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## Unions, Districts and Communities to the Table in the NEA Foundation Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative Sites

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## ABOUT THE NEA FOUNDATION

The NEA Foundation is a public charity supported by contributions from educators' dues, corporate sponsors, and others who support public education initiatives. We partner with education unions, districts, and communities to create powerful, sustainable improvements in teaching and learning. Visit [neafoundation.org](http://neafoundation.org) for more information.

## ABOUT THE NEA FOUNDATION REPORTS AND ISSUE BRIEFS

Occasional reports issued by the NEA Foundation provide in-depth coverage and analysis of innovations designed to increase teaching effectiveness and student achievement. Selected innovations are drawn mainly from the NEA Foundation program sites.

Issue Briefs provide an engaging snapshot of impactful features of NEA Foundation's local union, district and community collaborative partnerships.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Dear Colleagues:

The NEA Foundation embraces deep and enduring collaboration among the local teachers union and the teachers they represent, the district and community as a core philanthropic strategy. In our funded sites, local collaborative teams plan and execute a wide array of high-leverage reforms over the course of five years. The sustainability of these efforts is in large part driven by input and support from business, neighborhood groups, parents and families, community-based service providers, and local education funds or school foundations. The premise is straightforward: we believe that sustainability and scale can be achieved most effectively when top-down and bottom-up strategies converge and are aligned.

This *Issue Brief* highlights the collaborative work of two communities currently funded by the NEA Foundation as part of its *Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative*—Lee County, FL and Springfield, MA. In each of these communities, community partners have been engaged to achieve initiative goals by generating a shared agenda for reform and by bringing specific community-based assets to the bear on the development, implementation and sustainability of that agenda. Lessons learned from these two communities can be applied to any community and school district, especially wherever economic or social hardship continue to demand new resources and renewed public will to effect enduring change.

Beyond these “technical” lessons, we are certain that you will glean from these pages nuggets of inspiration that will compel action in your own communities. While now a well-worn slogan, “it takes a village to educate a child” has taken on new meaning in both Lee County and Springfield.

Sincerely,

  
Harriet Sanford  
President and CEO

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## Why Involve the “Community”?

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Referred to variously as community, civic or public engagement, or more generally, “constituency building,” the Ford Foundation defines constituency building as the creation of “inclusive, multi-sectoral coalitions and networks involving school personnel, parents, civic leaders, political leaders, the business community and ordinary community residents.”<sup>1</sup> Meaningfully engaging the community in reform has great potential. The community can help to build a groundswell of demand and support for change, act as an honest broker holding public officials and all leaders accountable for achieving equity and excellence, and ensure that educational resources and assets are allocated equitably.<sup>2</sup> Evaluations of specific efforts show promise for increasing student outcomes of a wide variety,<sup>3</sup> including increased student academic achievement, lowered dropout rates and disciplinary referrals, and overall student motivation.

**The NEA Foundation strategy to build local constituencies for reform has been operationalized in funded sites through three phases:**

- Relationship-building through the invitation of community partners to formally co-construct and lead high-leverage reform projects as members of collaborative leadership teams;
- Marshaling community assets to support increased student achievement through efforts such as extended learning (e.g., high-quality summer school) and enrichment opportunities (e.g., experiential learning); and
- Building community demand, support, and accountability for system-wide reform efforts.





## The Case of the Foundation for Lee County Public Schools (FL): High-Quality Instruction for All Lee County Students

Among the growing number of school or local education foundations across the nation, the Foundation for Lee County Public Schools has held as its mission since its inception in 1986 to “enhance the quality of public education in Lee County by increasing community involvement in, and support for, Lee County Public Schools.” It was created by a diverse group of local business and community leaders, united by the belief that the cornerstone of an economically strong community is a quality public education system.

Unlike similar organizations that only support existing programs at a single school, or that serve schools district-wide but are not independent of the district administration, the Foundation for Lee County Public Schools is more akin to a local education fund (LEF), a type of education non-profit that purposefully strives to maintain independence from its school district and seeks specifically to effect system-wide reform.<sup>4</sup>

Structurally and operationally, the Foundation maintains its independence from any single stakeholder group through the structure and composition of its governing body. Fifty-five percent of board members are drawn from the business sector; 25% from the nonprofit sector (including local philanthropies and community services providers); 10% from the community-at-large; 5% from higher education; and 5% other, including civic, union and district executive leadership. The local union and district are represented on the board by the union president and the superintendent. These last two positions are ex-officio and voting, though never elected as board chair or as voting executive committee members. These distribution and governance policies ensure that the Foundation can act as an informed and critical friend to the union and district, and as a collective and independent voice of the greater community, bringing non-educator needs, concerns and interests to the table.



Why and how does the Foundation for Lee County Public Schools enact its role helping to build a constituency for change? The reflections of the current school board chair, Mary Fischer, upon the Foundation's entry to the NEA Foundation Gaps initiative, signals the Foundation's commitment to both equity and excellence as a shared reform agenda among the district, union and community: "[An] exciting initiative was made possible by a \$50,000 planning grant from the NEA Foundation. It will be used to develop a collaborative plan to address the achievement gap that persists for low-income and minority students, and at the same time address the need to improve the scholastic performance for all Lee County students."

**Now concluding his first full year of involvement past the planning phase and as a member of the initiative leadership team, the Foundation executive director, Marshall Bower, reflects on the greater significance of the role of the Foundation ensuring that the district, union and other stakeholders preserve and support the dual goals of achieving equity and excellence:**

*Our community recognizes that there are multiple and sometimes competing agendas for reform—  
from state and national directives, for example, the issue of the types of student achievement data we use  
to hold ourselves accountable, or the priority we place on or resources we deploy for engaging parents.  
Add to the mix the ever looming possibility of turnover in district or union leadership. The Foundation attempts  
to straddle these dynamics—preserving stability amid change by serving as an “institutional memory,” and  
staying focused and supporting the core work of making sure teachers have the support they need to teach  
effectively and that students have a wide range of supports needed to thrive.”*

As part of its role keeping the community, union and district focused on the essential work of teaching and learning, the Foundation has created a pipeline of expert teachers to help scale up effective instructional practices throughout the district. The process begins with selection of Golden Apple awardees, a yearly and rigorous identification of six highly skilled teachers. These teachers are initially nominated by students, parents, teachers, administrators and the general public. Of a pool of 30 finalists, awardees are then chosen after being observed during instruction and interviewed by a committee of community and business leaders. The award process culminates with a banquet attended by more than 700 community members, and is broadcast live on two local television networks to provide widespread recognition and high visibility of teaching as a complex and challenging profession.

**The collective expertise of these teachers is marshaled and further developed through the Foundation-sponsored Academy of Teachers, made up of over 140 current and past Golden Apple awardees. Core activities of the Academy of Teachers include:**

- Utilizing awardees' expertise as classroom teachers for modeling and assisting new and veteran teachers;
- Developing and staying abreast of new and effective instructional practices;
- Assisting in the effective pairing of businesses and schools to provide academic and nonacademic supports to students in the neediest schools; and
- Expanding the Academy membership by mentoring teachers through the Golden Apple selection process.

**Mark Castellano, president of the Teachers Association of Lee County (TALC), points out:**

Beyond building a support structure for increased teaching effectiveness, the Golden Apple awards and the Academy serve an important community awareness and information function...they bolster community understanding of teachers as the most important factor driving up a child's learning and development, and nurture an appreciation by the public for the dedication and skills of teachers and teaching as a high-status and challenging profession.

Georgianna McDaniel, *Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative* leadership team member and district director of personnel, cites the Academy and Golden Apple Awards as clear evidence that "the Foundation is not simply a conduit for and broker of public and private resources to make up shortfalls in district budgets." Rather, as she points out, these and "other initiatives and programs of the Foundation demonstrate its role upholding a vision of high quality instruction." Further support for this notion is the Foundation-administered small grants program through which all Lee County educators can create impactful student learning experiences. Each project must have as a goal the enhancement of student learning through "hands-on" activities, bolstering student engagement in traditional subject areas by, for example, utilizing "manipulatives" to teach math, hiking in the Everglades to explore Florida's natural resources, planting a vegetable garden to learn the life cycle of plants, or creating multi-media presentations to teach students new forms of technology. Since its inception, the grants program has awarded over \$1,000,000 to fund these innovative projects.

Among its most recent efforts to marshal community and business support for increased student achievement is the Foundation's deliberation of parent involvement as a district-wide strategy. By next year, the Foundation expects to have developed a coherent parent engagement strategy jointly developed and supported by the union, district and community.



## The Case of the Community Collaboration in Springfield, MA: Aligning Community, Economic and Educational Development

The mission of the Springfield Collaboration for Change is to raise the academic achievement of all Springfield Public Schools (SPS) students, while eliminating achievement gaps for Latino, African American and low income students. As a joint venture between labor, management and community partners, the Springfield Collaborative for Change (SCC) has created a high-functioning and diverse constituency for change through its leadership team. This team leads a broad-based coalition embracing parents, teachers, community leaders, principals, district executive leadership, business community representation, and union leadership. They are charged with developing strategy, modeling labor-management-community collaborative practice, and bringing multiple perspectives and resources to the effort. Andrew Bundy of Community Matters, serves as the SCC Change Coach, and helps these leaders to facilitate planning, leadership team meetings, and overall project development. He explains:

Three things make the SCC work unusual, and promising. First, it is focused intently on raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps. Second, it builds on years of powerful labor-management collaboration, which has created reservoirs of trust, built new structures of common practice, included diverse educator voices, and shared leadership within the central district leadership. Third, our community partners are at the decision-making table, both in implementing SCC's school-based programming, and at the highest level of districtwide strategic deliberations.



**Early on in the initiative planning process, the team realized that this shared agenda for reform could only be achieved through:**

...external partnerships and support structures that include municipal leaders, service organizations, local businesses, after school partners, community organizations, and human, social service and criminal justice agencies. Without formal mechanisms to integrate a well-coordinated service network, our schools will continue to work in isolation from critical forces that impact our students' lives, and that in many instances are working with similar goals but in competing rather than complementary ways<sup>5</sup>

Constituency building through SCC has built on existing efforts of the district, operationalized through SPS' Parent and Community Engagement Office (PACE), by allowing for more "open and frank discussion about substantive issues directly related to teaching, learning and achievement" by all stakeholders.

**Nancy DeProse, SCC project manager and Massachusetts Teacher Association representative, reflects on an underlying dynamic driving the success of SCC's constituency-building process:**

We have learned that collaboration is difficult. Collaboration requires both that people be given an opportunity to participate, and that they believe they can participate in an open and honest way.

Collaboration requires trust. Trust in people, so that you can allow them to be involved in making decisions. Trust that one can speak up and disagree, be heard, know that one's perspective was heard and not fear reprisal or recrimination.

Three highly-engaged community-based partners have ensured candid discussion of all issues and have helped SCC ground itself firmly in the community, bringing to bear very targeted resources, political support and demand for improvement in participating SCC schools. These partners are the United Way of Pioneer Valley; the Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation, a leading local family foundation; and the Regional Employment Board (REB) of Hampden County, a business-led, non-profit corporation that engages business, education, labor, and community-based agencies to set public policies that will build a better workforce.)

Each of these organizations is a convener of a broad swath of community stakeholders, paving the way for a broader, coordinated and sustainable community, economic and educational development agenda.

As part of their involvement in the early work of SCC, senior vice president for Community Impact of the United Way worked closely with the leadership team to provide organizational development support and provided insight and guidance on community involvement issues in the region. The Davis Foundation, based on its own portfolio of giving and existing role as a convener and broker of the business and nonprofit sectors in Hampden County, connected SCC to complementary early childhood efforts and expanded learning initiatives, and advised on resource development, opening doors to additional corporate funding for SCC. REB involvement built on SCC school-based literacy efforts through its Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative (HSLI), which works to improve the quality of summer and afterschool programs through education, training, monitoring and evaluating local community based programs.

**Mary Walachy, executive director of the Davis Foundation observes about the overall development strategy possible through broad-based constituency building:**

**The logic here was to connect SCC school-based efforts to others such as the TalkReadSucceed!**

**Initiative and Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative –as a way of increasing overall coherence and impact,**

**making SCC more attractive to a wider array of funders, and ultimately making all initiatives more**

**sustainable. In a community this size, with a limited number of funders and in a climate of economic**

**hardship, this is the only sane way to go.**

The strategy has paid off. Through the combined and coordinated development efforts of all stakeholders, SCC has leveraged the NEA Foundation multi-year investment by attracting and raising more than \$320,000 in just two years. These resources have been deployed strategically, setting the stage for a shared, aligned and impactful reform agenda.

The Talk/Read/Succeed (TRS) program, for example, cosponsored by the United Way and the Davis Foundation and housed at REB, is working in two of four SCC schools, reaching 200 families living in Springfield housing authority units and actively involving low-income parents in building their children's early literacy skills. The collaboration has been credited with increasing access among three- and four-year-olds to preschool.

The Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative (HSLI), also housed at REB, is a system- and community-wide change effort to increase the quality of and access to summer learning programs throughout western Massachusetts. HSLI is designed to bolster positive academic and youth development outcomes by aligning summer programs to the regular school year standards-based curriculum. Licensed Springfield teachers, for example, act as literacy coaches in the community-based summer learning programs. This past summer, SCC partnered with HSLI to extend the school year by implementing the model in three of four SCC schools. Across the district, access has gone up among five- to eight-year-olds to the literacy-rich summer programming.



## Constituency Building: More than Simply Involving the Community

Constituency building represents more than involvement of community stakeholders in supporting—financially or in other ways—the existing efforts of the district or union. Constituency building expands the “system” beyond the district office and the schools that it manages and the educators and students that populate the schools. It recognizes that schools are an integral part of the communities in which they sit, and that their success both supports improvement of and is shaped by the greater economic and social context.

In both Lee County and Springfield, educational leadership structures have been redefined to fit this new model. Like the American public at large, stakeholders brought to the table through the Foundation for Lee County Public Schools and the SCC Leadership Team bring a keen awareness that quality public schools build stronger families, improve the local economy, and reduce crime rates.<sup>6</sup> In Lee County, this awareness fuels a constant striving among district, union and community leaders to provide rich, rigorous and experiential learning for all students. The shared agenda for reform seeks unequivocally to ensure that all teachers can facilitate this learning. In Springfield, leaders have coalesced around high-quality teaching and coordinated services linking schools and community agencies. High levels of early literacy and expanded learning time promise to change academic outcomes, especially for traditionally underachieving students.

### **Both communities demonstrate the power of constituency building by:**

- Convening diverse stakeholder groups to focus on the most pressing educational and social challenges;
- Developing a shared reform agenda linking social, economic and educational outcomes;
- Engaging community members as partners and co-leaders, whether as parent facilitators of school-based work, community agency partners in multi-school initiatives, or philanthropic, institutional, and civic leaders partnering with district labor-management teams;
- Expanding accountability for fulfilling that agenda beyond districts and unions, to include the wider community partners; and
- Leveraging and generating new resources through heightened investment from business, local government and philanthropy.

As “learning organizations,” both feeder patterns and both classrooms will continuously examine their progress with hard data, holding themselves equally accountable for showing measurable improvement in student achievement and performance according to agreed-upon standards. The sets of structures and processes instituted in the two communities are meaningful only insofar as they remain focused on student learning, and on the improvement in the capacity of those most intimately responsible—teacher or teacher aide, principal or district administrator—to facilitate that learning.

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## Selected Resources

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- The Ford Foundation (for information on Constituency Building for Public School Reform) at: [http://www.fordfoundation.org/pdfs/library/strategies\\_improving\\_public\\_education.pdf](http://www.fordfoundation.org/pdfs/library/strategies_improving_public_education.pdf)
- The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) (see especially Center for Family, School and Community) at: <http://www.iel.org>

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## Endnotes

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- 1 See Petrovich, J. (2008). *A Foundation Returns to School: Strategies for Improving Public Education*. Ford Foundation: New York, NY; also see: Hirota, Janice M., and Lauren E. Jacobs. *Vital Voices: Building Constituencies for Public School Reform*. New York: Academy for Educational Development and Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2003; Stone, C., Henig, J. Jones, & B., Pierannunzi, C. (2001). *Building civic capacity: The politics of reforming urban schools*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas; Kronley, R., & Handley, C. (2003). *Reforming relationships: School districts, external organizations and systemic change*. School Communities that Work.
- 2 See <http://www.PublicEducation.org>
- 3 Academy for Educational Development. *Constituency Building for Public School Reform Initiative. Initiative Value-Added Study Final Report*. Ford Foundation Grant No. 990-0602, April 23, 2000;
- 4 Lampkin, L. & Stern, D. (2003). *Who Helps Public Schools: A Portrait of Local Education Funds, 1991-2001*. Urban Institute: Wash, DC
- 5 Springfield Year 1 Interim Funder Report
- 6 Education Week & Public Education Network. (2002). *Accountability for All: What Voters Want from Education Candidates: National Survey of Public Opinion*.



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