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RESULTS

Shaping Education Policy: The Importance of Clarity, Commitment, and Consensus Building

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Keywords: State education policy; Education Advisory Committee of the Ohio Grantmakers Forum; advocacy for policy changes; broad range of stakeholders; philanthropy and education reform; collaboration; context, process, and results; clarity, commitment, and consensus building

Key Points

- In 2005, the Ohio Grantmakers Forum (OGF), a consortium of philanthropic organizations that includes the Cleveland Foundation, trained its focus on the seemingly intractable problem of improving public education.
- This review, co-chaired by the Cleveland Foundation, culminated in a report, "Education for Ohio's Future," which offered recommendations in five areas: systems and structures, standards and accountability, teaching and leadership quality, innovation and choice, and funding.
- In 2008, OGF reached out beyond philanthropists to a diverse array of education stakeholders who developed consensus recommendations on teacher quality and student success.
- For the next three years, OGF and its partners organized support and advocated for these policy recommendations, most of which were addressed in the state's 2009 and 2011 biennial budgets and in its successful 2010 Race to the Top application.
- OGF's approach was effective because the organization adhered to a well-defined agenda, recognized the long-term nature of pursuing policy change, and leveraged its members' traditional strength as conveners.
- Ultimately, the engagement of the OGF-driven coalition established the philanthropic sector as a respected and credible voice for education reform in Ohio.

Introduction

This article describes how foundations in Ohio joined together in a sustained, strategic effort to influence state public policy to improve education, and it reviews the progress that has been achieved. Specifically, it details activities over the past seven years by the Ohio Grantmakers Forum (OGF) and its Education Advisory Committee, chaired by the president of the Cleveland Foundation.

The committee's multipronged effort focused on defining the problem through research and analysis, establishing a clear agenda for reform, and advocating for policy changes. This process involved a broad range of stakeholders through regional meetings and task-specific work groups. Ultimately, the OGF advisory committee established philanthropy as a credible and knowledgeable voice for education reform, and was effective in getting many of its recommendations adopted as state policy changes.

This effort reflects current theories that foundations can achieve significant impact by working to influence public policy. This article shares lessons underscoring the importance of clarity, commitment, and consensus building that may help other organizations interested in lasting and meaningful education-policy reform.

Background

In the past few decades, foundations' interest and engagement in public policy have increased (Robelen, 2010; Grantmakers for Education, 2011). For the purposes of this article, we are using a common definition of public policy as an effort to influence public decision making (encompassing decisions by government bodies that have important impacts on public resource allocation or important behavioral impacts on individuals or organizations) (Ferris & Harmssen, 2009). Four main factors help explain this trend toward increased interest and engagement:

- Foundations are recognizing that their limited philanthropic dollars can have greater impact if they are used to affect how public dollars are spent (Greene, 2005).
- There is increasing understanding that laws governing foundations' ability to work in public policy give them considerable latitude to effect change, despite lingering perceptions to the contrary (Troyer & Varley, 2009).
- Given their public-benefit and problem-solving missions, foundations bear a strong civic responsibility to engage in the public decision-making process (Smith, 2009).
- As public decision making has devolved and decentralized, it has opened up more opportunities for foundations, particularly smaller local and regional foundations, to influence decisions regarding public policy (Arons, 2007; Ferris, 2009).

Education continues to be a critical focus of philanthropy at the national, state, and local levels. Nationally, education receives more philanthropic support than any funding interest area, with the exception of religion. An estimated one of every seven dollars given to charity goes to an education-related endeavor (Lenkowsky, 2005). As the need for education reform has moved front and center, the role of philanthropy in shaping education policy has garnered increased notice.

Advocates argue that foundations must invest in public policy to achieve broad-scale impact. Jay Greene (2005) estimates that philanthropic giving to K-12 schooling is only about one-third of 1 percent of all education expenditures:

Trying to reshape education with private philanthropy is like trying to reshape the ocean with buckets of water. The only realistic strategy for reform by philanthropists is to leverage their private giving by attempting to redirect how future public expenditures are used. (pp. 49-50)

In the overview to *With the Best of Intentions: How Philanthropy Is Shaping K-12 Education*, Frederick Hess (2005) of the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research comments:

In a sector where even the most generous gifts are no match for the money routinely spent on outdated and outmoded systems, the "new" education philanthropy's influence will ultimately turn on its ability to change politics and policy. (p. 311)

Given their public-benefit and problem-solving missions, foundations bear a strong civic responsibility to engage in the public decision-making process.

Diane Ravitch, a well-respected education researcher, takes a different viewpoint. In *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravitch (2010) cautions that education policy and practice have been unduly influenced by the grantmaking actions of a few very wealthy foundations. She asserts that these funders have successfully advocated for school-reform approaches such as the proliferation of charter schools, promotion of choice and vouchers, and schools run as businesses – strategies that threaten to destroy public education without improving outcomes for all students.

However, philanthropic interest in influencing education policy appears substantial. Grantmakers for Education (GFE), a national network of more than 275 private and public grantmaking organizations supporting education, tracks grantmaking patterns annually. In its “Benchmarking 2011: Trends in Philanthropy” report, 61 percent of education funders say they are providing grants to improve public policy or to build public will for education policy changes, and 34 percent say they plan to increase their efforts in the policy realm (Grantmakers for Education, 2011). According to GFE, the discussion has shifted from whether philanthropies should engage in public policy to how to do so effectively, which roles to serve, and how to evaluate impact (Robelen, 2010).

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Strategic Choices About Public Policy Involvement

The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy at the University of Southern California has taken the lead in examining the critical decision factors, strategic options, and implications facing foundations as they consider engaging in the public policy arena. Center Director James Ferris and colleague Michael Mintrom (2009) emphasize that foundations have a range of assets that can be leveraged to impact public policymaking, including money, knowledge, and networks. However, they caution that to effectively navigate a complex process, foundations must make strategic choices about how best to intervene in the public policy process, including choices about venues (legislative, judicial, administrative, or ballot initiatives); jurisdictions (local, state, or national); stages in the policymaking process (problem definition,

agenda setting, policy adoption, implementation, or evaluation); and forms of engagement (funding analysis and technical support, building knowledge communities, supporting advocacy, increasing public awareness, or underwriting evaluation).

Additional research has focused on the nature and frequency of public policy-related grantmaking activities. In their study of 19 foundations engaged in public policy work, Ferris and Harmsen (2009) identified seven primary avenues foundations use to influence public policy; listed in order from those used most frequently, they are advocacy and grassroots organizing, partnerships and networks, research, convenings, communications, foundation cache and expertise, and policymaker education. Julia Coffman (2008) estimates that the majority of grantmaking activities involve building awareness, building public will, conducting policy analysis and research, and other tactics with less perceived risk. She also predicts that more action-oriented approaches, such as community organizing, issue-focused coalition building, and community mobilization, will likely become more prevalent as foundations seek to push forward specific policy positions and agendas and create the constituencies to sustain them.

Attention has also centered on the potential impact of collaboration among foundations on public policy. Collaboration can take many forms: informal networks, traditional membership organizations, or temporary alliances focused on a single issue. Sharp (2002) has identified five ways that such collaborations can increase funder leverage and capacity, including the possibility of scale, expanded opportunity for knowledge exchange, minimized risk, expanded potential of dollars, and broader traction. Bernholz (2009) points out that associations of foundations expand on the efficacy of individual foundations simply by bringing “the power of many” to bear on an issue. In addition, these associations have more latitude for advocacy and lobbying than do many individual foundations.

TABLE 1: Breakdown of Foundation Participation in the Advisory Committee by Geographic Focus

Year	Participating Foundations	Local/Regional Focus	State Focus	National Focus
2006	31	21 (67.8%)	5 (16.1%)	5 (16.1%)
2012	24	16 (66.7%)	5 (20.8%)	3 (12.5%)

Ohio Philanthropies Organize to Influence Public Policy

Education has long been a top priority for Ohio philanthropy. The state’s charitable foundations give more support to education than to any other area, annually investing more than \$300 million, or about 27 percent, of their total grantmaking dollars in education (Ohio Grantmakers Forum, 2006). As the new century opened, education reform was taking on a new sense of urgency among Ohio’s foundations, which confronted the reality that the state’s education system was not meeting world-class standards, was failing to close persistent achievement gaps, and was trailing other states in higher education attainment.

In 2005, several Ohio foundations asked the Ohio Grantmakers Forum to take an active role in accelerating the rate of education reform. OGF is a consortium of more than 200 member organizations with combined assets totaling about \$19 billion; the members contribute more than \$1 billion annually in grantmaking. OGF’s membership includes 95 private foundations, 49 community foundations, 43 corporate foundations/giving programs, and 23 other grantmaking public charities. These member organizations, distributed throughout all regions of the state, hold roughly 59 percent of all foundation assets in Ohio and provide approximately 62 percent of the giving.

In 2005, OGF’s board launched the Education Initiative and authorized creation of the K-12 Education Advisory Committee (originally called the K-12 Task Force) to provide a venue to better understand and influence state education policy and to more effectively leverage philanthropic dollars to improve Ohio’s education system. In 2005, 28 OGF members – representing community, private, and corporate foundations of all sizes and from every region of the state – joined the new advisory committee, along with three

national foundations. (See Appendix 1.) Ronald Richard, president and chief executive officer of the Cleveland Foundation, was named chairman of the committee.

In 2012, 24 OGF members were participating on the committee, including 13 of the original members. (See Appendix 2.) However, as Table 1 indicates, the breakdown of the committee by geographic focus has remained constant. In 2005, two-thirds of the committee’s members operated primarily in a local/regional context representing urban, suburban, and rural communities. This is still true today, which means the majority of members bring a vital on-the-ground perspective based on their close ties to local communities.

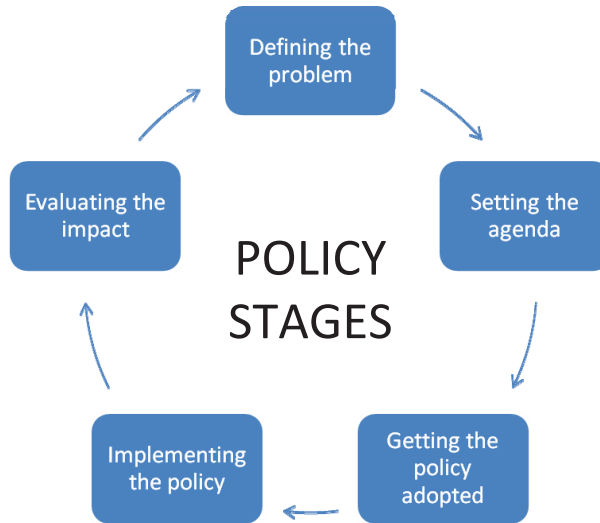
Twenty-three participating foundations have provided funding to support project staff costs, consultant fees, and other related expenses associated with the committee’s work. Ohio foundations have provided two-thirds of the funding and national funders the remaining third.

OGF’s Education Initiative is a leadership responsibility of its board of trustees, which appoints the chairperson of the advisory committee, annually reviews the work plan, adopts and disseminates the committee’s reports, and determines the continuation of the initiative each year. As part of its deliberations, OGF’s board has commissioned periodic, independent evaluations of the advisory committee’s work and impact.

OGF Pursues Multiphase Approach

From 2006 to the present, OGF’s Education Advisory Committee has been engaged in a comprehensive, disciplined strategy to influence education public policy. The conceptual framework developed by Ferris and Mintrom (2009) provides a useful lens for discussing this work. They suggest that foundations may choose to intervene in

FIGURE 1: POLICY STAGES



Concepts from James Ferris & Michael Mintrom, 2009
Visual adapted from the California Endowment

any, all, or some combination of the five phases associated with policymaking. (See Figure 1.) To date, most of the committee’s work has been concentrated in the problem-definition, agenda-setting, and policy-adoption phases.

Problem Definition

Ferris and Mintrom (2009) point out that, given that a clear link does not always exist between a social problem and government action to alleviate the problem, foundations have the potential to significantly shape the definition of a problem in a way that leads to feasible policy solutions. They maintain that problem definition emerges primarily by accumulating evidence, carefully analyzing the evidence, and presenting findings in a coherent and convincing manner.

The committee’s first step was to develop a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities Ohio faced in education. Throughout 2006, committee members participated in a series of discussions to assess the state of education and outline possible policy directions for Ohio. An experienced consultant in education and philanthropy coordinated the process, and several

consulting firms were used to develop briefing documents in various content areas.

As a result of the committee’s efforts, OGF published a comprehensive report, “Education for Ohio’s Future,” in December 2006. The intent of the report was “to offer an independent, easily accessible review of where we have been, where we are now, and the future policy options for education in Ohio – from the unique perspective of the foundation community” (OGF, 2006, p. 13). This report included a description of Ohio’s education challenges, a summary of recent reform initiatives, an overview of student performance results, and a series of findings and recommendations in five priority areas critical to improving student achievement. These priorities (summarized in Table 2) provided the framework for all future work.

OGF’s report was particularly timely, given that Ohio was in the throes of a race for governor; no incumbent was running, and education was a key topic for both candidates. Throughout the process, briefings were held for both candidates and their staffs and legislative education committees,

TABLE 2: Summary of Findings in OGF’s ‘Education for Ohio’s Future’ Report (2006)

Category	Findings
Systems and structures	<p>Ohio has a fragmented P-16 system, although efforts are under way to improve alignment.</p> <p>Not enough Ohio youngsters have access to quality preschool.</p> <p>Too few students have access to affordable higher education.</p>
Standards and accountability	<p>Ohio’s standards are not yet benchmarked to 21st-century skills and expectations.</p> <p>Ohio is strengthening its accountability and assessment system, but weaknesses remain.</p> <p>Teachers do not have sufficient tools and training to use the standards to plan and deliver daily instruction.</p>
Teaching and leadership quality	<p>Ohio has taken promising steps to strengthen the education profession, but most changes have not yet impacted local districts.</p> <p>Ohio does not have enough qualified teachers, particularly in hard-to-staff urban and rural schools and in high-need subject areas.</p> <p>Most Ohio districts use traditional seniority and a credential-based system, rather than a performance-based system, to compensate teachers and principals and determine school staffing.</p>
Innovation and choice	<p>Many Ohio public school districts have not recognized the need for wide-scale innovation.</p> <p>Ohio public community (charter) schools have no uniform performance standards, uneven accountability, and an inequitable allocation of resources.</p> <p>Ohio has only started to imagine what education might look like in the future.</p>
Funding	<p>Despite improvements, Ohio’s funding system still does not – and cannot – ensure stability, equity, or appropriate growth.</p> <p>Many districts and schools do not sufficiently focus on the effectiveness of their spending.</p>

as well as for other public officials and stakeholder groups, to keep them apprised of the committee’s progress. In November 2006, Ted Strickland, a Democrat, was elected governor, taking control after 16 years of Republican administration.

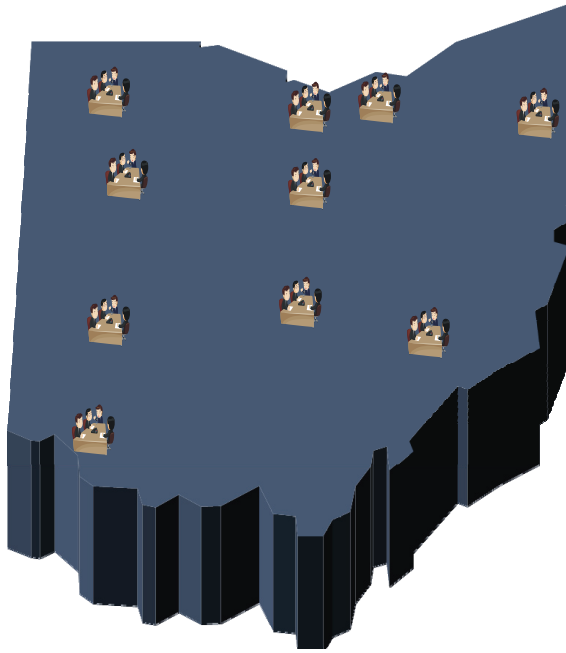
Agenda Setting

Once a problem is defined, items must be on the broader policy agenda if they are to gain attention from politicians who can place them on the gov-

ernment agenda. This progression requires that problems be connected to policies in sufficiently compelling ways to attract interest from those politicians (Ferris & Mintrom, 2009).

Understanding this imperative, the committee set out to build consensus recommendations around a specific education-reform advocacy agenda based on the 2006 report. The committee’s efforts were timed to coincide with the ongoing work of

FIGURE 2: LOCATION OF OHIO OGF REGIONAL MEETINGS



Gov. Strickland and his staff to develop a comprehensive education-reform plan for Ohio. The committee aimed to complete this phase of its work by the end of 2008 so that its recommendations could inform the reform package that was scheduled to be introduced in early 2009 as part of the biennial budget proposal. The agenda-setting process involved two steps.

Selecting policy priorities based on broad-based input

The first step of this process focused on gathering feedback from diverse constituencies on OGF's report and on what communities saw as the most critical issues to tackle first. From May 2007 through May 2008, the committee sponsored 10 meetings across Ohio. (See Figure 2.) As a starting point, OGF organized a statewide conference involving more than 225 educators, business leaders, public officials, foundation leaders, and national and state education experts to explore the implications of the report's recommended state reforms for students and schools.

Subsequently, OGF and its member organizations sponsored nine regional meetings throughout the

state to offer a broader group of stakeholders the opportunity to discuss education reform at the local level. These regional meetings engaged some 1,500 Ohioans in roundtable discussions, including K-12 educators, elected officials, and representatives from higher education and the business and philanthropic communities. OGF members heard many concerns and ideas, some consistent from region to region and others unique to particular regions. Two themes emerged as critical across all regions: preparing students for success in the global economy and guaranteeing quality teaching and effective school leadership.

Developing policy recommendations for priority areas

As the next step in the agenda-setting process, OGF convened two work groups composed of 43 individuals from 33 stakeholder organizations, including teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members, higher education faculty, representatives of regional education and business partnerships, employer organizations, community charter schools, community-based groups, and charitable and corporate foundations. Their charge was to develop policy recommenda-

TABLE 3: Summary of Recommendations in OGF's 'Beyond Tinkering' Report (2009)

<p>Create Ohio Innovation Zones and an Incentive Fund. Support promising school and instructional models, introduce districtwide innovations, and eliminate barriers to creative change.</p>
<p>Focus on transforming low-performing schools. Develop a statewide plan targeting the lowest-performing 10 percent of schools. Reassess and reallocate school improvement funds.</p>
<p>Develop a statewide P-16 education technology plan. Address technology as a diagnostic tool and an approach to instruction, improve teacher capacity in using technology, and identify ways to close the technology “equity gap.”</p>
<p>Develop a “graduate profile.” This profile would set the next generation of academic standards, identifying the foundational skills and competencies that all graduates should master.</p>
<p>Re-evaluate and revise Ohio’s academic standards. Align standards to college and career expectations, including 21st-century skills.</p>
<p>Revise the state’s assessment and accountability framework. Develop a system to improve the quality and consistency of instruction and learning, to determine whether students are meeting important goals, and to hold schools accountable.</p>
<p>Provide instructional supports to promote high-quality teaching and learning. Facilitate development of performance assessments, develop a clearinghouse for curriculum materials, and provide high-quality professional development.</p>
<p>Strengthen standards and evaluation for teachers and principals. Amend teacher and principal standards in key areas, create model hiring and evaluation protocols, and provide teacher-level value-added reports.</p>
<p>Improve Ohio’s teaching and learning conditions. Financially incentivize schools and districts to improve teaching and learning environments, increase requirements for award of tenure, and reconcile language on teacher dismissal with that of other public employees.</p>

tions for each of the two priority areas identified from the regional meetings. The conversation was sometimes contentious given that the participants, though serious and well informed, held divergent views. Yet, these differences enriched the dialogue, and the participants developed common goals in an environment where they felt free to express their honest opinions. Throughout the process, OGF met periodically with policymakers to keep them informed.

In January 2009, after six months of in-depth study, discussion, and debate, the work groups forwarded 11 consensus action recommendations (see Table 3) to the Strickland administration, the Ohio General Assembly, and the State Board of Education. The recommendations focused

on three broad areas: accelerating the pace of innovation, refining Ohio’s academic standards and restructuring its assessment system, and ensuring that top-quality teachers and principals are in every classroom and school. Published in a report, “Beyond Tinkering: Creating Real Opportunities for Today’s Learners and for Generations of Ohioans to Come” (Ohio Grantmakers Forum, 2009), these 11 recommendations would be the basis of OGF’s advocacy efforts over the next several years.

Policy Adoption

The policy-adoption stage begins with introduction and legislative consideration of a bill and ends with government adoption of a new policy. Although this stage is heavily influenced by

TABLE 4: OGF Education Initiative: Timeline and Milestones

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2012
Problem Definition		Agenda Setting		Policy Adoption	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formation of Education Advisory Committee • Publication of “Education for Ohio’s Future” 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 OGF-organized stakeholder meetings • 11 OGF recommendations from two work groups, published in “Beyond Tinkering” 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • House Bill 1 policy changes • House Bill 153 policy changes • Race to the Top policy changes 	

political insiders such as elected officials and their staffs, outsiders such as foundations can exert critical influence in guiding the actions of decision makers (Ferris & Mintrom, 2009).

For the next three years, OGF helped organize support and advocated for its 11 policy recommendations, with a primary focus on the 2009 and 2011 biennial budget processes. In Ohio, policy changes are typically included in the budget bill. These advocacy efforts were led by George Espy, OGF’s president, and Lisa Gray, coordinator of OGF’s Education Initiative.

In terms of the 2009 budget process, staff and committee members engaged in multiple activities related to the 11 action recommendations. Initially, OGF and its partners worked with the governor and his key advisers as they put together the budget bill for introduction. After several months of briefings and meetings, a majority of the recommendations were completely or partially included in the governor’s proposed budget.

Once the governor’s bill was introduced, OGF turned its focus on the legislature – a Democratic-controlled House of Representatives and a Republican-controlled Senate. OGF met legislative leaders and members of the education committees to advocate for inclusion of the 11 recommendations in bills introduced in both chambers. Outreach also included leadership of the Ohio Department of Education, the State Board of Education, and the Ohio Board of Regents.

During the legislative committee hearings, OGF provided policy briefs and legislative analyses,

testified and helped organize expert testimony, and mobilized local stakeholders to attend and participate in the hearing process. Ohio’s foundation leaders were critical advocates throughout this process and were tapped to join OGF in various meetings, especially when legislators from their districts were involved. This targeted outreach helped provide credibility and a personal link to the work, as many legislators had previous working relationships and positive experiences with the foundation leaders in their communities. A significant number of OGF’s recommendations were subsequently adopted in the state’s budget (Ohio House Bill 1), passed in June 2009. (See “Positive Impacts on Public Policy” below.)

In November 2010, Ohio elected a Republican governor, John Kasich, and gave control of both houses of the legislature back to Republicans, once again changing the political landscape for reform. Relying on the techniques it had used previously, OGF adapted its strategy, choosing to partner more closely with businesses and other reform-minded sectors to tackle some issues not addressed in June 2009. Again, OGF and its partners were successful in getting many of these policy objectives incorporated in the budget passed in June 2011 (Ohio House Bill 153). (See “Positive Impacts on Public Policy” below.)

OGF had another opportunity to push its recommendations forward. In 2010, Ohio applied for federal funding to help implement some of its reform efforts through the federal Race to the Top program. After an unsuccessful first attempt on its own, the state asked OGF for assistance in crafting a second application. OGF helped mount

TABLE 5: SUMMARY OF OGF RECOMMENDATIONS ADOPTED INTO POLICY

OGF Recommendations	HB 1 (2009)	HB 153 (2011)	Race to the Top (2010-2014)
Create Ohio Innovation Zones and an Incentive Fund	-	+	-
Focus on transforming low-performing schools	-	+	+
Develop a statewide P-16 education technology plan	+	-	-
Develop a “graduate profile”	-	-	-
Re-evaluate and revise Ohio’s academic standards	+	√	+
Revise the state’s assessment and accountability framework	+	√	+
Provide instructional supports to teaching and learning	√	√	+
Strengthen standards and evaluation for teachers/principals	+	+	+
Improve Ohio’s teaching and learning conditions	√	√	+
Develop a new educator compensation system	√	+	+
Ensure an equitable distribution of high-quality teachers/principals	√	-	-

Note: +, adopted in full; √, partially adopted; and -, not addressed.

an inclusive communications and outreach effort, working with the governor’s office, legislative leaders, the Ohio Department of Education, the Ohio Board of Regents, business and civic leaders, and other education stakeholders and advocates to create a more robust application. Support included a consultant to help navigate the complexities of the application and its relationship to current public policy. In addition, OGF leadership served on the writing and advisory team in the development and review of the application, which included many of OGF’s 11 original recommendations. This joint effort won Ohio a \$400 million federal grant.

Table 4 illustrates the three phases OGF engaged in over seven years as it developed and advocated for changes in state education policy.

Measuring Impact

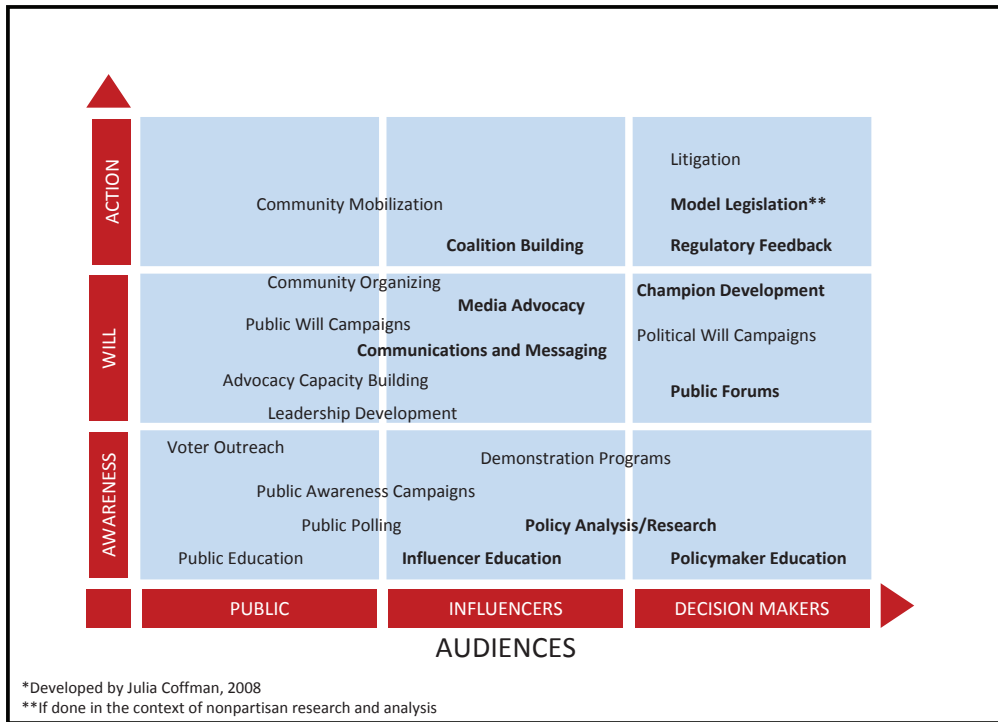
Throughout the life of the initiative, the board of the Ohio Grantmakers Forum has consistently examined whether this work was (1) impacting philanthropy’s level of credibility in the education-policy arena and (2) resulting in desired policy changes. To help answer these questions, the OGF board contracted with The Strategy Team, Ltd. to conduct independent evaluations of the committee’s work in 2008, 2009, and 2010.

Using an Internet-based survey and an in-depth interview protocol, the evaluation team solicited input in 2008 and 2009 from a representative sample of philanthropic OGF member institutions, OGF Education Advisory Committee members, and nonfoundation education stakeholders (representatives of teacher unions, the Ohio School Boards Association, business, Ohio Department of Education, governor’s office, legislature, and education advocacy organizations) regarding the general effectiveness and impact of OGF’s education work. The 2010 evaluation, which focused on OGF’s role in Ohio’s successful Race to the Top application, involved interviews with 23 nonfoundation education stakeholders.

Growing Credibility in Public Policy Arena

Data from The Strategy Team’s three evaluation reports as well as anecdotal evidence strongly suggest that OGF’s work has firmly established philanthropy as a credible and knowledgeable voice for education reform among two sets of key constituencies in particular: influencers (education associations, teacher unions, business organizations, and advocacy and research organizations) and decision makers (governor and staff, legislative leadership, and leadership of the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Board of Regents).

FIGURE 3: FRAMEWORK TO INFORM PUBLIC POLICY GRANTMAKING*



The reports clearly indicate that perception of OGF’s advocacy role has evolved over time. The 2008 evaluation suggests that after two years of advocacy, OGF had begun to carve out a positive presence as an education-policy advocate. Ninety-one percent of nonfoundation stakeholders interviewed reported that OGF was better known among those in the education arena; 80 percent believed that philanthropy’s involvement in guiding statewide policy was helpful. Asked what the OGF initiative had accomplished over the past two years, 79 percent cited “raising awareness about the issues” as OGF’s principal contribution.

The 2009 and 2010 evaluation reports pointed to a growing leadership role for OGF within the education-policy arena. Nonfoundation interviewees’ perception of OGF’s contribution moved beyond awareness building to convening and agenda setting: “The education stakeholders perceived the Education Initiative’s most positive at-

tribute to be its ability to convene a diverse group of people to discuss education issues and recommend improvements in Ohio” (The Strategy Team, 2009, p. 5). The 2010 report underscored the importance of OGF’s neutral convening role in relation to Ohio’s Race to the Top application:

OGF is largely perceived as a neutral organization with a unique ability to bring people together to discuss important issues. Their independent status encouraged stakeholders from both political parties to participate without being concerned the meetings were driven by one party’s political agenda. OGF succeeded in convening a very diverse set of people to have an open dialogue about education reform. (Strategy Team, 2010, p. 3)

Positive Impact on Public Policy

As Table 5 indicates, 10 of OGF’s 11 policy recommendations were fully or partially adopted through the 2009 and 2011 biennial budget bills or addressed in the state’s Race to the Top plan.

The independent evaluations underscore the perceived role OGF played in these changes. Eighty-three percent of those interviewed (Strategy Team, 2009) believed OGF did play a role in these developments. A sampling of these stakeholders' comments:

When the Education Initiative convened groups to give very, very specific recommendations, the level of detail was very helpful – very specific. Policymakers were able to use it very easily. Their report expressed common goals and how it could get there. Their feedback was very helpful and allowed us to test our thinking. – Staff person, Office of the Governor (Strategy Team, 2009, p. 32)

The “roll up our sleeves” working relationship has resulted in legislative movement. They gave us a set of recommendations; we pulled from them and got some into the legislation. Not only policy, though ... the value they added as a convener, a group able to pull together folks from all walks. Not just substance, but the conversation. – Staff person, Ohio General Assembly (Strategy Team, 2009, p. 30)

OGF's growing credibility as an education-policy leader is rooted in two aspects: the general reputation of foundations as neutral brokers and the time, effort, and resources OGF invested in establishing a clear purpose and direction for education reform in Ohio. As one interviewee summarized:

It (OGF) has accomplished a lot. They have definitely established OGF and its members as critical partners in the education system in Ohio and as critical partners in developing education policy. Their first publication came out in December 2006, and then was followed with a series of community forums in 2007-2008. Their second report was released in January 2009 and had a significant impact on policy dialogue. Their work has had a significant impact on dialogue in education policy and has contributed ideas that became part of the governor's education policy (Strategy Team, 2009, pg. 28)

Analysis of OGF Approach

A framework developed by consultant Julia Coffman (2008) aims to help foundations think and

act more strategically as they try to influence public policy. As seen in Figure 3, her framework has two dimensions: audiences, or actors in the policy process; and outcomes, or the results an advocacy or policy-change effort aims to achieve. The framework encourages foundations to start by thinking about which audiences they need to engage and, then, about how hard they need to push those audiences toward action. Plotted within these dimensions are specific types of activities for achieving policy goals. Grantmaking may focus on one audience or outcome, or it may pursue multiple audiences and outcomes simultaneously.

The OGF advisory committee targeted influencers at the state and local levels, such as leaders of key education stakeholder groups (education associations, teacher unions, business organizations, and advocacy and research organizations) and public policy decision makers, such as the governor and staff, legislative leadership, and leadership of the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Board of Regents. Its desired outcomes were to build awareness and will for its policy-reform recommendations among all these audiences, and then to prompt action by decision makers to effect those changes. As highlighted in the bold text in Figure 3, the committee undertook various activities to help achieve these outcomes. It is reasonable to think that, in the future, the committee's work may shift to target different audiences or outcomes.

Success Factors

It is our belief that three major factors have contributed to the effectiveness of the advisory committee's public policy work since 2005:

- **Clarity:** The committee developed a well-defined purpose and agenda at the outset and followed through with clear goals and action recommendations at each step in the process.
- **Commitment:** The committee recognized the long-term nature of pursuing policy change and developed the organizational infrastructure and mindset to effectively operate in this context.

A sustained, long-term commitment is necessary to accommodate shifts in the political and policy landscape – what Ferris and Harmsen call the “opening and closing windows of opportunity” in the policy process.

- **Consensus building:** The committee pursued a role as convener, a traditional strength of the philanthropic community, to bring together diverse groups of education stakeholders and, ultimately, to forge agreement on the priorities for action.

Clarity

A major factor in the success of the advisory committee has been clarity of purpose and direction. From the beginning, OGF understood it had two major goals: Inform education-related grantmaking and impact education policy in Ohio. The committee began by developing a well-defined agenda that could serve as a consensus position within the foundation community – one that could then be shared with other key stakeholders. The committee examined how Ohio’s education outcomes compared with the best education systems nationally and internationally based on research, data analysis, and deliberation. From this review, the committee identified five critical areas to be addressed through public policy and potential policy directions. “We did our homework. We based our approach on solid data and were able to develop an agenda based on that data,” said Espy, OGF’s president. The committee’s commitment to collecting and objectively analyzing the data was important in earning widespread support among the broad membership of OGF, a critical first step.

The next agenda-setting phase, while successful, was significantly more complex. The committee recognized that to get policymaker attention

and action, it would need to mobilize support outside the foundation community on a subset of issues. The committee convened two work groups comprising education stakeholders with divergent viewpoints to develop consensus recommendations related to two policy priorities: (1) standards and accountability and (2) teacher quality. The 11 recommendations that emerged have formed the basis for all of OGF’s advocacy efforts to date.

This clarity has allowed OGF to understand and operate successfully within a constantly changing political context, adapting its partnerships and retooling its strategies as necessary. From 2005 through 2012, Ohio had three different governors and multiple changes in the leadership of key legislative and education groups. At the beginning of its work, the committee was careful to keep both gubernatorial candidates informed of its efforts and to craft its agenda to be accepted regardless of who was elected. The committee framed its education efforts not as a political issue, but as a social issue that needed to be better understood and addressed by everyone with a vested interest in Ohio, promoting the belief that education reform was critical to a successful future for children and for Ohio.

Commitment

A second major success factor has been OGF’s long-term commitment to this process. The consistent involvement of OGF leadership has been critical. This involvement has taken many forms. The president of OGF has been engaged in the work from its inception. The chairperson of the advisory committee sits on OGF’s executive committee, as do the presidents of several other foundations whose staffs are involved in the work. OGF’s board has taken an active oversight role, including reviewing and approving policy priorities, annual work plans, and budgets. It also has contracted with The Strategy Team to provide annual progress reviews.

In addition, OGF has built an effective organizational infrastructure. The advisory committee itself was established as the core entity responsible for understanding the issues, taking ownership of the process, and providing oversight and

direction. The core membership of the committee has remained stable, allowing foundation staff across Ohio to become extremely knowledgeable on education policy. At the same time, new members have joined, lending a fresh perspective. Moreover, OGF leadership recognized that to succeed, this effort would require dedicated staff; at the outset, a seasoned professional was hired to coordinate the work of the committee, build and maintain relationships among key constituencies, and ensure progress. “Successful advocacy work cannot happen without sophisticated staff who are able to analyze political power bases and pressure points; keep track of legislative, administrative, and regulatory opportunities; prepare policy analyses; and work strategically with a variety of actors ...” (Auspos, Brown, Kubisch, & Sutton, 2009, p. 142).

The committee also recognized the need for patience and persistence. A sustained, long-term commitment is necessary to accommodate shifts in the political and policy landscape – what Ferris and Harmssen call the “opening and closing windows of opportunity” in the policy process (2009, p. 14). This orientation can be difficult for foundations, which are accustomed to relatively short time horizons. “For those foundations engaged in public policy, there is a need to reaffirm their commitment – stay the course – at the same time that [they] are responsive and adaptive to the changing policy possibilities” (p. 16).

Consensus Building

No matter how well intentioned they are, local and regional foundations cannot influence public policy alone. They have a better option. Viewed as neutral and objective on issues of public concern, foundations are accustomed to bringing potential partners together for collective action. This convening function is only the prelude, however; to influence the decisions and actions of public officials, the participants must then reach consensus on their priorities for action.

OGF, with members spanning the state, has embraced the role of consensus builder:

As honest brokers, foundations are uniquely positioned to bring people and organizations with disparate points of view to the table – to find areas of consensus and to resolve conflicts that can get in the way of pursuing a common cause and generating positive results. (Ohio Grantmakers Forum, 2010, p. 6)

In the first half of 2007, the OGF advisory committee took its “show on the road,” sharing its findings with leaders in major metropolitan areas across the state and listening to their feedback. In addition, through a series of conferences, regional meetings, and work group sessions, the committee brought together representatives of all major education stakeholder groups outside philanthropy to delve into the agenda items and develop a specific set of actionable recommendations.

Based on this work, the committee secured the attention of key statewide policymakers. It built ongoing relationships with the governor’s office and leaders of the state legislature, the Ohio Department of Education, the Ohio Board of Regents, and other significant groups.

The ability to find consensus and resolve conflicts does not imply that foundations always maintain strict objectivity. OGF describes its members as “honest brokers with a point of view,” noting that “in Ohio they invest more than \$300 million a year in public education, so they clearly have ‘skin in the game’ ” (2010, p. 6). This positioning predisposed OGF to aggressively tackle tough issues that had the potential to derail consensus. Instead of being satisfied with tepid compromises that would produce inadequate results, OGF was assertive in maximizing the scope of its public policy advocacy.

As one stakeholder said:

OGF’s ability to pull together a large, diverse group of stakeholders is a big plus. They gathered a diverse group of people – union, nonunion, grantmakers, business groups – and got good information from the meeting without it going downhill into “party lines.” They brought together people with a common interest and they came together not for competition

or for good PR, but for actual discussion. There was meaningful dialogue, not just people restating their own positions. You don't see that very often." (Strategy Team, 2009, p. 29)

In "Leading Boldly," Heifetz, Kania, & Kramer advocate a new role for funders in addressing complex adaptive problems such as education: "The central task of adaptive leadership is mobilizing people to clarify what matters most, in what balance, and with which trade-offs" (2004, p. 5). They describe a process in which "people and institutions that lead are not expected to know the answer and bear the full responsibility for problem solving. Instead they create and sustain the conditions through which stakeholders take responsibility for tackling tough problems and generating answers ..." (p. 3). Through convening, catalyzing, mediating, and other similar functions, a foundation can serve as a kind of "civic glue" that keeps different players working together and enables them to move forward on an agenda (Auspos et al., 2009, p. 138).

Conclusion

In its 2011 trends report, Grantmakers for Education concluded, "Education philanthropy has seated itself firmly at the table of today's education policy debates and will continue to be a strong voice in the debates of tomorrow" (p. 28).

In Ohio, this has certainly been true. Foundations, under a special committee of the Ohio Grantmakers Forum, rallied together to better understand and develop a course of action to improve education – their most important interest area and one crucial to the future of the state. Their focus on collective research and analysis and clear presentation of their findings helped to establish philanthropy as an important player in the reform conversation. The committee zeroed in on public policy as an effective lever of change, and pushed that lever with the collective might of its members. They convened education stakeholders to develop specific recommendations and used their connections with influencers and decision makers to advocate for changes in public policy.

The most direct sign of the committee's success is that many of its recommendations are now state policy. Another important achievement is the credibility that OGF and its members have developed with critical constituencies, from education groups to government officials. Paired with a commitment to the long-term nature of this process, this credibility will enable OGF to keep moving forward on its agenda: helping to implement recently enacted policy, to drive reforms not yet addressed, and perhaps to uncover new avenues for reform. The committee intends to build on the momentum it has helped create to contribute to further substantive improvements in Ohio's education system.

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APPENDIX 1

OGF Participants in 2005 K-12 Education Advisory Committee

Ashland County Community Foundation
Ashtabula Foundation
Bucyrus Area Community Foundation
Charles F. Kettering Foundation
Cleveland Foundation
Community Foundation of Greater Lorain County
Dayton Foundation
Dominion
Fairfield County Foundation
Findlay-Hancock County Community Foundation
Foundation for Appalachian Ohio
Foundation Management Services, Inc.
Fred & Alice Wallace Charitable
Memorial Foundation
George Gund Foundation
Greater Cincinnati Foundation
Iddings Foundation

Jones Day
Joseph G. Schmidlapp Trust – Fifth Third
KnowledgeWorks Foundation
Longaberger Foundation
Martha Holden Jennings Foundation
Muskingum County Community Foundation
Nord Family Foundation
Nordson Corporation Foundation
Richland County Foundation
Sandusky/Erie County Community Foundation
Stark Education Partnership, Inc.
Stranahan Foundation
Non-Ohio based funders:
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Joyce Foundation
Stupski Foundation

APPENDIX 2

OGF Participants in 2012 K-12 Education Advisory Committee

Ashland County Community Foundation
Ashtabula Foundation
Charles F. Kettering Foundation
Cleveland Foundation
Dominion
Fifth Third Bank
Frank M. Tait Foundation
GAR Foundation
George Gund Foundation
Iddings Foundation
JPMorgan Chase Foundation – Midwest Region
KnowledgeWorks Foundation

Margaret Clark Morgan Foundation
Martha Holden Jennings Foundation
Nord Family Foundation
Nordson Corporation Foundation
Scioto Foundation
Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland
Stark Education Partnership, Inc.
Stocker Foundation
Stranahan Foundation
Third Federal Foundation
Thomas B. Fordham Institute
U.S. Bank Foundation