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Heather Zavadsky
Communities Foundation of Texas

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Creating and Scaling Innovative School Models Through Strategic Partnerships

Heather Zavadsky, Ph.D., Communities Foundation of Texas

Introduction

Shifts in Texas student demographics, challenges in postsecondary access completion, and ongoing expansion of global competition have accelerated the need for innovative educational programs.¹ High school graduation as a final goal is no longer sufficient. New instructional models focused on increased academic rigor, greater analytical thinking, and complex problem-solving are critical to the future of our students, their ability to generate greater economic outcomes, and ultimately to ensure a vibrant U.S. economy.

Increasing academic rigor, changing instruction, creating work-based pathways, and taking innovative risks to prepare students for their choice of postsecondary pursuits requires a significant shift in how students are educated. Making such a change during times of fiscal scarcity can be difficult, but is not impossible if done with an eye toward efficiency, coordination, and scale. One method of accomplishing all this is through strategic partnerships that align skills and resources with a common goal.

To achieve broad-reaching impact within Texas, the Texas High School Project (THSP) was created in 2003 as a public-private alliance to support education reform across the state and maximize the resources of aligned organizations. The common goal of THSP is to significantly improve the postsecondary readiness of low-income students

¹ The term “postsecondary,” in this article, refers to both community colleges and four-year institutions.

Key Points

- The Texas High School Project (THSP) was created in 2003 as a public-private alliance to support education reform across the state.
- This article focuses on the pivotal role of philanthropy within the THSP alliance to create early college high schools (ECHS).
- The model has been scaled at different levels to produce direct, affordable pathways for students to both attend college and attain skilled careers.
- The ECHS schools have higher test scores, greater credits earned, and reduced dropouts rates compared to traditional schools.
- Foundations with a track record for supporting successful work can increase the overall commitment to joint projects and attract additional members and support to an alliance.
- Lessons for successful partnerships include investing in time together, managing the partnership through one organization, and using data for decision-making.

with a focus on students in low-performing schools. While this goal is not unique, it represents a level of complexity that is greatly compounded by the size and diversity found in Texas, where the number of organizations working in silos is large and spread out exponentially. THSP’s approach of improving postsecondary readiness through its partnerships provides an interesting model that has shown strong promise. In addition to education organizations, foundations serve as an important part of this public-private alliance

through their ability to support risks associated with innovation and serve as conveners and organizers to ensure successful programs involve a broader range of students.

Foundation involvement with the THSP alliance exemplifies how philanthropy has evolved to leverage resources and increase collaboration and engagement through a more long-term, strategic approach.

The public and private partners that form the THSP collaborative alliance are the Texas governor's office, state lawmakers, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, the Communities Foundation of Texas, the Greater Texas Foundation, National Instruments, and the Meadows Foundation. Dallas-based Communities Foundation of Texas is the primary overseer of private funding, while state and federal funding is managed by TEA. These partners work directly with a number of K-12 districts, community colleges, and four-year institutions throughout the state. The programs and supports provided by THSP and its partners have had a significant impact on Texas students; their success can be attributed to the types of programs created and the strong partnerships that support them.

The logic of partnering with education and legislative agencies to improve postsecondary education is straightforward, but the role of philanthropy in supporting such a partnership is less clear and at times misunderstood and undervalued. While some, like Diane Ravitch (2010), argue that foundations are funding politically driven self-interest projects in education, others judge philanthropy involvement from the old charity paradigm that provides one-shot seed money with little or no sustainable impact (Anheier & Leat, 2006). Foundation involvement with the

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This article focuses on the pivotal role of philanthropy within the THSP alliance to create an innovative school model – early college high schools (ECHS) – at the school, district, and regional levels. The result has been the development of a successful model that has been scaled at different levels to produce direct, affordable pathways for students to both attend college and attain skilled careers. The schools discussed in this article have increased the number of students prepared for college, helped them earn an average of 16 credit hours, and helped families save approximately \$4.5 million in college tuition. The referenced foundations were a major factor in the schools' success by making an important shift from a traditional, finite role of funding “symptoms of problems” (Anheier & Leat, 2006) to reaching greater success through more strategic philanthropic approaches.

Through two examples of successful early college high schools in Texas – Mission Early College High School and the El Paso Early College High School Consortium – this article describes how foundations engaged in the project, recruited other foundation partners, shared and increased expertise, maximized resources within the entire alliance and increased impact to address a complex issue and solution. The article will end with a discussion of lessons learned about the foundations engaged with the THSP alliance.

The History of the Texas High School Project

Before the creation of the Texas High School Project in 2003, the state of Texas focused its school-reform efforts on K-8 education. While that early work resulted in pockets of success, much of it was approached at the school level; at the same time, concern for lack of improvement for high schools began to increase. When the growing number of high school dropouts became a publicized issue, the governor, lawmakers, the state education commissioner, and private foundations created THSP as a joint venture focused

on high school reform. While THSP represents a consortium of various public and private entities, the Dallas-based Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT) was established as the organization's home base.

The initial investment of \$130 million (\$65 million from the state and \$65 million from the private foundations) provided grants to districts and charter schools to redesign existing underperforming high schools, create small schools, and provide additional support services for at-risk students. Additional funding from the state, private foundations, and the business sector increased the breadth of programs within THSP and led to the creation of 44 ECHSs; 46 Texas-Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (T-STEM) Academies; and five T-STEM/ECHS blended campuses across Texas.

While the first few years of the THSP approach more closely mirrored the seed-money approach, lack of far-reaching impact prompted the alliance to refocus efforts on the models showing empirical success and to leverage its stakeholders and networks more effectively. The foundations were a pivotal part of this new approach because of their ability to support and fund innovation (an area of risk that public schools typically cannot support independently), leverage skills and knowledge, and convene key stakeholders working on the same goals. The result of this strategy was greater alignment and a shift from campus-by-campus implementation of programs to scaling them to the district, regional, and state levels. The ECHS model provides an example of how philanthropy played a key role in the alliance to leverage and scale a successful model.

Early college high schools are designed to better prepare students for college by increasing academic rigor and offering the opportunity to save time and money by compressing the time it takes to obtain a high school diploma and complete the first two years of college. Students have the opportunity to earn a high school diploma and up to 60 credit hours toward an associate degree or a bachelor's degree in an academically supportive environment and at no cost.

ECHS Outcomes

The internal and external partnerships affiliated with THSP have been crucial for creating, funding, piloting, and scaling innovative school models like ECHSs. As of 2008-09, there were more than 200 ECHSs in 24 states and plans to open more. The models are showing promising results. Among the early findings about the 900 students graduating from ECHS around the country in 2007:

- More than 65 percent of the graduates were accepted to four-year colleges; others chose to complete an associate degree by spending a fifth year at their ECHS.
- More than 85 percent graduated with substantial college credit.
- More than 250 graduates earned merit-based college scholarships. Four earned the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarship, awarded to 1,000 high-achieving, low-income students each year.

The ECHS model provides an example of how philanthropy played a key role in the alliance to leverage and scale a successful model.

THSP also has seen preliminary successes in its 44 schools in Texas. Compared to matched peers in the state, ECHS campuses:

- achieved 23 percent higher math qualifications on state college readiness (Texas Success Initiative) indicators,
- achieved a 42 percent higher rate of advanced course/dual credit completion than peers, and
- saw a reduction in the dropout rate of 10 times that of the comparison group (0.3 percent versus 2.5 percent).

To create a successful ECHS, a school or district must increase academic rigor, create courses that focus on career and technical skills, partner with higher education organizations, and convince

educators, students, and parents that college is a viable and desirable option. Additionally, these programs need the support of policies that will allow this type of innovative program that can help students earn college credits in high school. The brief examples below describe how some of the first ECHSs were developed in Texas and how the partners, specifically foundations, helped them thrive and grow.

THSP helped to bring the organizations together to work on common elements such as curriculum and instruction, course alignment, leadership and teacher training, and budget. The result of that collaboration was the development of five core principles of early college high schools, which remain the cornerstone of ECHS programs in Texas.

Mission Early College High School

Mission Early College High School, part of the Socorro Independent School District in El Paso, has been rated as an “exemplary campus” (the highest rating under the Texas accountability system) since its creation in 2006. Mission ECHS was initially funded by the Gates Foundation, and THSP sub-granted the funds to the Texas Association of Community Colleges (TACC). The goal of the original grant was to start three early college high schools – in Corpus Christi, Houston, and El Paso. The University of Texas System, The University of North Texas, and the Texas A&M System were additional partner universities that served as intermediaries to support the high schools and colleges as well as liaisons between the secondary and postsecondary programs. THSP helped to bring the organizations together

to work on common elements such as curriculum and instruction, course alignment, leadership and teacher training, and budget. The result of that collaboration was the development of five core principles of early college high schools, which remain the cornerstone of ECHS programs in Texas.²

The El Paso Early College Consortium

The El Paso Early College Consortium (EPECC) grew around the same time as the opening of Mission Early College High School. It was initiated through an earlier project funded by the Lumina Foundation, called “Achieving the Dream,” which focused on preparing more students for postsecondary school at a faster rate by reducing the number of hours spent in remedial courses. Mission Early College High School became an important part of that work, helping compress the postsecondary timeline even further by allowing students to earn up to 60 hours of transferable college credits while in high school. Eventually, the first Mission students were positioned to make decisions about college. When several of those students expressed an interest in The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), the university was brought into the EPECC.

Once the successes of Mission Early College High School became known in the El Paso region, other school districts became interested in the model. With the help of the EPECC, four CHS partnerships were added: Transmountain T-STEM Early College High School in partnership with the El Paso Independent School District (ISD); Val Verde Early College High School in partnership with the Ysleta ISD; Cotton Valley Early College High School in partnership with the Fabens, Tornillo, and Fort Hancock ISDs; and Northwest Early College High School in partnership with the Canutillo ISD. At that time, the Greater Texas Foundation (GTF), the Meadows Foundation, and the Hunt Family Foundation also joined the EPECC.

Increasing Impact

The El Paso Early College High School Consor-

² For more information, see Core principles at <http://www.earlycolleges.org/Downloads/ECHSICorePrin.pdf>.

tium provides an important example of scaling a successful program to a regional level through connections made by multiple foundations and education organizations. The coordination achieved by these partnerships has provided the El Paso region, an area with traditionally low rates of college enrollment, with uniform and aligned opportunities for students.

Although El Paso Community College initiated much of the work, the foundations involved were significantly engaged with the THSP alliance members and as well as other foundations. They were instrumental in helping that process evolve by providing initial seed money, recruiting other peer foundations and stakeholders, and collaborating closely with other alliance members. The Greater Texas Foundation became interested in the ECHS model because of its alignment with the foundation's interest in improving postsecondary access and success for Texas students.³ What started as a single grant to fund college scholarships mushroomed into a larger investment and commitment to the ECHS model. After meeting students in Mission Early College High School and tracking them to their postsecondary schools, foundation director Wynn Rosser became convinced that the model was providing higher education opportunities in "some of our poorest communities in our nation" and in some cases "changing the direction of some families' trajectories forever."

As a result of his interest in the work seeded by the Gates Foundation within the THSP alliance, Rosser brought other private funders and organizations – including members of the Governor's Business Council and the Meadows Foundation – to El Paso to see the program. During these visits, conversations arose about such questions as how to fund transportation in rural areas, pay for textbooks, address academic remediation for students, and align state policies to support early college high schools. The meetings were an important venue for sharing expertise and information.

³ For more information, see <http://greatertexasfoundation.org/>.

When asked about the benefits of the THSP alliance and partnerships that work with early college high schools, Rosser pointed to the importance of aligned policy agendas, the collective impact arising from foundation cooperation; development of networks for common problem-solving; and coordination of resources. The Greater Texas Foundation, for example, does not have a policy analyst, but has been able to use the one employed at THSP.

The Greater Texas Foundation became interested in the ECHS model because of its alignment with the foundation's interest in improving postsecondary access and success for Texas students. What started as a single grant to fund college scholarships mushroomed into a larger investment and commitment to the ECHS model.

For the students and the El Paso community, Dr. Rosser cites even larger benefits:

We have seen more graduates not only go to higher education institutions college-ready, but are also doing so in less time and with less money by avoiding remediation costs. It is a huge bonus for the family and for raising the income of the community.

With these successes has come natural expansion of the model. Rosser reports that he now hears personal stories about students who want to attend an ECHS because their sister or cousin graduated from one. Even as early as sixth grade, students and families are having conversations about preparing for college by attending an ECHS.

The students in the El Paso region are not the only beneficiaries of the EPECC. When the director of the Greater Texas Foundation brought the leader of the Meadows Foundation and other public and private stakeholders into the consortium, it became a hub for foundations and educators interested in the same regional post-secondary goals. Bruce Esterline, vice president of grants at the Meadows Foundation, reports that involvement with the EPECC “made us a better grantmaker and a better foundation community. The alliance gave us common points of reference, language, and metrics. It happens organically with smart people coming together to learn.”

When speaking to THSP leaders and alliance partners, they frequently cite the value of partnering with private foundations for their ability to use private capital to take risks by innovating and scaling what works. A specific example would be their ability to fund research and development - funding that is often not available in the public sector, particularly during times of fiscal scarcity.

Both leaders also point to “the collective intellectual capital” created through the exchange of information and collaborative problem-solving. One example of lessons learned is the differences between working on human-capital ventures (which describes the educational field) and on projects with definitive, controllable inputs and outputs (which are common in foundation work). Both organizations learned to appreciate the strengths and differences of both forms of work. In addition to information sharing, the El Paso community benefited from the resource align-

ment created by collaboration within the alliance.

Foundations as Strategic Partners

The complex work of ensuring students are better prepared for college, see the value in pursuing college, and can access and succeed in their college choices requires a high level of collaboration and strategic alignment to leverage resources and yield lasting effects. In *Creative Philanthropy*, Anheier and Leat (2006) describe how foundations have moved from simplistic charity models to more current “strategic philanthropy.” The authors contend that while strategic philanthropy has potentially improved business operations, the resolution of social problems is “never in the hands of one actor.” For foundations to reach their potential, the authors argue, they must move beyond strategic to “creative” philanthropy, where they can jump-start problem-solving through innovation and support implementation and then help disseminate results.⁴ Supporting similar tenets, the Grantmakers for Education Benchmarking 2010 report highlights the power of foundations to leverage greater impact through their ability to convene key collaborators, identify best practices and lessons learned, and to understand, value, and utilize the differences across organizations (Grantmakers for Education, 2010).

The two cases highlighted how the foundations within the alliance became involved in a public-private partnership with the same goal, actively worked to understand the ECHS program, and brought in other foundations. The alliance frequently communicates informally, and meets formally each quarter to share information and learn more about how THSP schools are doing. Whether at their own or another convening, members mention the successes of the THSP schools. They work closely and actively with the other partners to learn more about areas where they are not as informed.

The alliance partners see their relationships with various stakeholders as positive for all involved. When speaking to THSP leaders and alliance partners, they frequently cite the value of partner-

⁴ For more information, see <http://greatertexasfoundation.org/>.

ing with private foundations for their ability to use private capital to take risks by innovating and scaling what works. A specific example would be their ability to fund research and development - funding that is often not available in the public sector, particularly during times of fiscal scarcity. In addition, many of the foundations working with THSP come from state and national levels and thus are able to add further depth of knowledge about business, education, and work force needs.

Another benefit cited was that many foundations have a “brand” or “name recognition,” often coupled with a reputation for doing good work. Foundations with a track record for supporting worthy and successful work can greatly increase the overall belief and commitment in joint projects and add another measure of marketability to membership and support efforts.

Finally, foundations have different skill sets and approaches, so coordinating across foundations can be beneficial. Some foundations provide money to start programs, some directly provide services, and still others – like the Greater Texas Foundation – are interested in producing systemic change and policy reform. As one foundation leader says: “It is better to coordinate efforts so that philanthropy is not duplicating efforts or working at cross-purposes,” and to utilize strengths brought to the table by various organizations.

Some Suggested Partnership Practices

Whether partners are K-12 districts, two- or four-year colleges, foundations, or state agencies, many benefits were cited for leveraging the resources, skills, and platforms of partners from various sectors. The goal of the THSP alliance is to increase impact and sustainability, an increasingly common aim for foundations as they review and shift their strategies to maximize their potential. Partnerships are important for public schools and districts that must find resources – skills and dollars – in a public arena that favors traditional practices over innovation. Additionally, leveraging various partners can save resources and broaden their efforts through coordinating skills, eliminating duplication, and aligning programs.

The THSP leaders and partners interviewed were asked for advice on fostering sustaining partnerships. Below are some of their suggestions, which reiterate how current literature characterizes changing trends in philanthropic approaches. These suggestions address how philanthropy can maximize its work and impact beyond grantees.

Foundations have learned that their work is greatly enhanced with the right partnerships, but it is important to select partners that are like-minded and share the same goals. You want to invest your time discussing the work, not convincing others that your mission and goals are appropriate.

- *Select partners thoughtfully.* The problems addressed by foundations and the THSP alliance cannot be solved in isolation. Foundations have learned that their work is greatly enhanced with the right partnerships, but it is important to select partners that are like-minded and share the same goals. You want to invest your time discussing the work, not convincing others that your mission and goals are appropriate. Be mindful as well of leadership stability in potential partner organizations, and assess their willingness to collaborate. One interviewee suggested that partnerships are best sustained when the leadership is positioned high enough in an organization to make decisions. For example, the El Paso Early College High School Consortium is directly supported by the president of El Paso Community College and the president and provost of the University of Texas at El Paso.
- *Invest time on fostering strong relationships.* While it is difficult to balance a process that considers the opinions of different types of stakeholders, all interviewees agreed that the

potential “collective intellectual capital” is worth the time it takes to build positive relationships. To this end, communication seemed key to the process for clarifying, defining, and respecting partnership roles; appreciating and utilizing the skills of others; engaging in frequent check-ins for understanding and progress; and coming to the table as a contributor rather than the sole driver. Sustaining change is a long-term endeavor that is best fostered through trusting relationships that take a lot of time and patience, and work best with a long-term plan.

There are some inherent differences between business and education that several interviewees mentioned as important to remember when partnering with education organizations. Those differences center mainly on the reality that schools do not have the same control over their inputs and outcomes as many business organizations.

- *Invest in “face time” with partners and practitioners.* In-person meetings are important for exchanging information and building networks. In addition to citing partnership meetings, several interviewees stressed the value of taking learning tours or site visits to where the work actually occurs. Greater Texas Foundation Director Wynn Rosser mentioned the impact a recent learning tour to the Rio Grande Valley had on several foundations and minority-serving institutions visiting the area who wanted see the communities surrounding the early college high school in the region, observe what students were learning, and hear about their personal experiences. “There is power in place,” observed one interviewee. “It’s important to be immersed in the culture, to know that if you take a left turn down the road you are literally on the bridge to Mexico.”
- *Use data to make decisions on priorities and practices.* While the use of data has increasingly become more commonplace in education, several interviewees said they often attend meetings where opinion seems to be utilized more than data. “Looking at data, you can’t dispute that students in Column C are underperforming compared to those in Column D,” observed one foundation director. “With data, we are not just stating opinion.” Others agreed that data – even if you have to hire a consultant for it – is important to confirm what works and should be scaled, to monitor progress, and to make mid-course corrections.
- *Understand that education is a human-capital venture.* Educators and business at times find themselves crossways about how to approach work common to both enterprises, such as performance management, budgeting, and decision-making. But there are some inherent differences between business and education that several interviewees mentioned as important to remember when partnering with education organizations. Those differences center mainly on the reality that schools do not have the same control over their inputs and outcomes as many business organizations. While both have much to learn from each other, investing time in listening, understanding, and sharing skills and knowledge goes far in bridging the two worlds.
- *Coordinate partnerships through one person or organization.* Several partners mentioned the importance of having a dedicated resource to convene partners with differing skills and knowledge. THSP has been able to provide oversight and support to its many partners by using their expertise in education, relationships with Texas school districts, and their ability to convene and attract like-minded stakeholders as a knowledge broker toward a common goal. Bruce Esterline mentions the importance of having an organization like THSP coordinating the partnerships: “THSP and CFT recognized the opportunity to bring different reform minds that are hungering to work and learn together under the same tent. It created a space for everybody to work together and it has been incredibly valuable.”

- *Dissemination is an important step for sustainability.* Dissemination of lessons learned is important to scaling what works. This can be done through convening various stakeholders and thinking strategically about advocating for whatever levers need pushing or pulling to create the conditions for success. The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy mentions the importance of focusing on advocacy, and how philanthropic advocacy efforts have influenced education policy like performance-based accountability, use of incentive pay, and school choice (Welner & Farley, 2010).

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Heather Zavadsky, Ph.D., is director of research and implementation for the Communities Foundation of Texas's Texas High School Project. She is the author of Bringing School Reform to Scale: Five Award-Winning Urban Districts (Harvard Education Press, 2009). Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Heather Zavadsky, 5500 Caruth Haven Lane, Dallas, TX 75225 (email: hzavadsky@cftexas.org).

Conclusion

It is a gain for the state of Texas that public and private organizations are collaborating to address the postsecondary access and success for traditionally underserved students. THSP has created and supported innovative programs to better prepare students for postsecondary success by engaging with and convening various organizations to contribute solutions. Foundations have played an important role in providing resources, attracting other partners, bringing in new knowledge, and sharing the results of powerful programs that have the potential to improve postsecondary preparation in Texas. Developing, implementing, and scaling innovative programs can be challenging. However, THSP and its partners have succeeded due to the collective knowledge, alignment, and support gained through their partnerships. While it may take more time to gain agreement on what must be done, those involved in the work believe it is worthwhile because it results in more strategic, aligned, and focused solutions that are goal-oriented rather than driven by programs.

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