

# · [making it happen] ·

## LEFs: A Proud History

### OF EVOLVING TO MEET CHALLENGES

BY JANICE PETROVICH

Since the inception of local education funds (LEFs), the goal that has driven the programs and activities of LEFs has been incredibly consistent—to help improve the public schools that serve diverse, disadvantaged students. What has changed is the *way* in which LEFs have sought to achieve this goal. Over the years, LEFs have demonstrated a new level of sophistication and maturity, both programmatically and tactically. Reflecting on their decade-long history can give LEFs an important sense of context, as well as an enhanced ability to anticipate and adapt to new challenges in the years ahead.

Unlike Western Europe and Japan, America has an educational system in which organizational dynamics and governing policies are largely a local phenomenon. For this reason, the Ford Foundation was deeply interested in the fledgling, nonprofit local groups that it saw operating in select communities—working at a level at which they could have a genuine impact on educational quality.

As Foundation staff looked more closely, we found that these emerging voluntary, self-governing institutions were already doing some exciting things: for example, providing grants to teachers who developed promising and innovative programs or who were delivering instruction in a different way.

These voluntary institutions were created by groups of citizens who had no axe to grind except to help their public schools improve. As outside advocates and observers, they had the independence and community backing to exert pressure for change. Most significantly, they were unified with a singular purpose: to improve schools in their communities. Needless to say, Ford recognized their potential and moved quickly.

The Ford Foundation provided “seed money” to the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, which had a fledgling education fund in Pittsburgh that was started by LEF pioneer David Bergholz. This was followed by a \$2 million grant to help support or establish LEFs in up to 50 urban communities across the country as part of a five-year project.

After the five years were up, Ford, Bergholz and other LEF leaders reached the consensus that this was no time to fold up the tent. There was a central coordinating function that someone needed to play in order to provide technical assistance to the LEFs, as well as to help these newly-formed LEFs talk to each other and learn from each other. This led to the creation of the organization that today we know as the Public Education Network (PEN).

With PEN’s resources and assistance, LEFs have grown and matured in some exciting ways. They have moved from a mainly “charitable” approach—a one-shot approach in which grants and financial awards are given directly to specific teachers and schools—to a more “philanthropic” approach by working systematically and using strategies that can be maintained over the long term to leverage public support and public involvement on behalf of school improvement.

It has been heartening to see LEFs evolve toward this more systemic approach. A perfect example of this is the work of New York City’s LEF, which is called New Visions for Public Schools. It was New Visions that helped to pioneer the “small schools” movement in New York, which is now very active throughout the country. By the 1970s and ‘80s, many school systems had become a series of large, sprawling high schools and middle schools in which students increasingly became anonymous and which impeded the capacity of schools to inspire a sense of community.

New Visions helped leverage support to create new schools that helped to recapture this sense of community and alleviate the alienation that many students felt on large campuses. In doing so, New Visions kept its perspective and avoided being overly prescriptive—after all, there’s no set definition of how small is small enough. (I heard one principal say that the definition of an appropriate size for a school was the maximum number of students’ names that he could remember.)

As a result of New Visions’ relentless efforts, New York City now has dozens and dozens of schools that provide different curricular themes—including

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L E A D E R S H I P

schools with an emphasis on the arts, social justice, and the environment. And, generally speaking, these schools have a pretty good track record of educating and graduating students. But, the most compelling aspect of New Visions' efforts is the focus on driving broad, systemic, and lasting reforms, as opposed to short-term projects of limited reach and doubtful potential for sustainability.

Indeed, whatever the issue has been, throughout their history LEFs have provided mechanisms for people to come together, and they've channeled money from foundations, businesses, and individuals to support public school improvement efforts like the one championed by New Visions. In doing so, LEFs have also developed a more complex and nuanced understanding of what it takes to create and sustain good public schools. For example, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC) Education Foundation helped develop a publication and a workshop for people wanting to fully understand the school district's budget. We're talking about a lot of money in these large urban school systems. Understanding that process gives citizens more than the often-cited "buy in." Creating a greater understanding of the process empowers the public to take the dialogue about a school budget to a whole new level, sharing its views about budget priorities.

The history of LEFs is a proud history. It's a history that many who are new to the movement may not know about, but it's something that LEF leaders really need to be aware of. In the months and years ahead, LEFs will need to be attentive—carefully observing the dynamics in their school communities and evolving constantly to stay true to their mission as advocates for both quality public schools and engaged communities as both our schools and communities continue, inevitably, to change.

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