



Case Study: Teacher Compensation Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF), Mobile, AL

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Public Education Network (PEN) is a national organization of local education funds (LEFs) and individuals working to improve public schools and build citizen support for quality public education in low-income communities across the nation. PEN and its 83 LEF members work in 34 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico on behalf of 11.5 million children in more than 1,600 school districts, seeking to bring the community voice into the debate on quality public education in the firm belief that an active, vocal constituency will ensure every child, in every community, a quality public education.

The **Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF)** is an independent, non-profit, local education fund dedicated to creating higher expectations for our public schools and our community. The mission of MAEF is to build community responsibility for improving public education in Mobile County. MAEF works with, but is independent of, the Mobile County Public School System.

The Mobile Area Education Foundation works in three important ways:

- **INVESTING IN TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS**—MAEF invests in developing and incubating research-based best practices to support capacity building for improved student achievement in Mobile County Public Schools.
- **BUILDING OWNERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY**—MAEF works as a critical friend and partner to the Mobile County Public School system to make decisions based on data, not opinions and to share accurate stories of progress in our schools.
- **MOBILIZING THE COMMUNITY**—MAEF marshals the talent and resources of parents, citizens, and businesses and political leaders across the county to strengthen every school in every community.

“In Mobile, public engagement is not a noun, it is a verb. Everything we do has engagement within it.” (Carolyn Akers)

Overview

In the spring of 2001, the Mobile Area Education Fund (MAEF) began a concerted and unprecedented effort to organize and engage the public. What began as a project to support a tax referendum to fund education in the county became a way of life for MAEF and the citizens of Mobile. It was at this time that MAEF launched a public campaign (Yes We Can) to inform the citizens of Mobile about an upcoming referendum that would tax the people of Mobile to support education in the county. The campaign was successful, and on May 15, 2001, for the first time in 41 years, the people of Mobile voted to support this tax.

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MAEF used this momentum to galvanize the community and “initiate the largest community engagement campaign ever attempted in Mobile County” (MAEF, 2). It created a community agreement that echoed the voices of its citizens and was approved by the school board, and worked toward forming other policies to benefit the Mobile School system. MAEF organized a purposeful and structured patchwork of meetings that engaged the people of Mobile in researching, reflecting, and analyzing educational options. The result was a community that found it “had far more in common than [it] had different” and was able to articulate and codify its ideas into a Community Agreement that reflected the voices of citizens across Mobile County.

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From Community Agreement to Strategic Plan

MAEF's public engagement campaign led to the adoption of a citizen-driven long-range strategic plan (PASSport to Excellence) using the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence as its strategic framework. The local education fund's (LEF) work as a convener and facilitator of the Community Agreement process put it at the center of educational work in Mobile County. MAEF's involvement in public engagement gave it credibility with individuals across the community, as well as with

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educators, policymakers, and decision makers throughout the county, even the state. The LEF was seen as both an independent voice and as a full partner.

The community had decided that quality leadership was the key to progress. This was codified in the Community Agreement and teacher quality was officially a top priority in the district. When MAEF received funding through the Goldman Sachs Teacher Quality initiative in the fall of 2004, it was ready to leverage the funds.

MAEF set out to support teacher quality by trying to better understand how to recruit and retain high quality teachers to all schools in the district, but particularly to low-achieving, hard-to-staff schools. As with most of MAEF's work, the teacher quality work led to increased publicity and opportunity, engaging the public at three levels: (1) within the district and schools, (2) with stakeholder groups, such as institutions of higher education, and (3) with the public at large.

Gathering Data – Mobile’s Teacher Survey

The survey of teachers in Mobile was part of a statewide effort to understand what it would take to staff all classrooms with quality teachers. Teacher attrition is a tremendous drain on the district, both financially and in terms of reform efforts. Hard-to-staff, high-poverty schools are particularly vulnerable, with almost one-third of teachers leaving their positions annually. (Ingersoll, R. M. (2001). “Teacher turnover and teacher shortages: An organizational analysis,” *American Educational Research Journal*, 38 (3), 499-534.) Alabama worked with the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) to design and administer a survey of teachers in select districts to inform Governor Bob Riley’s Commission on Quality Teaching. Leveraging other funding allowed CTQ to drill down on survey results in Mobile. They conducted greater in-depth analysis of the survey data for different schools around teaching quality, recruitment and school conditions.

All licensed, school-based personnel in Mobile were encouraged to participate in the survey. The 25-question online survey asked about school working conditions and what it would take to bring teachers to hard-to-staff schools. With a response rate of 76.8 percent (3,336 respondents – 2,849 grade-level or subject teachers, 305 school-based support staff, and 160 other licensed personnel),

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the survey represented the voice of the teachers in the county. Survey results revealed teachers were generally positive about teaching and learning conditions within their schools. Teachers felt supported by their principals and professional development. However, those who were thinking about leaving their schools reported feeling less support. While financial incentives were key to persuading educators to move to hard-to-staff schools, non-financial incentives such as reduced teaching loads, more planning time, and smaller class size were reported to be more important.

In addition to collecting teacher voices through the survey, MAEF used its funding to conduct focus groups, analyze the results, and bring together the parties responsible for teacher development and training. MAEF engaged the district leadership in a partnership with the University of South Alabama (the institution responsible for training most of the teachers in the county) to look at the survey data. For the first time, this partnership developed a shared plan to recruit and retain teachers and develop new teacher academies.

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The implications of the survey were powerful statewide. In October 2005, Governor Riley established the Commission on Quality Teaching. Carolyn Akers, executive director of MAEF, served as one of the co-chairs, chairing the task force on Compensation and Incentives. The Commission reviewed the teacher survey results and is set to survey other districts to inform recruitment and retention efforts in districts across Alabama.

The Transformation Plan

Mobile recognized that it had a subset of underachieving schools. These schools suffered from “high teacher turnover, inadequate funding, under-qualified and ineffective faculty, and low student achievement.” MAEF worked with the district to design a transformation plan based on what the Community Agreement outlined in terms of teaching quality and school reform. In August 2004, the Mobile County Public School System launched a plan to reform the lowest five schools in the district, based on SAT-9 test scores. The district utilized this plan to reform the district in terms of budget, staffing, and policy. Low-performing schools received extra funding and resources to carry out transformation plans. These “transformation” schools (two elementary, three middle) were reconstituted – the staff was let go and signing bonuses and pay-for-performance incentives were offered to attract quality teachers who would be “committed to using new and dramatically different approaches in turning around underachieving schools, thus improving student learning and test scores.”

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MAEF supported the board and local teachers’ union in an agreement in 2004 to offer performance incentives for those teaching in low-performing schools. The district adopted a pilot incentive-based pay system to encourage the most highly qualified teachers to teach in the set of five low-performing schools.

As part of the Teacher Quality initiative, MAEF, the district, and a consultant worked with the CTQ to document how the plan was being implemented and its impact on teaching quality. During SY2004-05, CTQ conducted case studies at the five transformation schools to track their progress and to keep the reform effort in the public eye and the district and school board accountable.

Using survey results, focus group data and site visits, the CTQ published a report that documented and assessed teaching quality and reform strategies in the five schools. CTQ followed the progress of the schools to determine what was going well and what needed modification after the first year of the plan. The resulting case studies engaged both district personnel and the public. The results – four of the five schools met AYP in 2006 – reinvigorated the community. In turn, the community worked to reinforce the transformation plan’s success.

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Lessons Learned

“The work of [MAEF] illustrates a multi-year process of public engagement that achieved substantial policy change.” (Turnbull, May 2006, 10). From the initial mobilization around a vote back in 2001 to the present day reforms, the sustained grassroots effort allows these changes to occur and continues to support the improvement that makes Mobile a success story. At times of tension between the state teachers’ union and the school board, the Community Agreement serves as a foundation for the work and the strategic plan acts as a guide for what needs to be done.

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Eyes across the state and nation are focused on the work in Mobile. Last year, of the two blue ribbon schools in Alabama named by the President, both were in Mobile. Forty-eight of 100 schools in Mobile hit their AYP targets. When the Governor gave incentive rewards for hitting targets in Alabama, Mobile received almost one-third of all funds. The improvements in Mobile have sparked competition and a sense of urgency in terms of education across the state. Governor Riley has made education his top priority, and Mobile educational leaders are playing a major role in the reform efforts. Lessons learned in Mobile are being analyzed for transfer to other Alabama districts – even typically more successful suburban districts.

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The successes in Mobile came out of an extensive community engagement process. The changes in teaching and learning are the public’s will, a will that needs to be consistently engaged and tapped. The Community Agreement laid out lofty goals for the district. Ensuring their implementation and sustaining their results will take the continued diligence on the part of organizations like MAEF and additional district capacity.



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Our Vision

Every day, in every community, *every* child in America benefits from a quality public education.

Our Mission

To build public demand and mobilize resources for quality public education for *all* children through a national constituency of local education funds and individuals.

PEN's Theory of Action

The national office of PEN issued a broad and ambitious charge to LEFs by developing a theory of action for the policy initiatives in 2001. The theory of action asserted that the combination of public engagement and specific school reform goals would result in sustained policy and practice and the public taking responsibility for public schools. It argued that too many school systems lack accountability to their local constituencies, and that the reforms undertaken by school professionals or brokered in back rooms without public engagement are likely to be faddish and ephemeral.

The theory of action identified three categories of the public: policymakers; organized groups; and the public at large. For each, it spelled out strategies and tactics by which LEFs cultivate public engagement: advocacy with policymakers; community strategic planning with organized groups; and community organizing with the public at large. The theory of action went on to provide examples of these strategies in action. It ended with a vision of the long-term goal:

...to create public demand for good public schools and to have this demand actually improve public schools. When we're done, we envision communities with a substantive education agenda making real changes in student achievement. We envision a strong community voice outside the schools — with its own power and constituency — that argues for improvement and helps guide changes. We envision robust community organizations that always are in the process of building new leadership and sustaining involvement. And we envision an accountability system that places shared responsibility for success with everyone in the community. (p. 11).

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