team; a chance for a call for feedback or questions; and a follow-up coaching message and "lessons learned" sheet that helps communicate what the UVA team noticed and learned from that experience. Also at a macro level is a balance between those visits to the schools that are organized for observational data collection and those that are true listening sessions designed to help the UVA team understand the benefits and challenges that the participants see. The timing between each learning experience allows the UVA team to adjust content or format according to feedback, and has twice already resulted in major shifts in content and design: creating separate content for kindergarten and for first and second grades and a decision to illustrate how existing programs can be adapted when certain content may be missing, as opposed to suggesting new instructional approaches as a supplement to those programs.

At the micro level, a two-way partnership is evident in the title of the project, which was co-developed and included the name of the region. This modification helped teachers and school leaders elicit more connection and support when speaking about the project to the community. In another example, remote coaching sessions were poorly attended because the teachers were culturally resistant to phone interviews or Skype calls, even though the timing of these calls was specifically set based on a poll of the teachers. As a result, in-person feedback sessions were organized for the first semester, and in the second semester a different approach to the technology will be attempted.