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Use of Layering for Effective Partnership Building: Leveraging Positive Impact in Education Philanthropy

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Key Points

- Federal initiatives provide opportunities to link national, state, and local partnerships.
- New opportunities create a challenge of how to maximize mission-related goals while also seeking out new partnerships.
- "Layering" allows core foundation goals to be addressed while further examining how building new partnerships can expand with national and federal opportunities.
- Each "layer" represents multiple sector partnerships at the local, state, federal, and national levels.
- Layering differs from collective impact in its focus on strategic alignment with existing work to new partners versus the focus on the partnerships and organizational behavior of those relationships.
- Building new partnerships with philanthropic, private, and public sectors enhances leverage.

Rethinking Partnership Building

Partnership building is a fluid, iterative process that is grounded in understanding roles and identifying partners and potential partners. The foundation's role is to be a catalyst for change through strategic partnerships and resource identification. The role of the organization – school district, community organization, business entity – is to be the contextual expert in challenges and opportunities. The role of foundations and organizations are not mutually exclusive; they depend on local context.

As part of a Funders Network Webinar, I discussed the use of "layering" as an effective partnership-building method to enhance education philanthropy. Layering is a strategic approach that aligns existing goals with new partnerships at the local, state, national, and federal levels to increase leverage and impact. Partners in the layering process include foundations, grantees, and federal, state, and local partners. This differs from collective impact, which is described by Kania and Kramer as "the commitment of a group of key stakeholders from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem" (2011, p. 39). Collaboration is a common practice in philanthropy and is defined as working with others on a joint project. Bailie (2010) suggests nonprofits need to familiarize themselves with how other philanthropic partners are working together. Examples of philanthropic collaborative efforts can be found with the federal Investing in Innovation (i3) national registry and through the Foundation Center's Collaborative Database.

While both layering and collective impact embrace collaboration, the paradigms are very different. Collective impact and collaboration refer to the partnerships and how they function, while layering refers to the systematic and strategic alignment of existing organizational goals through multiple layers of partnership building. In contrast, collective impact requires a common agenda, shared measurement systems, continuous communication, common infrastructure, and mutually reinforcing activities.

Types of Collaboration

Kania and Kramer (2011) describe the types of collaboration:

- *Funder collaboratives* are groups of funders pooling resources to support the same issue without specific adoption of shared evaluation or measurement.
- *Public-private partnerships* are formed between private organizations and the government to achieve a defined service or benefit. Typically, stakeholders are not broadly included.
- *Multistakeholder initiatives* are, typically, a set of voluntary activities surrounding a common theme or issue completed by numerous stakeholders without accountability or set infrastructure.
- *Social-sector networks* are social groups that generally gather ad hoc to address an issue through short-term action.
- *Collective-impact initiatives* are created when key stakeholders commit long-term to solve a specific problem through shared infrastructure and outcome measurement.
- *Internal collaboration*, as defined by Rhoten, involves a conscious effort to promote collaboration across program lines within foundations by "connecting subject area experts with functional or technical experts across program areas, rather than isolating them in program-based hierarchies" (2004, p. 6).

Collective impact adds to the common practice of collaboration by adding long-term commitment, a common agenda to tackle a specific problem, a shared measurement system, and a core structure of staff and related activities. Examples are multistakeholder projects to benefit the environment, such as clean-water initiatives and community farmers' markets, which provide communities with better access to nutritious food. While the examples above are joint projects, collaboration implies that partners are working together to address a common issue, whereas collective-impact initiatives can achieve greater impact compared to silos of individual organizations.

Layering Achieves Aligned Impact

Layering differs from collective impact and col-laboration because it is a strategic alignment of partnerships across a vertical spectrum matched with existing organizational goals. The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation's strategic plan encompasses a five-year commitment to "moving the needle" by reducing poverty, improving education, and strengthening communities and local nonprofits. Collaboration in rural states with capacity challenges can weaken impact. While collaboration is important at the local and state levels, layering has led to better outcomes. Other foundations are experiencing similar difficulty with finding the right balance of partnerships between local and state and now federal opportunities.

> *Layering differs from collective impact and collaboration because it is a strategic alignment of partnerships across a vertical spectrum matched with existing organizational goals.*

This paradigm shift toward rethinking how new partnerships can be built overlays a time when the economic downturn has raised fiscal concerns to a new level. Such concerns are evident in the current trend of nonprofits looking to operate with the greatest efficiency and effectiveness. In 2009, a consulting firm reported the number of its presentations and workshops on mergers and other partnerships nearly doubled and restructuring consultations grew 60 percent. The firm shares the long-term cost of merging, stating that:

> merging itself did not lead to substantial cost savings for the vast majority of the mergers [the] firm has facilitated. Merged nonprofits can roll together annual audits, combine insurance programs, and consolidate staffs and boards. But they are also bigger and more complex and require more and better management – a cost that often exceeds the savings from combined operations (La Piana, 2010, p.31).

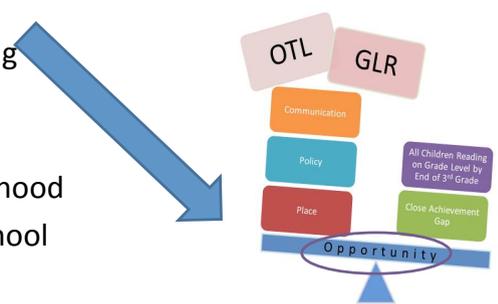FIGURE 1 Layering Through Bi-directional Vertical Partnership Building

Leverage Opportunities

L e v e r a g e

- Infrastructure – National Campaign
- Legislation
- Federal I3 - Reading Recovery
- AR21C
- Promise Neighborhood
- Delta Freedom School Collaborative

O p p o r t u n i t y

Arkansas OTL/GLR Campaign

 Considering this trend, there has never been a greater opportunity to bring together federal, national, state, and local partnerships with the availability of federal initiatives such as Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation (i3), and Promise Neighborhoods. These new opportunities challenge us to determine how to continue existing education grantmaking while seeking new partnerships that align with foundation goals. President Obama's proposed 2012 budget continues competitive grant programs such as Promise Neighborhoods and other i3 format opportunities, which allow foundations to take a more active role in education philanthropy.

Reflecting on Emergence of Layering
In reflecting on how the challenge of building new partnerships was met, we examined core goals and how they fit into expanded federal opportunities. With past practices that focused too narrowly on existing partnerships, the development and implementation of the national i3 registry greatly increased communication among foundations. Additionally, the registry opened doors for our foundation to examine national initiatives that matched well with our existing goals.

The consequence of building new partnerships through the registry was the ability to:

1. match funds according to common goals,

2. determine the amount of match necessary to move the initiative forward,

3. build new partnerships through common matched initiatives, and

4. extend partnerships to national grantees that impact our state directly.

By reflecting on the process to integrate federal initiatives into our education grantmaking, we realized that collaboration alone referred more to the work itself and the focus on the partners. What we were experiencing was something different. Consequently, the practice of layering emerged.

We created the first layer by using the organization's education philanthropy goal to build partnerships with state and national funders. The second layer was created by seeking federal

funding opportunities with partners who shared a similar goal. A third layer was created when the organization leveraged funding match grants with additional federal or national money, such as i3 funds. By connecting these new partnerships to existing place-based work, the final layers were created by building partnerships with other philanthropic, private, and public sectors. The diagram below illustrates layering through multiple levels of new partnerships.

While the organization seeks to build new partnerships by moving to different levels of the vertical spectrum, others are also seeking potential partnership with the philanthropic organization. An excellent example of this bi-directional approach through layering is the i3 registry for competitive grant seekers. Grant seekers at the national and state levels applied for federal funding that could be matched by philanthropic organizations. As the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation analyzed the registry applications, it was able to build new partnerships by providing match funds to grant seekers that aligned with its goals. The subsequent result was additional funds coming into Arkansas on a much larger scale than would have been possible through local or state grantmaking efforts alone. These new leveraged funds were then layered through place-based strategies to have the greatest impact on high-need communities. Layering of Promise Neighborhood, i3, and state funds for research-driven interventions have helped the foundation pursue its education goals. The place-based emphasis also allowed for layering with national initiatives to which the foundation committed, such as the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign.

While the foundation leverages funds for local and state initiatives, the greatest impact has emerged from aligning with national and federal initiatives that impact its state and strategic goals. National initiatives are those sponsored by larger foundations that recruit individual states or a group of states to commit to the national initiative goals. Federal initiatives are those sponsored by the government that include allotted funds (i.e., Race to the Top, i3, and Promise Neighborhood) for innovative projects that affect selected

communities or states based upon a rigorous and competitive process. With state capacity challenges, the foundation found layering to be a significant strategic approach to maximizing these opportunities.

> *To best integrate what we have learned through strategic layering, it is recognized that place-based work plays an even more critical role in our grantmaking. Without the additional layering in selected communities, the risk of individual silos of grantmaking would exist.*

Philanthropic Place-Based Strategies and Layering

The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation utilizes multiple strategies to encourage community engagement and collaboration that reflect the core goals developed through 35 years of community-based work in Arkansas. High-need communities typically have significant problems that not only result in poverty, but also limit education, economic development, health care, and community leadership. To best integrate what we have learned through strategic layering, it is recognized that place-based work plays an even more critical role in our grantmaking. Without the additional layering in selected communities, the risk of individual silos of grantmaking would exist. While some areas of the state may have greater focus and support, these selected communities have already been identified as high need and critical to achieving foundation goals. The Promise Neighborhood planning grant, for example, targets seven census tracts in Arkansas that include an urban area that meets the requirements of Absolute Priority 1 (geographically defined area in distress) as defined by the federal government.

FIGURE 2 Layering Leverage With Opportunity Example
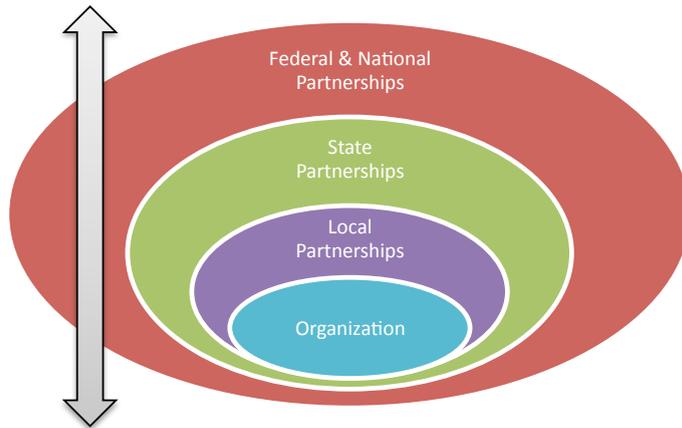
Specific Accomplishments Through Layering

With funding for the Promise Neighborhood planning grant, the i3 grant program, and Complete College America in Arkansas, more than $4 million was leveraged that aligned with existing goals. Consequently, numerous initiatives that spanned across foundation programs collectively strengthened impact in selected communities through strategic layering. By selecting "key buckets," the foundation was able to focus strategies on communication, policy, and the place-based focus and layered infrastructure of two national campaigns. These were strengthened through leverage opportunities of:

- legislation,
- i3 federal funds,
- Promise Neighborhood federal funds,
- Complete College America philanthropic funds, and
- bringing existing School of the 21st Century investments to scale.

This systemic approach strategically aligned work to affect two mission-related goals – to close the achievement gap and to ensure all children read on grade level by the end of third grade.

For example, our foundation's core goals are related to improving education in our state. With i3, we sought out as partners other foundations at the state and national level and businesses with compatible goals.

Those partners strategically plan together to meet their goals (the first layer): the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation provided $100,000 in match funds to the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation provided i3 match funds for Ohio State University's Reading Recovery Program and the National Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.

Our foundation identifies compatible state and federal government funding opportunities. We apply or support our grantee organizations or school systems to apply for government funding (the second layer): Ohio State University's Reading Recovery Program applied to the i3 registry;

the University of Arkansas at Little Rock's Literacy and Education training program received a $100,000 match from our foundation.

And then grantee organizations use their local, state and national foundation and private sector funding to leverage federal funding (the third layer): through i3, $2.7 million in federal funds were awarded to University of Arkansas at Little Rock as one of the OSU Reading Recovery participating institutions.

The foundation played a key role in learning about and utilizing the i3 registry as a partner-building tool and in advocating for grantees that align with our goals. Building these new partnerships through layering opportunities furthered our goals. Consequently, layering emerged as a promising best practice to move the needle.

Lessons Learned

New partnerships can create a challenge of maintaining cohesion with existing grantmaking. With each new partnership, new expectations and demands on staff, finance, and capacity make efficiency and effectiveness harder to maintain. However, with constant monitoring and strategic planning, the additional burden on foundation goals and resources can be minimized. Each new partnership may need to be molded to fit the needs of the state, the foundation, and its communities.

The emerging practice of layering gave context to the need for place-based focus. The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation found that place-based work linked with layering significantly increased impact. Moving the needle on an issue at full scale at the state level is achieved with greater impact when the needle has already moved in designated communities within that state. Part of the significance of place-based work is the community engagement piece, which is often missing. To be transformational, the communities need the opportunity to have a voice. Other foundations and stakeholders seeking place-based collaboration may benefit from a review of the literature to learn about common challenges that occur with place-based work.

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Layering and Philanthropy's Shifting Paradigm

Philanthropy is recognizing the critical role of layering as an emerging best practice to building new partnerships. Layering within the philanthropic field does not refer to organizational structure, policy, or experiences as often cited in business literature; rather, it refers to a deliberate strategic approach to vertically forge new partnerships at the federal, national, state, and local levels that align with existing mission-related goals. These new, layered partnerships strengthen the leverage potential of the organization in the context of its own work while also maintaining the autonomy of individual partners. Martin and Ernst stated:

> Increasingly, philanthropists adopt a problem-solving approach and ask: Who needs to be in the room and with whom do we need to partner to turn the tide on a complicated social issue such as HIV/AIDS or climate change? They then reach out through personal and expert networks to assemble donor collaboratives or social investor clubs (2008, p. 13).

While collaboration and networking are noted, layering emerges beyond this scope to include how aligned partnerships can affect an issue within a geographic place versus how partnerships and collaborations can collectively affect an

issue. These new partners include stakeholders from all sectors – private and public – and community organizations.

> *To maintain commitment to core mission and goals, foundations and organizations should allow time to set expectations, learn about potential partners, and time to build shared vision and mission.*

Layering Versus Shared Systems

Becoming more efficient and effective in mission-related work requires a strategic commitment to partnership building that aligns with existing core goals. This process requires reaching out to nontraditional partners. Kramer, Parkhurst, and Vaidyanathan (2009) discuss innovation in partner building in the context of utilizing web-based systems to capture social impact from collaborations to move the nonprofit sector toward increased effectiveness. The report lifts up adaptive learning systems for large collaborations and partnerships that are working together to address a single issue from different angles through the use of facilitation. Kramer, Parkhurst, and Vaidyanathan provide this example of adaptive learning systems:

> The Strive initiative includes 300 diverse education-related organizations in the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky region. These organizations work together across fifteen networks that are organized by type of intervention, from early childhood education to career counseling. Each network meets bi-weekly to share information, develop common outcome measures, and coordinate efforts, creating a comprehensive and systemic approach to tracking and improving educational outcomes throughout the region (2009, p. 2).

While this type of partnership building has some similar components of layering, it differs in several aspects. With adaptive learning systems,

collaboration and goal alignment are fluid, new partnerships are built within a single-issue system, and efforts are coordinated among partners to align goals across organizations. While this type of collaboration brings together partnerships working on a similar goal, it does not offer the same strategic potential that layering does. Layering provides greater potential for outside investment in the organization's mission-related work to facilitate breakthroughs. Layering is not connected to a web-based system or shared measurement per se; rather, it is connected to strategic alignment that is place-based and core to mission-related goals.

Building New Layered Partnerships

Below are eight key steps to assist partnership building in education philanthropy:

1. *Stay committed* to core mission and goals.

2. *Define the buckets* by identifying the core goals that assist in achieving mission (e.g., policy, advocacy, communication, research, place-based work).

3. *Seek new partnerships* that align with goals.

4. *Be innovative* with opportunities from federal, national, state, and local levels.

5. *Support communities* through new public and private resources aligned with goals.

6. *Think big and small* through initiatives that affect goals. A local business initiative may provide a unique opportunity to link goals with a larger national initiative to leverage federal grants.

7. *"Look up, look down"* the vertical spectrum to build new partners. Is the organization participating strategically with national and federal initiatives, state initiatives, and local work?

8. *Look inside* the organization periodically to assure work remains aligned to mission and goals.

Tools

To maintain commitment to core mission and goals, foundations and organizations should allow time to set expectations, learn about potential partners, and time to build shared vision and mission. When conflicts arise among partners, it is important to re-focus on commonality and shared vision. Planning retreats and use of facilitators are tools our foundation has found useful. For example, in building our state's Opportunity to Learn Campaign, we sought partnerships that included grass roots organizations, education stakeholders, legislators, national and local funders, faith-based organizations, business and industry, and community-based organizations (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs, CityYouth, Out of School Network). Each of the partners has individual mission and goals, which do not always align. One organization advocates strongly against charter schools while a local funder is a strong proponent. A facilitator was hired for a planning retreat with partners in an effort to build consensus around identification of common campaign goals. What became evident from the planning retreat was that partners did not yet have a shared vision, but still had individual mission and goals; the facilitator and planning time moved the campaign forward exponentially. Another tool is to allow time for partners to work and create shared vision and mission without the funder in the room. Our foundation has found it assists the group to ask less about what we desire and more about what they need.

Cultivating Growth

Imagine layering as analogous to a neighborhood garden. The garden is bound to a specific place with the need for resources that cultivate growth. While local water and natural fertilizers may help grow healthy vegetables, the farmer wishes to farm organically (i.e., mission-related goal); partners can be brought in to leverage these basic items with additional resources. Some new partners may weed with a keen understanding of soil productivity; others understand organic methods of green and biological pest control or unique ways to package and market the organic produce. Still others may be experts at distribution to larger markets particular to the organic consumer. These new partnerships bring larger market interest to locally grown, organic produce (bi-directional vertical layering with larger organizations) while also understanding the local community and its specific needs and requests (layering with local community partners).

In this analogy, building new partnerships through layering helped to leverage a local organic garden to a larger scale. The mission was strengthened based on the alignment with existing work and goals. The organic vegetable garden creates an opportunity to bring a larger audience with additional innovative skill sets to a community. The larger market benefited through the exchange of aligned work with a community that had its unique set of assets.

Consider the definition of organic agriculture from the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements: "Organic agriculture combines tradition, innovation, and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships" (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, 2009). Like organic agriculture, new partnership building should be grounded in traditional partnerships: adding innovative partners for research, innovation, and ultimately the potential for significant leverage and growth.

Conclusion

While the business sector is downsizing and de-layering, layering within the philanthropic sector is emerging as a best practice. Layering pertains to more of a process and strategic alignment than to traditionally defined layers, as in piling up something on top of something else (e.g., an investment upon other investments, an experience upon other experiences). In its most simplified traditional definition, layering can be thought of with the example of clothes being layered to keep warm in cold weather. This would be more collective impact or collaboration. The clothing items are working together for a common goal to meet a specific need (warmth). In contrast, layering as an emerging best practice would be seeking new partnerships with clothing manufacturers, heat and air companies, travel associations for warm-climate destinations, exercise physiologists who examine how activity generates body heat, and

other philanthropic partners who support green energy and heat provision for underserved populations, etc. The goal to create additional warmth is pursued by building new partnerships with others who have resources to move the needle. Like the organic farming analogy, capturing unique assets and resources can greatly enhance education philanthropy through a paradigm shift that focuses on layering.

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