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OH: Tough times, tough measures-funding strategies



With new equipment and textbooks from the GE Foundation, CPS students are boosting their science and mathematics skills.

Summary: Schools and districts often shy away from outside funding because it's too hard to sustain. Not this district. It embraces outside funding by including it in its strategic planning, getting to know its funders, and inviting them into the school community.

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In tough economic times schools find it harder and harder to fund programs and services that are integral to student success. Many schools and districts have sought outside funding, but find that it difficult to sustain. The Cincinnati Public School (CPS) district has worked hard to identify funding partners, maintain relationships with those partners, and to sustain funding once it's been obtained.

As the third largest school district in Ohio, with 34,000 students and 58 schools, CPS has grappled with its share of challenges: Shortages of funds, a shift from a middle class to largely impoverished student population, a disengaged community, and deteriorating facilities. Nearly ten years ago, with a comprehensive, system-wide plan, grounded in the concept of schools as community learning centers (CLCs) and an ambitious one billion dollar Facilities Master Plan to renovate or build new schools throughout the district, CPS set a course of action to recapture its students, re-engage its local

communities, and improve its academic and fiscal health. External partnerships have been critical to the district's efforts to reinvent itself. CPS partners range from local and regional businesses, non-profit agencies, philanthropies, and institutions of higher education, to national level foundations such as The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the GE Foundation. The lessons that CPS and its schools have learned through their efforts to identify and sustain partnerships are applicable to many other urban districts that are struggling to gain extra support in tough economic times.

Know what you want: Just holding out a tin cup equals poor funding strategy

One key strategy that shows funding partners you mean business is to start tackling your problems yourself. "Some major initiatives simply require an additional impact player and additional funding, or they cannot be undertaken," observes CPS Board of Education president Eve Bolton. "We've been successful in attracting support and partners, like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, because we started tackling the critical problems ourselves and have persisted in trying to find solutions. If you're just out there talking about your problems, holding out a tin cup and hoping it will be filled with money because you need

something, you'll be out of luck finding partners to help."

Kelli Wells, program director for U.S. Education, GE Foundation, concurs: "When we were looking at districts in geographic areas where we have facilities to participate in our College Bound District Program, we saw that CPS had already laid a foundation for change and had a shared vision with its teachers, unions, board, and administration of its goals for its students and the system. We had the sense that our investment of \$20 million over five years could help them reach another level of success." The grant, made in 2006, is the largest non-governmental grant in the district's history and addresses five key areas: A rigorous district-wide curriculum in math and science; professional development for teachers; engagement of school, community, and business stakeholders; improvement of management

District characteristics
Name: Cincinnati Public SD
State: Ohio
Type: Urban
Grades: Pre-k-12
Enrollment: 34,000
Students per teacher: n.a.

Enrollment characteristics
Economically disadvantaged: 65.5%
English language learners: 2.7%
Students with disabilities: n.a.
White: 22.7%

All in favor

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effectiveness through collaboration; and evaluation to measure students' progress toward college readiness.

Black: 70.9%
Hispanic: 1.5%
Asian/Pacific Islander: 0.8%
American Indian/Alaska Native: 0.1%
Other: n.a.
Source: CPS Annual Report 2007 and Basic Facts

Building funding collaborations into school improvement plans is a must

According to Interim Superintendent Mary Ronan, having a board of education policy that includes community partnerships as part of the district's strategic plan, and for all the district's schools, has been crucial to CPS's successful friend and fundraising relationships. "It's difficult to get the community and businesses involved if only a few schools are doing outreach. When all levels of the system—board, administration, union, teachers, and community—are engaged in the process, others pay attention and want to be involved," she said.

The transition to community learning centers (CLCs), especially as schools move into new or renovated buildings, has increased opportunities for creating a broad network of partnerships across the district. Through a community engagement process, communities assessed their particular needs and helped to plan and design their facilities. With the assistance of the district CLC consultant, schools identified partners to share on-site space at no cost. Depending on community needs, partners offer a targeted range of services and support, such as health and mental health care, after school programs, extended learning, work force development, or the arts, accessible by all community members. Through funding from the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, the United Way, and other public and private sources, twenty schools currently have a community resource coordinator on staff to assist them in creating and coordinating partnerships.

Challenges meeting basic obligations

With shrinking state funding and a requirement to have a balanced budget, CPS regularly faces challenges to meeting its basic obligations. Nearly 90 percent of the CPS \$445 million budget for 2008–2009 comes from two sources: State foundation revenues (33.5 percent) and local property tax revenues (51.6 percent). The balance is provided by other state, local, federal and non-operating revenues.

"The beauty of the CLCs is that we establish self-sustaining partnerships that leverage existing services and resources to meet the needs of the community," says Darlene Kamine, the district-wide CLC consultant who coordinates partnerships and trains and supervises the community resource coordinators. "Funders like the efficiencies of the CLC model. It reduces overhead, programs and agencies have better access to their clients, and there is increased capacity because of the synergies of the school and their partners' support systems. Funders can also see what the needs are across the district rather than have 'one-off' conversations school by school. We can also draw in potential partners in a more organized way."

Staying the course ensures funding fits your goals and priorities

At the district level, CPS also has a set of criteria for developing and accepting partnerships to ensure consistency with its goals, according to Ronan. These criteria consist of following questions:

- Does the initiative or program in question fall within our Building Futures Strategic Plan?
- How will it help our students succeed?
- What will be the system-wide impact?

Keeping these points in mind "ensures that we stay on course and don't jump on any reform or initiative bandwagon that comes along just because funding is available," says Eileen Reed, board of education member and chair of the Partnership/Engagement Committee. "The partnership has to help us meet our goals as well as their [funders] own," she says.

At the local level, Dr. Christina Russo, Principal, Winton Hills Academy, which serves one of the largest public housing projects in the district, advises that, "Principals and teachers need to be gatekeepers for their schools and classrooms so that services and donations, as much as they are appreciated, do not take up an inordinate amount of time or detract from the education process. We also seek relationships that promote academic achievement and goodwill for the public school system." In short, while a funder's proposition may sound tempting, if it doesn't fit your school or district's goals, it's not going to last.

Defining your need and establishing an accountability plan attracts funders

Before applying for any funding, it's important that your district or school do its homework. Defining need and establishing accountability processes are extremely attractive to funders. "By defining what you need help with, making it discrete and manageable, and having ways to measure success, you can show that what you propose to do will make a difference and that the partner will have a return on their investment," observes Bolton. CPS has received funding through several grantors, all of which target specific needs within district. Bolton describes a few:

- CPS's initial Gates Foundation grant focused on improving academic scores and graduation rates at several large, underachieving high schools by creating smaller schools within schools.
- Through professional development for teachers and the purchase of new books and equipment, the GE Foundation grant has already helped our students improve their math and science scores.
- An employee-tutoring program with Cincinnati Bell Corporation at Taft Technical High School has helped improve graduation rates by bringing the private sector's best practices into the school.

"Each of these programs has had a broad impact, but each one has also been narrowly focused and results could be measured and evaluated," notes Bolton.

Getting in tune with funders helps to understand their guidelines and restrictions

Jeff Edmondson, executive director of Strive, a subsidiary of KnowledgeWorks, a Cincinnati-based educational philanthropy, notes that the district's approach to its programs coincides well with the prevailing local philanthropic environment. "Local funders, many of whom are corporate-based, are interested in bringing all stakeholders together to tackle issues collaboratively and to make educational changes that are research-based, focused on best practices, and that have measurable results. This type of strategic approach goes way beyond, 'I want to implement a tutoring program, and how can I get it funded?' It sets the stage for a broader, more lasting impact and for attracting funding," says Edmondson. Strive works closely with CPS, especially with its CLCs, and other school districts in the region to build collaborative networks of partners focused on targeted issues and students' success throughout and beyond their educational career.

Understanding potential funders' guidelines and restrictions is also important to achieving a positive outcome. "This sounds like common sense," says Wells, "but the [GE] foundation receives requests all the time for assistance in areas such as literacy that do not fall within our purview. In addition, we tend to focus on geographic areas where we have facilities and generally do not accept unsolicited proposals. Reading guidelines or making a phone call to your potential funder often saves a lot of wasted effort and disappointment. By seeking out local partners first and establishing a track record with them, you'll have a better chance of success with a request to a major national organization."

Engaging your funders: It's not just money, it's people too

External partners almost always bring more resources to the table than simply money, which multiply the value of the relationship far beyond the recipient's expectations. "The GE Foundation is about people power and collaboration, as well as about making a financial investment in educational systems" says Wells. Elizabeth Del Toro, an employee of GE Aviation, the Cincinnati-based GE facility paired with the GE Foundation on the CPS grant, works full-time at the district to coordinate the grant with two CPS program managers. Her role includes helping to harness the power of GE Aviation volunteers on projects such as tutoring and to reach out to potential regional partners in mathematics and science. A GE Aviation facilities expert has also worked closely with architects and CPS to save the district several million dollars on its Facilities Master Plan. Corporate staff is helping the district with management issues, and the CEO of GE Aviation donates time each month to the program. Through the GE Foundation network, the district also benefits from contacts with top educational experts, conferences with other districts participating in the same grant program, and from contacts with national-level scientific organizations such as NASA.

Being prepared softens funding's end

"If outreach, collaboration, and partnership building are part of your normal way of doing business, you are constantly perpetuating your relationships and creating new ones," says Bolton. "When you need assistance, you'll already have a network in place. When funding from one source ends or another funding opportunity arises, you'll have multiple partnership avenues to explore," she notes.

External partnerships can also give a district or school the opportunity to learn how to realign existing resources so that programs can become self-sufficient. As Wells notes, "The GE Foundation tries to build sustainability into our grants by capacity building as the grant progresses. Funded positions, for example, are often reduced over the course of the grant with the grantee assuming more responsibility as the project goes on." At the local level, for example, the CLC model creates economies of scale and efficiency that allow schools to draw on existing community resources, offering cost savings to both schools and their partners, says Kamine. Those savings can then be leveraged and applied to other areas of need.

Although external funding does eventually end, grants themselves often have built-in longevity. "Consumables such as scientific equipment and textbooks will eventually need to be replaced, but the GE Foundation's investment in staff professional development will last throughout teachers' careers," notes Ronan.

Reaching the next level of success

"External partnerships aren't going to solve all your problems, but they can help you reach the next level of success that might not be possible to achieve through regular streams of revenue," says Reed. "Boards and school districts must realize that the school system cannot do everything by itself. It's hard for large institutions like school systems to look outside themselves and to be open to outside influences, but you have to do it if you're serious about helping your students and your community," she notes.

CPS' efforts in building partnerships and promoting collaboration have paid off with recognition by the national-level Coalition for Community Schools for its successful transition to community learning centers, improvements in academic achievement in reading, science, and mathematics, and increased graduation rates (60 percent in 2002 to a projected 82 percent in 2008). These steady gains have earned the district the Continuous Improvement ranking on the Ohio Department of Education Report Card for the fourth straight year. In the sixth year of the Facilities Master Plan, twenty-three schools have been newly constructed or renovated. Three CPS high schools—Walnut Hills High School, Withrow University High School, and Clark Montessori High School—are nationally ranked among the top 1,000 public high schools in the United States.

Lessons learned

- Don't overlook local partners. Eileen Reed says, "Drawing on partners from the local neighborhoods whether it's a business, a social service agency, residents, or parents helps propel everyone forward to give them a sense of pride and ownership in what's happening. It's not just the big corporations and foundations that can help. If you start with the people you know, you'll eventually attract the attention of those that you don't know."
- Keep the flow of communication going. Make sure that local, and state officials, your donors, partners, parents, students, and

the community know what is happening in the school system. Reed counsels: "It's important to establish an environment of collaboration that reaches all levels. Share your successes and don't hide your challenges."

- Make it personal, especially with corporate partners. "Yes, that check's important, but open the doors of your schools and let interested parties meet your students and see what happens on a daily basis at your school and district," says Wilmers. "All teachers and students also know that thank you notes must be written. When I visit corporate offices and not-for-profits, I often see those notes posted prominently in volunteers' offices," he says.
- Make sure volunteers have a valuable experience that is well managed and well coordinated. "You don't make a good impression, nor do you seem to value a volunteer's time if students who need tutoring, for example, don't keep their appointments. Each project or program needs a point person to make sure it runs smoothly. It's important that administrators give someone on staff the responsibility and time for this type of coordination and also for outreach to partners," says Wilmers.
- Give back to your donors. "We're grateful for the assistance our students receive through our partnerships with wealthier school districts and others, but we want students to know that they aren't just recipients; they have gifts to give also. It might be a concert at a sister school or at a corporate event. Donors appreciate these gestures more than you can imagine," says Russo.

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