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# Implementing Education Policy: Getting from *What Now?* to *What Works*

“The need for sustained oversight in the implementation of important public policy cannot be underscored... Politicians and senior bureaucrats become distracted and lessen their focus on the nitty-gritty. They move on. They move out. They pursue higher priorities. They pursue headlines. They get bored. This is unfortunate, because it is the great middle of public policy that is implementation, and it is often left on its own.”

—ANDREW GRAHAM, *School of Policy Studies at Queen's University*

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Written by Education First Consulting and Grantmakers for Education.

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# Introduction

Over the past decade, increasing numbers of funders have championed policy advocacy and policy change as key strategies for improving education outcomes for all learners. These grantmakers recognize that public policies, resources, and leaders drive what happens in public schools and other educational institutions, and are therefore working smartly to inform policy choices and deliberations at the local, state and even national level.



**D**espite this newfound emphasis on influencing new policies in order to guide education system improvement, however, too few funders are paying attention to the design and adoption of new policies and, more importantly, to the less alluring and equally important work of implementing the policies. This focus is the next logical step toward effective grantmaking: If the ultimate goal is to improve outcomes for students, then funders need to see policy changes through to ensure that they are ultimately translated, supported and applied in the classroom in a way that actually leads to better outcomes.

According to Grantmakers for Education's (GFE) *Benchmarking 2010* report, a survey of trends in education philanthropy, 70 percent of funders who responded are supporting public policy or efforts to build public will to affect policy change in early education, K-12 or post-secondary systems—a milestone figure that has shown year-over-year growth.

Although grantmakers are increasingly committed to supporting efforts to shape public policy, they are often less likely to remain engaged through the implementation of the policies they helped to influence. Of the *Benchmarking 2010* respondents who are supporting policy change, 72 percent reported that they are funding advocacy and 48 percent public-will building—yet only 38 percent are funding implementation.

This lack of attention to policy implementation may be short-sighted: While the newfound focus on policy advocacy bodes well for philanthropy's ability to have a positive impact and influence on needed changes in the nation's education systems, the enactment of new policies alone does not guarantee meaningful educational results for learners. Passage of new legislation or citizen-initiated ballot proposals is a critical first step for creating the enabling conditions for new practices, approaches or responsibilities, but the implementation of new laws and policies can vary dramatically. Gains made as a result of the adoption of new policies will be only fleeting if follow-up rule-making or implementation by education agencies is not well managed, if changes are poorly communicated and public support wanes, or if momentum stalls.

*As foundations, we have a hard time following policies down to the ground. We are engaged through the enactment of new policies but, too often, move on before those policies have taken hold.*

—ROBERT SCHWARTZ, *Associate Dean, Harvard School of Education*

At the same time, few grantmakers have deep experience or expertise working on strategies to influence the implementation of policy, and the resources available to support and educate funders in this area are limited.

**T**he good news is that many of the finely honed tools that funders employ to influence policy deliberations—communications and public-will building, convening of stakeholders, research that points to best practices or shines a light on performance, etc.—are the same ones that can be adapted to support a new focus on policy implementation. Also, as noted above, a focus on seeing

through successful policy changes until they are implemented can be a natural evolution in a funder's strategy and a way to ensure its work truly improves student outcomes.

Recognizing these needs in the field, Grantmakers for Education focused its biennial Education Grantmakers Institute on policy implementation, part of a longer-term commitment to helping funders successfully navigate the policymaking process. Offered in partnership with the Harvard Graduate Schools of Education in May 2011, "Implementing Education Policy: Getting from *What Now?* to *What Works*" convened seasoned grantmakers for a series of discussions and presentations with other funders, education leaders and Harvard faculty members. In addition to lectures and group discussions, the program used case studies of several foundations' recent and ongoing efforts to move from the advocacy of policies to their implementation.

their role for maximum impact. They weighed the need to balance intentional planning with the ability to adapt and make iterative adjustments as implementation challenges unfold. Funders discussed how best to secure and maintain public understanding and support over time and through leadership transitions, as the spotlight moves to new policy issues; they also debated when to help grantees build their capacity to implement policy versus when a grantmaking organization itself should become more directly involved in policy implementation.

This report summarizes key observations and lessons from GFE's 2011 Institute for education grantmakers as they begin to place greater emphasis on education policy implementation.

**T**he GFE Institute attracted more than 60 grantmakers from national, corporate, community and family foundations, with interests in systems and programs from early learning through postsecondary completion. And while attendees arrived with diverse experiences and expertise in grantmaking to support policy change, they shared a commitment to better understanding and improving their efforts to influence policy implementation.

The Institute defined "policy implementation" as the series of efforts by grantmakers, national, state or local public agencies, system administrators, school leaders, and teachers to translate newly adopted education policies into tangible next steps that would likely lead to improved outcomes for students. Throughout the Institute, participants reflected on the unique role grantmakers should play in policy implementation and how funders can leverage

PART I

# *Why* funders should see policies *through to* implementation

It is both easy and appealing for grantmakers to see the passage of a policy as the end point—the “win” that culminates a carefully calculated advocacy and communications strategy that may have taken years. In many ways, however, the adoption of a new policy is really just the starting point: A complex set of actions must unfold to translate a new statute, policy or court ruling into changes in practice in classrooms, schools and institutions—and for those changes in practice to translate into meaningful improvements for students.



**W**ithout careful attention to these next steps, some promising policies will never be realized, while others will be carried out only partially and others may set in motion a series of unintended consequences.

Within the last few years, federal stimulus dollars and Race to the Top grants, coupled now with sweeping leadership changes following the 2010 elections, have led to a wave of bold policy developments across the education sector and at all levels of governance. Federal programs are prodding and rewarding states for pursuing dramatically new policy directions—such as using new, common standards, designing new ways of gauging teacher effectiveness and providing greater support to low-performing schools—and states and districts are responding with their own new laws, administrative rules, initiatives and bargaining agreements. In addition to significant changes in K-12 policies in most states and school districts, policymakers are also working to impact other parts of the education system—encouraging the development of longitudinal data systems and increasing state commitments to high quality early education, for example. Furthermore, the Obama Administration has established a national goal of raising the college graduation rate to 60 percent within 10

## Spurring activity is not the same as making genuine improvements in student outcomes.

years, and this in turn is spurring new activity in the states and new commitments from governors to improve college completion rates and to better engage higher education in improvement efforts.

Spurring activity, however, is not the same as making genuine improvements in student outcomes.

### **THREATS TO SUCCESS: WHAT MAKES POLICY IMPLEMENTATION DIFFICULT?**

The implementation of any new policy is an inherently complex endeavor that involves multiple players and multiple systems. Whereas most education policies are adopted by a discrete body of decision makers, such as a local school board or state legislature, they are implemented by a much wider group of actors. Furthermore, the key stakeholders engaged in the work are different—the elected leaders who debated and enacted the policy are not the people charged with determining its day-to-day implementation.

Other challenges threaten implementation, in addition to those posed by new players and new audiences. Some of them are political, such as a lack of sustained leadership, or resistance from key stakeholders once the spotlight has moved on to other issues and debates. Others include a lack of capacity or knowledge at the practitioner level to make the kinds of changes in practice that are sought or mandated. Some challenges are financial—local actors may not have the resources to respond to “unfunded mandates” passed down from higher bodies, or they may not know how to invest new resources effectively. In the end, new policies offer the promise of change—but they may also prove difficult to implement well, because they are fundamentally about altering incentives, reshaping well-established patterns of behavior, and increasing the capacity of institutions to change practices at scale.

Newly enacted policies face significant barriers to implementation, especially today: Budget cuts and limited public resources create a greater demand for delivery models that are more efficient and cost-effective.

For grantmakers, these challenges suggest that it is no longer enough to win the adoption of new policies and then move on to promote another policy change or priority. Funders who want to ensure that new policies actually



#### IMPLEMENTATION CASE IN POINT:

## Will new common core standards be successful?

Jointly developed by state policymakers and educators, unveiled in 2010 and endorsed by a diverse political spectrum of leaders, new “Common Core” standards to guide student learning hold out the promise of dramatically improving teaching and learning across the U.S. by providing a common benchmark to assess and compare student achievement regardless of where students live. Forty-four states have taken policy action to adopt the Common Core standards. But now the implementation work begins.

Research from the Center on Education Policy released in early 2011 suggests that states expect implementation to be difficult and slow. According to its report, “States’ Progress and Challenges in Implementing Common Core Standards,” many states expect to face significant challenges aligning teacher preparation requirements and evaluation systems, implementing new assessments, developing new curriculum materials and finding the resources to do all these things well.

“We don’t get many mulligans in education reform, but over the next few years, we have a big one,” writes Suzanne Tacheny Kubach, executive director of PIE Network, a national network of state-based policy advocacy groups. Most states have adopted the Common Core. The question is: will this work be the beginning or end of policy-making at the state level to make these new standards a powerful driver in reform?”

While a few national funders helped underwrite the convening and research needed for states to come together to draft the Common Core standards, state leaders ably (and appropriately) took the lead in making the case to their governors, legislatures and state boards of education to adopt the new standards. But with policy adoption accomplished, state lead-

ers and educators need resources and support for the most difficult challenge—ensuring that the new standards improve teaching and learning in schools and school districts.

#### Funder roles could include:

- Helping individual states, districts or individual schools “map” old state standards against the new, more rigorous Common Core standards—so they can focus on the areas that are likely to be the biggest “pain points” in meeting the new expectations.
- Encouraging networks of states to pool resources and ideas as they work to develop model courses, formative assessments and instructional tools better aligned to the new standards—instead of each state developing its own tools.
- Ensuring higher education institutions in a state or community align with and reinforce the new standards by changing their placement requirements.
- Supporting policymakers in identifying the complementary changes in policies and programs that will be needed to boost capacity in the system to meet Common Core expectations, such as state teacher preparation requirements or the allocation of professional development resources.
- Convening educators in a school or district and giving them time to review the standards, to discuss ways that classroom practices need to change and to identify specific resources and tools that are needed for them to be successful.
- Building public understanding about the new standards (and the short-term dip in student achievement results that will likely happen initially)—and why these higher expectations will give students a stronger platform for competing in the 21st century.

improve student outcomes need to expend additional energy and resources helping public agencies and education systems struggle with the challenges of implementing complicated, often politically difficult new reforms. Now more than ever, grantmakers focused on policy solutions as a lever for improving education outcomes must attend to how these solutions are implemented on the ground.

**In an environment where resources are constrained, positions are ingrained and flexibility is limited, grantmakers can provide a much needed antidote to the political inertia.**

#### **“LESS SEXY EXECUTION”: FUNDER ROLES IN POLICY IMPLEMENTATION**

Paul Herdman, president of the Rodel Foundation of Delaware and a presenter at the Institute, argued, “A lot of what foundations do is go after the ‘next bling,’ but instead we need to be about less sexy execution.” The Rodel Foundation played a key role over many years in preparing the policy environment in Delaware that helped the state to win a coveted Race to the Top award from the federal government in 2010. After successfully unifying key advocacy groups and policymakers behind a common agenda and winning enactment of some key policy changes that helped the state win the award, the foundation is now supporting the implementation of the ambitious reform agenda Delaware has committed to accomplishing by 2015 (see Part 5 for more details).

Funders have a unique vantage point that positions them well to support the transition from policy enactment to policy implementation. Although a grantmaker’s unique role in the policy-change process may differ according to foundation type (with private, community and operating foundations having different parameters guiding their level of engagement

in policy and political issues), all funders can bring independence, flexible resources and an outside perspective. In an environment where resources are constrained, positions are ingrained and flexibility is limited, grantmakers can provide a much needed antidote to the political inertia that, if left unchallenged, will inhibit the implementation of even the most well-intended, well-crafted policies. Thus while most grantmakers are prohibited from directly lobbying public officials (or giving grants to nonprofits explicitly for lobbying), and few are well positioned to organize, manage or staff community change efforts directly, there are still numerous important roles that funders can play to help leaders and educators carry out new policies successfully.

During discussions and debates at the Institute, presenters and funders identified a range of roles grantmakers can play; they also recognized that these roles are likely to shift over time as implementation moves forward. These roles include:

- Providing resources to directly fund agencies, organizations and programs that are responsible for policy implementation—or supporting external technical assistance;
- Providing resources for “watchdog” organizations to monitor and be involved in decision-making and next steps;
- Convening diverse stakeholders—including unlikely partners who would not come together on their own—to build understanding and support for new policies and to resolve differences regarding how best to approach implementation;
- Supporting research to identify and share the most effective approaches to implementing a new policy;
- Communicating with key stakeholders about the implications of a new policy and supporting communication efforts that target parents, teachers, leaders,

community members and others who are likely to be affected by the change; and

- Assuming the bully pulpit to broaden understanding of and support for a particular approach, particularly when opposition mobilizes.

Because all education grantmaking organizations have different strengths—including knowledge, skills, expertise and relationships—each should be thoughtful in identifying which implementation roles it would be most helpful for them to play. Indeed, too often funders rely disproportionately on their financial resources instead of considering the non-financial assets they have to offer. For example, many grantmakers have significant standing in their community and can influence civic and community leaders to provide additional financial, in-kind or political support for a new initiative. Their neutral and respected position in many communities may also allow them to effectively convene stakeholders with opposing political perspectives to achieve a result that ultimately ensures a positive outcome for students and learners.

The next section, Part 2 of this report, provides further guidance and a tool that will enable funders to calibrate their interests and resources with needs on the ground.

PART 2

# *Paying attention* to all elements of implementation: A planning framework

Moving from the enactment of new public policy to the actual achievement of better learning outcomes for students is a challenging, complex and lengthy process. Policy changes often take place out of the media spotlight, where the well-established—and often bureaucratic—procedures of government agencies or schools may slow down implementation and where milestones defining success are not clear.



**E**ven as policy changes offer the promise of wide-scale impact because they will affect larger numbers of students than any grantmaker could hope to reach on its own through program funding, they also represent change that—at least initially—is many steps removed from the classroom.

Determining where and how best funders can support policy implementation is not a simple, linear endeavor. It requires careful strategy, deft balance, constant recalibration and—in some cases—precise execution. Indeed, what constitutes “implementation” will vary depending on the specific issue, the surrounding circumstances, the political context and the actors engaged in the work.

#### **ALIGNING FUNDER ROLES AND NEEDS IN THE FIELD**

To help grantmakers assess opportunities and guide their involvement in policy implementation, GFE developed a policy implementation framework that suggests possible grant-making strategies to successfully implement policy changes. GFE presented a preliminary version of the framework during the Institute and invited participants both to apply the framework to their own grantmaking and to provide input to refine and improve the tool. GFE has subsequently revised the tool, based on grantmaker feedback; the

current version is presented in the illustration on page 12.

This tool is designed to help funders clarify the roles they are playing and to identify where they may be best positioned to support broader implementation efforts. It should encourage funders to step back from the particular details of their grantmaking and consider how their overall approach may need strengthening or adjustment. This framework is not intended to serve as a static tool, to be interpreted and applied in a “one size fits all” manner; it is a resource for grantmakers to use so they can continually understand, calibrate and refine their own approach to policy implementation and the direction of the efforts they are supporting. The framework can also provide funders with guidance on sequencing key initiatives and action steps to support policy implementation.

#### **FUNDER FEEDBACK: USING THE FRAMEWORK TO IMPROVE STRATEGY**

As Institute participants considered ways of applying the tool to their own grantmaking, they observed how efforts to support implementation are distinct from the grants they often make and how this type of grantmaking requires a different approach. Funders discussed how their roles as funders differ from the roles of their grantees and noted the important distinction between being responsible for implementation and supporting oth-

### **Determining where and how funders can best support policy implementation is not a simple, linear endeavor.**

ers who do this work. At the same time, they observed, since funders are not accountable for results in the same way that schools, districts, colleges and others on the front lines are, they need to be mindful of the complex and often competing interests and challenges

that their grantees must navigate. One participant described the tension inherent in their relationships with grantees, observing: “We’re grantmakers, not policy implementers. We are advocates—we are pushing for change from the outside.”

Still, because grantmakers usually play an indirect role supporting other individuals and organizations that are charged with implementation, they have a significant degree of flexibility and independence which many of their grantees do not have. From this position, funders can advocate more boldly and work more flexibly to move implementation forward when needed.

As funders considered how to use the framework, the most relevant and compelling lessons they discussed related to setting goals, being flexible and adaptive, committing for an

extended period, playing to one’s strengths and taking calculated risks. These include:

- **Plan carefully before acting.** Funders should invest time and resources on the front end assessing the landscape and the likelihood of success. Crucially, leadership matters, and funders should therefore carefully assess the capacity and needs of agencies and organizations that will be involved in shaping implementation decisions.
- **Prepare to invest for the long haul.** Whenever possible, secure commitments from foundation leaders that allow for a sustained commitment over multiple years and tolerate the fact that the work will most likely evolve in different and unanticipated ways. In particular, stay deeply committed to steering implementation—especially through the early stages of a new policy—

## Education Policy Implementation Framework



- Implementation Strategy Elements**
1. Define goals and time horizon
  2. Specify your theory of change
  3. Identify resources & resource growth strategy
  4. Conduct needs assessment
  5. Identify key leaders
  6. Create communications plan
  7. Develop your “political” strategy
  8. Identify risks and failure points
  9. Address sustainability
  10. Outline your exit strategy

to ensure that ample time is allowed for implementation to take hold.

- **Implementation is iterative, not linear.**

Although the visual description of the framework suggests a sequential process that moves logically and predictably from one step to the next, successful implementation actually demands repeated adaptation and a continual reassessment of the landscape, including a regular evaluation of the stakeholders engaged in the work and how their perspectives may have evolved.

## Grantmakers have a significant degree of flexibility and independence which many of their grantees do not have.

- **Play to your strengths.** Grantmakers should apply their own unique knowledge, skills, expertise and relationships to support policy change and implementation—looking for the right marriage between needs in the field and a funder’s interests, capacity and assets. Remember: The greatest contribution a funder can make is not always financial; grantmakers have other assets to deploy that can make changes more successful.
- **Be willing to take risks.** Funders should set goals and measure progress but they also need to be aware that defining and measuring the success of policy implementation grantmaking is often difficult. Harvard School of Education Associate Dean Robert Schwartz cautioned, “I worry that foundations sometimes overspecify their strategy and metrics.” Because they have so much greater flexibility and independence than grantees, funders should take well-informed risks without always having a guarantee of a certain outcome.

This framework is an open source tool that GFE expects to continue to refine. Please contact GFE with your questions or feedback.

PART 3

# Stakeholder engagement: Seeking input *and* building support

In working to inform policy makers and influence policy choices, funders have become increasingly sophisticated: Communications campaigns, community organizing, stakeholder engagement and convenings, and research reports that shine a spotlight on a compelling problem or possible solutions have all become common tools. But these same tools are needed just as much, if not more, in seeing newly adopted policies through to successful implementation.





**T**hat is because the initial enthusiasm, urgency and leadership that propelled adoption of a new policy can lose momentum, get bogged down or be poorly communicated in the course of day-to-day implementation decisions. State and local organizations usually guide policy implementation decisions, and information about the changes can be sporadic, incorrect or confusing.

Moreover, it's one thing for a group of community members, parents or educators to be encouraged to weigh in with an opinion on a policy idea being debated by legislators; the situation is very different once the policy has been adopted, and these same stakeholders need to understand—and hopefully constructively shape—how it will affect them and change their responsibilities or roles.

While ideas for how grantmakers can confront these dilemmas were discussed throughout the Institute, Harvard Lecturer Karen Mapp (who also directed family and community engagement efforts in the Boston Public Schools) led a program session devoted to the topic of stakeholder engagement. GFE's implementation framework—described earlier in Part 2—also flags this fundamental need for funders to engage key stakeholders, encouraging funders to reflect on who needs to be engaged, what information they need, and

how support for the new policy can be sustained and strengthened over time.

Mapp argued that open communication and intentional relationship building to ensure key community stakeholders have provided input and subsequently support both the definition of the problem and the proposed solution is a critical and ongoing imperative for policies to take hold. Indeed, a shared understanding of both the problem and the policy solutions is, she said, “the oil to the engine of success.”

#### **CHANGING THE CALCULUS: ENGAGING MORE VOICES IN THE PROCESS**

A small number of interest groups will often have much more sway over decision-making about how a policy will be implemented, since policymakers, key advocates and the media will have moved on to other issues. At this stage, as the work unfolds, there are often few external stakeholders engaged; policymakers who were instrumental in introducing the new policy have often passed the baton to state agency managers, school administrators, teachers and other practitioners, who are tasked with translating the proposed policy into a set of actions at the local level. Institute presenter Paul Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation, described how elected officials are too often “inundated with

**A shared understanding of both the problem and the policy solutions is “the oil to the engine of success.”**

opinions from interest groups” that are well organized, focused and actively mobilized in support of a common goal, whereas parents and other “ordinary people” exert minimal influence over public policy. Grogan implored fellow funders to make it easier for “ordinary people to change this calculus” by supporting efforts to elevate their voices.

To help new policies survive significant opposition during their implementation (and ideally avoid it completely), funders should work to ensure the input and support of those who will be most directly affected by the hoped-for changes, including those who are charged with implementing the new approach and those whose children and community will be most directly affected. It is not sufficient to ask for input once solutions are fully crafted; Mapp stressed instead the need for transparent, inclusive and early stakeholder engagement throughout *both* policy enactment and implementation.

Often it is obvious which audiences and communities should be engaged, but being explicit and thoughtful upfront will help ensure that some key voices are not left out. It is vital to ensure that parents, teachers or faculty members, school principals or superintendents or other district staff, college presidents, advocacy groups, nonprofit providers, etc. have all been included. Again, this important element can be found within the framework offered in Part 2 of this report.

## Funders should work to ensure the input and support of those who will be most directly affected by the hoped-for changes.

Funders also should pay close attention to local capacity to implement reform. Concerns about the introduction of new instructional practices, for example, may be legitimate in cases where teachers are not being well trained or prepared to implement the new approach. Communications—and implementation—can become particularly contentious in these situations, and funders can provide unique and important leadership if they tread carefully. Without prior knowledge of, or support for, the changes—or with changes that may sometimes seem unrealistic—those who are most directly impacted are understandably likely to question new policies and may

even mobilize against them. Funders can help ensure that communication is good and information is shared with all, while guaranteeing that strong alternative voices—from parents, social justice advocates or school leaders, for example—are heard during deliberations about moving forward. This sort of community engagement will likely lead to a better result and a more carefully conceived, more broadly supported plan for moving forward.

### CREATING SHARED UNDERSTANDING—AND SHARED COMMITMENT

Underscoring each of these points about the complexities of stakeholder engagement, one Institute participant described local resistance to experts “helicoptering in to fix things” without seeking community buy-in, and observed how this perception has led to blanket community resistance to any new approaches and programs. To ensure that parents, educators and community stakeholders are more involved in defining the problems as well as the solutions, this participant’s foundation has responded by helping to create a new local education fund to engage stakeholders early and often in conversations about school improvement strategies.

In addition, this foundation is coupling its “grasstops” engagement strategy with a commitment to more “grassroots” community organizing of low-income and disaffected parents. “It has become clear that you can’t sustain change without engaged parents and an engaged community,” this grantmaker observed. “In our community, we learned this lesson and have invested heavily in community organizing.” She also noted the inherent tension involved for grantmakers who may wish to influence the outcome—“We struggle with how one can empower parents in a community to be engaged in a process, while also knowing that with empowerment, you can’t predict the outcomes it will bring”—but nevertheless argued that asking parents to understand the

problems facing their schools and children and to help identify the solutions is a more powerful change strategy in the long run.

With this information as background, participants reflected on other critical lessons regarding building and sustaining stakeholder support for policy change:

- **Reach out to the right mix of stakeholders, and communicate regularly.**

Depending on the issue and the policy change, relationships with a range of constituencies—including parents, teachers and providers, administrators, and business and community leaders—are needed to advance and sustain improvements; it is critically important for all those being touched by the policy to understand what is happening and to have a chance to shape the decisions about it. Just as important, recognize what makes frequent transitions in public agencies inevitable; new policies that are closely connected with or championed by just one leader may not receive support to continue from a new leader without a broad constituency of supporters.

- **Engage stakeholders regularly and honestly.** In order to avoid what Mapp referred to as the “done to” dynamic—where a community does not feel consulted or valued during the planning and implementation of new policies—communicate actively with those who will be implementing the new approach and those who will be directly impacted by the new approach. Mapp emphasized the importance of transparency and authenticity. She observed, “The process needs to be authentic; there is a difference between asking people what they think once decisions are made, and engaging people during the planning.”

- **Convene stakeholders to keep the process moving.** Private philanthropic resources devoted to policy implementation will almost always pale in comparison to

those provided by public agencies. Funders, however, have other assets they can deploy: Because of their independence and community standing, community leaders listen when grantmakers talk and when funders call a meeting, people come. Funders can leverage their convening power to keep prodding decision-making forward and help troubleshoot to resolve challenges that arise within the implementation process.

- **Invest in reaching those who are hardest to reach.**

The support of parents and the broader community is a critical ingredient in the long-term success of any change effort, and engaging stakeholder groups in a meaningful way requires patience and a long time horizon—it is not something accomplished with a few meetings. In her book, *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform*, Mapp describes community organizing as one powerful solution, arguing it can be a “critical part of a broader agenda to build power for low-income communities and address the profound social inequalities that affect the education of children.” As another model to engage parents, one Institute participant pointed to former Miami-Dade County Public Schools Superintendent Rudy Crew’s efforts to create “demand parents” through a “parent university” that helped low-income parents become more engaged and active in supporting education improvement.

- **Engage detractors.** Do not limit engagement to only those who are enthusiastic about the policy change. Getting feedback on how a new policy can be improved from potential opponents—or at least understanding valid concerns about the policy—can lead to better decision-making as it is implemented. The Rodel Foundation, for example, made a tactical decision to cast a broad net and include the teacher’s union at the very beginning of its efforts to craft its Vision 2015 plan, even when other partners

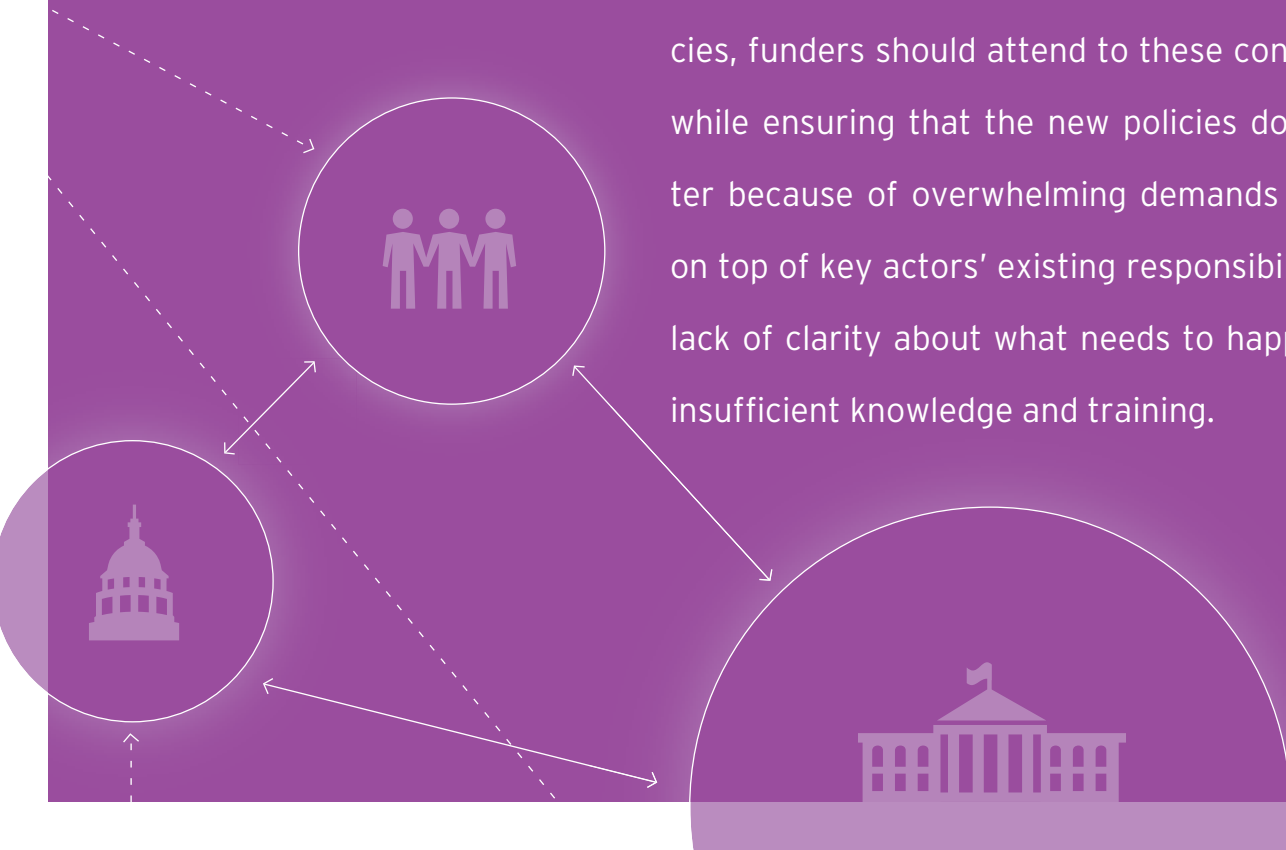
cautioned that the union might derail the process. “We knew going into this process that each stakeholder, including the union, might disagree with 20 percent of the ideas we wanted to explore, and so we were aiming for—and we got—at least 80 percent agreement on all the final recommendations,” explained its president and CEO, Paul Herdman. “We would not have gotten out of the gate without involving the union early in the process.”

- **Expect the going to get tough.** Inevitably, the implementation of new policies—especially new requirements or expectations that ask educators to do things differently—will make people uncomfortable and may mobilize strong opposition. Funders should brace themselves for the reality that not everyone will like or support the changes, and these opponents may even call into question the motives of grantmakers and others supporting the new approach. While there is no one right approach for navigating resistance, funders should anticipate opposition and should be deliberate, agile and ready to respond to concerns as they arise.

PART 4

# Building capacity *to get the job done*

Ultimately successful change depends on the talent and capacity of the people who are on the front lines implementing any new approaches. It also requires committed leaders—at all levels—who have the time, resources, staff and political will necessary to deliver. In shepherding the successful implementation of new policies, funders should attend to these conditions while ensuring that the new policies don't falter because of overwhelming demands placed on top of key actors' existing responsibilities, a lack of clarity about what needs to happen, or insufficient knowledge and training.



In many cases, political momentum and policymakers' vision for change outpace the field's capacity to implement. Today, for example, the effort underway in many states and districts to redesign teacher evaluation systems is racing ahead of the knowledge that district and school leaders have regarding how to use student achievement results reliably and consistently, how to ensure evaluation can be a tool for improving educator effectiveness, and how to collect and easily access all the rich new data about teacher performance that will be collected. Technical assistance in this area remains limited, and where there are knowledgeable experts, they are often not experts in change management.

Building on the successful implementation of new policies, funders can play an important role in developing greater capacity to implement education policies. Two Institute sessions in particular focused on the problems of building local capacity: Karen Hawley Miles, executive director and founder of Education Resource Strategies First, led a discussion about strategically redirecting resources, and Harvard School of Education Professor Susan Moore Johnston led a discussion about improving teacher effectiveness.

## Funders should look out for obstacles that might get in the way of smooth implementation.

In many ways, the grants most funders offer to nonprofits and schools already relate to capacity building—they introduce new programs and train teachers on new approaches, for example, or they cover costs for new staff, new leaders or outside technical assistance. However, as GFE's policy implementation framework (discussed in Part 2) suggests, funders ought to be paying attention to these same needs in evaluating what it will take to implement a new policy well. In assessing the landscape, funders

should look out for obstacles that might get in the way of smooth implementation: What information or research would illuminate the best way to implement a new policy? What tools and knowledge do practitioners need in order to be successful? Determining whether organizations have access to the talent they need to manage the change process is key; so too is figuring out what leaders might also need to help ensure the successful implementation of the initiative.

Confronting these obstacles and supporting even newer policies can be challenging, especially given the tight fiscal environment in which governments are operating today—needs may quickly swamp available resources. Nonetheless, Hawley Miles argued, difficult financial times—though challenging—can actually create opportunities to improve system effectiveness. She emphasized how public sector budget tightening can provide the impetus for more thoughtful implementation, as policymakers and education leaders need to think more carefully and strategically about how to deploy resources for maximum impact on student outcomes. Harvard Senior Lecturer James Honan went a step further, urging the group to consider the role that resource allocation plays in shaping student achievement and learner outcomes: “If you don't change the use of the money, you aren't going to change the pattern of outcomes.”

Throughout the Institute, participants identified other observations and critical lessons related to addressing and building the capacity for systems to implement new policies:

- **Policy implementation requires ongoing adaptation.** Reinforcing a component of the GFE policy implementation framework, Professor Susan Moore Johnson advised participants to begin with an honest assessment of “what is” rather than imagining a

blank slate, and to recognize that education improvement does not happen in a vacuum but instead will be introduced and implemented in a preexisting environment with established values and practices. Funders must honestly recognize that organizational change, particularly of the magnitude necessary to transform student learning, is complex, may be gradual (it will take time) and requires ongoing adaptation and refinement.

- **Building capacity doesn't mean slowing down.** As part of the Institute program, participants discussed a Harvard Graduate School of Education case study about the implementation of a new, weighted school-funding model in Baltimore City Public Schools. While teaching the case and reflecting on her own interaction with Baltimore leaders, Miles described working with Baltimore City Public Schools CEO Andres Alonso, who questioned whether capacity building would inhibit his aggressive push for change. Miles described how Alonso's initial assertion—"Every time you say 'build capacity,' I hear 'slow down'"—evolved into a calculated approach to building the knowledge and skills of his team to implement change without sacrificing their sense of urgency. She encouraged funders to approach their capacity-building work similarly: It should be carefully designed but aggressively deployed.
- **A "one size fits all" approach rarely works; teachers are different.** When required new instructional approaches or programs are introduced, they should be rolled out with careful planning and consideration of educator preparation and experience. Educators at various stages in their careers need different types of support, Moore Johnston pointed out; indeed, a growing body of research suggests that newer teachers, in addition to having less experience than more veteran teachers, also see the profession differently and are more

## Transformation or decline: How can funders promote restructuring in tough times?

Karen Hawley Miles, executive director and founder of Education Resource Strategies First, encouraged funders to support education system transformation during times of tight resource constraints by:

- Focusing on whole systems—not just individual schools;
- Supporting transition investments for systems to implement restructuring and/or to pilot and evaluate new approaches;
- Making "productivity" (i.e., both outcomes and efficiency) a part of contracts and grant agreements;
- Supporting efforts to build the fact base and understanding for union contract negotiations; and
- Supporting efforts to communicate the trade-offs and choices of new policies to stakeholders.

## Universal, well-planned and high-quality: The Schumann Fund helps New Jersey implement a higher standard for preschool

Responding to decades of debate, legislative inaction, and litigation on the adequacy of funding for New Jersey's public education system, the New Jersey State Supreme Court in 1989 ordered the state to implement specific remedies to improve education in the 31 poorest school districts, including "universal, well-planned and high-quality preschool education for all three- and four-year olds." While advocates and funders who supported the litigants saw the court order as an unprecedented opportunity to change conditions and outcomes in these school districts, they also understood that a court ruling alone would not be sufficient to ensure students actually received the education they were now legally guaranteed. In particular, they saw a huge deficiency in the ability of state and local agencies to implement the mandated reforms effectively.

As legislators grappled with this new mandate, the Schumann Fund for New Jersey considered how it could best help support the implementation of high-quality universal preschool, a remedy it strongly supported.

The Fund's recently hired executive director, Barbara Reisman, had extensive national experience in child care and early childhood education; her expertise, coupled with the Fund's track record on such issues, positioned the Fund to be a strong supporter of the state's implementation of universal preschool. Indeed, looking back on the Fund's experience and successes since 1989, its deep expertise and knowledge in this area of work helped it efficiently and effectively direct resources to support implementation.

Both Reisman and trustees of the Fund realized that the court-ordered changes were complicated and would take years to implement fully, and they explicitly committed the foundation to an open-ended, long-term effort to support the changes.

The Fund's efforts included convening key stakeholders, such as the Education Law Center (the litigators in the school funding court case), advocacy organizations, the New Jersey Head Start Association, superintendents in the affected school districts, child development experts and other key leaders, to develop a shared vision and clear path toward implementation. In addition, the Fund made direct investments to build the capacity of those responsible for implementation.

The Fund also actively collaborated with other New Jersey foundations to coordinate and align grantmaking strategies and resources, so that the foundations were working effectively together to support their shared commitment to high-quality early childhood education.

Now, more than a decade after the court's ruling, the Fund is finally at a place where it can consider whether implementation has been "done" well enough that the changes will stick and the work will move forward even without continued nurturing by the foundation—or whether its continued leadership and resources remain necessary.



interested in greater accountability. As one participant noted, “No matter how sophisticated the tool is, we can’t just move from the tool to the teacher. We need a strategy that accounts for how exactly the tool gets to the teacher and how that, in turn, translates into greater student learning.”

- **Leadership matters.** As in nearly every relationship between grantees and grantmakers, inspired and capable organizational leadership is the non-negotiable key for success. That maxim is true in funding policy implementation too: Investing in the “right” educational leaders will make the difference between success and failure.
- **Be aware of “reform fatigue.”** Educators are engaged in unprecedented levels of change and uncertainty in their schools and institutions. Early childhood instructors, teachers, school leaders, school district personnel and postsecondary faculty are already engaged in—and overwhelmed by—multiple improvement efforts. Wariness is often exacerbated by a lack of training and support for the implementation of new instructional approaches. Grantmakers should carefully consider the constraints faced by those on the frontlines and consider directing support to ease the burden and smooth the transition.
- **Develop partnerships with other grantmakers in support of common goals.** Given all these considerations and challenges—overwhelmed organizations, long time frames, too few resources, etc.—funders (particularly those who are working on similar or closely related issues) should coordinate grantmaking strategies to maximize the impact of their collective efforts. Boston Foundation President Paul Grogan reinforced this lesson in describing his organization’s successes and setbacks: “We are at our best and most formidable when we put all of our capacities as funders together into one strategy, especially in education.”

PART 5

# Capacity, communication *and* courage: Attending to implementation in Delaware

“Our ultimate goal is not to take credit but to make things happen,” explained Paul Herdman, president of the Rodel Foundation, in describing his organization’s approach to supporting policy implementation.



**T**he experience of the Rodel Foundation is documented in “The Rodel Foundation of Delaware: Reshaping the Landscape of State School Reform,” a case study co-written by GFE and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The case study examines the role the Rodel Foundation and its Vision 2015 initiative played in shaping Delaware’s successful Race to the Top (RttT) application (it was one of only two states to win an award in the first round of grantmaking). It describes the tumultuous six years leading up to the state’s extraordinary accomplishment, as well as the careful behind the scenes strategizing and support the foundation provided.

Just as importantly, the case study also reinforces many of the approaches, observations and lessons suggested by other funders throughout the discussions at the GFE Institute. It spotlights one funder’s pursuit of dramatic education policy change and its subsequent transition to prioritizing implementation. Although it is an operating foundation, with greater flexibility to staff programs and launch new organizations than a traditional foundation, the Rodel Foundation offers relevant lessons to all grantmakers interested in broadening their focus to include support for policy execution, and shows in practice how one funder converted the choices in the GFE policy implementation tool into a powerful strategy.

As Herdman reflected on how the foundation needed to shift its strategy from simply advancing policy to seeing it through to its implementation, he identified the following three key roles the organization could play as a funder:

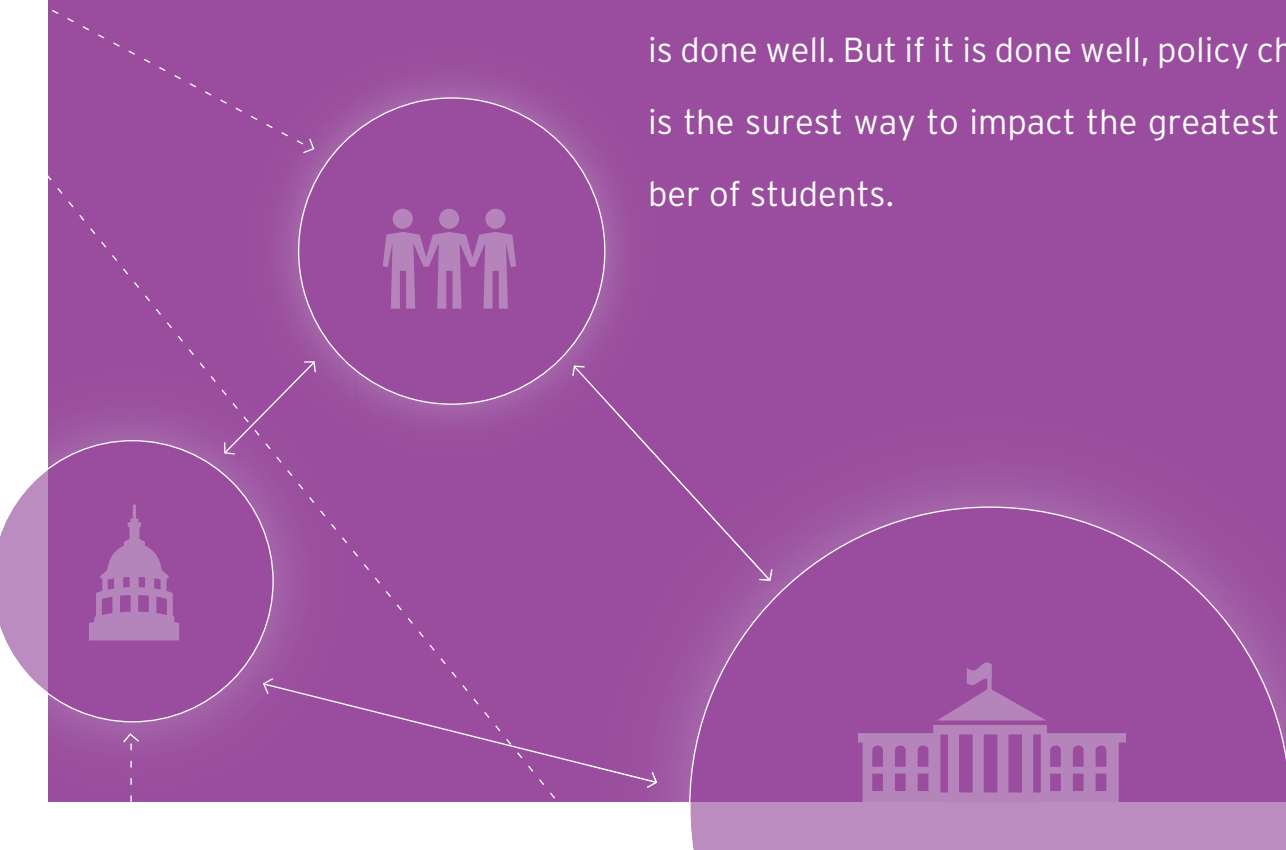
- **Capacity:** The Rodel Foundation recognized that state departments of education—like most government agencies—are predominantly focused on ensuring compliance with regulations. The bold commitments of the state’s Race to the Top plan and its rapid timeline for change required the Delaware Department of Education to assume new leadership, design new approaches and innovate in a way it had never done before—and to do all this without a staff with the skills needed to meet these demands. To support state agency leaders, the foundation actively helped recruit new talent from across the country for the new positions funded by the RttT grant, and it sought strategic partnerships with some of the best education providers and thinkers to enlist their expertise, including Harvard University’s Strategic Data Project and the Hope Street Group. In addition, the foundation made selective investments to build the capacity of local school districts to implement new policies and instructional approaches, including the implementation of common standards and assessments.
- **Communications:** Rodel understood that the pace of change demanded by the state’s Race to the Top commitments was unprecedented and could easily overwhelm parents, teachers and school leaders whose knowledge of the new policies now underway was very limited. To improve understanding across a broad set of stakeholders, the foundation prioritized frequent, accessible communication to help parents, teachers and other community members understand what Race to the Top changes would mean for them. Rodel actively partnered with the

Governor's office; with Education Voters, a newly formed grassroots organizing and advocacy organization; and with other Vision 2015 partners to support community presentations and meetings designed to answer questions and build understanding and support for the coming changes in schools.

- **Courage:** Implementation becomes particularly tough when it pushes people out of their comfort zone or when it has undesirable short-term outcomes. The foundation has consistently recognized the value of applying ongoing political pressure to advance policy changes in Delaware, and that commitment continued as it shifted its focus to support implementation of the Race to the Top policies and plan. Foundation leaders anticipated obstacles such as waning interest or mobilized opposition, and has continued making the case for the vision and hope for the future of Delaware's schools embedded in both Vision 2015 and the state's RttT plan—even when opposition has intensified.

## Conclusion: Make perseverance *and* agility your bedrock

During her concluding remarks, GFE Executive Director Chris Tebben encouraged funders to embrace the challenge of supporting policy implementation and to be “guardians of the process.” Almost no one else is focused on ensuring that policy change—from design to execution to implementation on the ground—is done well. But if it is done well, policy change is the surest way to impact the greatest number of students.



**P**olicy implementation is not a linear, sequential process, and—as is the case with all good grantmaking—requires a combination of flexibility and responsiveness. Grantmakers should take the time to articulate what success will look like, and then measure their progress along the way. They should assess the landscape and needs carefully, but they also should act with urgency, zero in on the biggest obstacles and be prepared to adjust their strategy as they learn more. And they should be persistent and prepared to sustain their work over a long time horizon, because it takes years to move from advocacy to adoption to implementation that truly changes student outcomes.

Finally, funders should recognize that the work of bringing about change in public systems is inherently difficult and fraught with political divisions—and they should bring the same political sensibilities to this work as they do to their efforts to enact policy. “If you can’t tolerate the criticism and ups and downs, your efforts will be very limited and perhaps on the margins. This work is not for the faint of heart,” Tebben observed. Echoing this advice, Robert Schwartz, associate dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, added, “Working in the public sector is messy, and as difficult and messy as it is, you need to develop a working relationship across political lines and views to move things forward.”

In dinner conversation with funders during one night of the Institute, David Gergen, director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government and a political analyst for CNN, offered additional advice to grantmakers who care about policy change: “Your biggest voice will come from being in alliances with others, and you need to be prepared to work with people you wouldn’t vote for.”

PRINCIPLES FOR

# Effective Education Grantmaking

principle  
no.

1

## Discipline and Focus

In education, where public dollars dwarf private investments, a funder has greater impact when grantmaking is carefully planned and targeted.

principle  
no.

2

## Knowledge

Information, ideas and advice from diverse sources, as well as openness to criticism and feedback, can help a funder make wise choices.

principle  
no.

3

## Resources Linked to Results

A logic-driven “theory of change” helps a grantmaker think clearly about how specific actions will lead to desired outcomes, thus linking resources with results.

principle  
no.

4

## Effective Grantees

A grantmaker is effective only when its grantees are effective. Especially in education, schools and systems lack capacity and grantees (both inside and outside the system) may require deeper support.

principle  
no.

5

## Engaged Partners

A funder succeeds by actively engaging its partners—the individuals, institutions and communities connected with an issue—to ensure “ownership” of education problems and their solutions.

principle  
no.

6

## Leverage, Influence and Collaboration

The depth and range of problems in education make it difficult to achieve meaningful change in isolation or by funding programs without changing public policies or opinions. A grantmaker is more effective when working with others to mobilize and deploy as many resources as possible in order to advance solutions.

principle  
no.

7

## Persistence

The most important problems in education are often the most complex and intractable, and will take time to solve.

principle  
no.

8

## Innovation and Constant Learning

Even while acting on the best available information—as in Principle #2—a grantmaker can create new knowledge about ways to promote educational success. Tracking outcomes, understanding costs and identifying what works—and what doesn’t—are essential to helping grantmakers and their partners achieve results.

grantmakers<sup>for</sup> education 

Grantmakers for Education strengthens philanthropy to improve outcomes and expand opportunities for all learners. As a national network of more than 275 private and public grantmaking organizations supporting education from early learning through postsecondary education, GFE provides research, programs and resources to increase funders' ability to be strategic and capable in their education grantmaking. For more information or to learn about membership, please contact us.

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