

san francisco **education** fund
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Case Study: Public Engagement Initiative

San Francisco Education Fund

San Francisco, CA

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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.

Founded in 1979, the **San Francisco Education Fund** is a community-based nonprofit organization established to improve the quality of teaching and learning in San Francisco public schools so that all students in this diverse community have the education necessary for full participation in the economic, civic, and cultural life of our society. The Ed Fund believes that strong public schools are critical to San Francisco's viability and that the community must take action to ensure their success. By acting as a bridge between the community and the classroom, the Ed Fund increases the availability and impact of resources for students and teachers throughout San Francisco public schools.

Overview

The San Francisco Education Fund has a long history of community engagement. One of the first local education funds (LEFs) in the country, it was founded in 1979 after Proposition 13 significantly reduced funding to the California public schools. The Ed Fund was established to involve the community in improving the quality of teaching and learning in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). “By acting as a bridge between the community and the classroom, the Ed Fund increases the availability and impact of resources for students and teachers throughout San Francisco public schools.”

The Ed Fund’s Public Engagement Initiative (PEI) began in the fall of 2004. Working with students, educators, parents, policymakers, and the community at large, the PEI has:

- Formulated a working definition of “quality teaching” that includes the training, skills and compassion that a teacher brings to the classroom, and also the environment in which a teacher functions and students learn.
- Provided and will continue to provide opportunities for students, educators, parents and the community to voice their opinions on how best to improve the teaching and learning environment in San Francisco public schools.
- Collected data about recruitment and retention in the SFUSD and conducted research to identify best practices from around the nation that could be applied locally.

Background

During SY2002-03, the Ed Fund undertook a strategic planning process with the goal of making an impact on a more systemic basis. San Francisco has many community-based organizations, and the Ed Fund wanted to find its niche. During the year, the Ed Fund looked at best practices research and reflected on its own history of public engagement, thinking about its strengths as an organization. The answer was clear: the Ed Fund was committed to professional development. They understood what teachers needed and wanted in the school environment.

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This strategic-planning process led the Ed Fund to focus on teacher quality and on engaging the public around the issue. Researched showed that in order to improve students’ academic achievement, the quality of teaching mattered more than any other factor. In 2004, the Ed Fund launched “It Takes a Community,” a public engagement initiative that reached out to education stakeholders to work toward solutions for supporting teachers and promoting the quality of

teaching and learning in the San Francisco public schools.

To further focus its agenda, the Ed Fund reached out. Through conversations with key stakeholders - including educators, parents, and community leaders - the Ed Fund learned that recruiting and retaining quality teachers was one of the biggest obstacles facing San Francisco's schools. Teacher turnover rates were especially high in lower-performing schools, and retention was a serious concern.

Gathering Data and Creating Priorities – Listening to Teachers and the Community

Throughout its work, the Ed Fund has used a data-driven approach. After choosing to focus on recruiting and retaining teachers, the LEF reached out to three constituency groups in particular—teachers, the district, and the community-at-large—to work toward solutions to support teachers and promote the quality of district teaching and learning. To better understand teacher quality issues, the Ed Fund began its research by talking with teachers. They talked to quality teachers (those who were national board certified, candidates for national board certification, and/or distinguished teachers within the district) in a series of focus groups about what it would take to recruit and retain teachers like themselves.

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The Ed Fund believed that for sound, research-based policies and best practices to be implemented and sustained, the public must be deeply involved in establishing community priorities around policies, resources, and practices. Because this was emphasized throughout the initiative process, in a short time, the Ed Fund was able to inspire public support and concern around teaching quality. The Public Engagement Initiative (PEI) Task Force was formed to represent the diverse constituencies and perspectives of San Francisco, providing strategic oversight and policy recommendations.

Through teacher focus group conversations and community input, the Ed Fund developed a list of five teacher-identified policy recommendations to improve teacher recruitment and retention in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD):

1. To implement sustained and quality professional development;
2. To create supports for new teachers;
3. To provide recognition from the district and community at large;
4. To focus on salary increases; and
5. To create affordable housing.

As the Ed Fund’s priorities—based on teacher input—became clear, it worked hard to engage the public in supporting its work and aligned its priorities with those of the district.

Engaging the Public-at-Large

Thank A Teacher Today Campaign

In order to provide recognition to teachers (policy recommendation #3), the Ed Fund launched the “Thank A Teacher Today” campaign. The Ed Fund felt this campaign was especially pertinent because at this time teachers were not in a good place professionally: Governor Schwarzenegger was undermining teachers by discussing “combat pay” and removing tenure, and teachers were in the midst of tense contract negotiations between the superintendent and union. The campaign coincided with Teacher Appreciation Week and worked to engage both the community and local schools.

The Ed Fund partnered with school and community leaders to create the citywide public call to recognize teachers during May 2006. With input from parents, the Ed Fund created an interactive toolkit that outlined creative ways to appreciate teachers during that month. The toolkit was distributed to parents and community members throughout the city and was available as a PDF in English, Spanish, and Chinese on the Thank A Teacher Today website (www.ThankATeacherToday.org). Parents sponsored teacher appreciation events throughout the city. The campaign received recognition from the Mayor, the superintendent, and other local officials and board members. The mayor worked with the Ed Fund to establish the San Francisco Mayor’s Teacher of the Month Award to recognize outstanding SFUSD teachers for their dedication, professionalism, and work for the city’s students. He also participated in the campaign kickoff press conference to announce the award and its first recipient. The Thank A Teacher Today website provided the community with additional ways to Thank A Teacher: (1) writing a thank you email to a teacher, (2) sharing a story about your favorite teacher, and (3) the opportunity to donate to fund teachers’ classroom projects or professional development.

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Mini-Reports

As a further means to engage the public around issues of quality teaching, the Ed Fund began to release a series of reports. These “mini-reports” are eight-page documents on how the community can support quality teaching and learning in San Francisco. The first report (released Winter 2006) outlined the community definition of quality teaching. The second report was the teacher appreciation parent toolkit from the Thank A Teacher Today campaign. This report was widely disseminated, thanks to the collaboration of eight local community-based organizations. The third report aimed at capturing the opinions and perspectives voiced at the Public Education Network hearing in California on No Child Left Behind, as well as written testimony submitted before and after the hearing.

The Public Engagement Initiative continues to work on future mini-reports pertaining to:

- (1) professional development for teachers that draws on national and local research around what quality professional development should look like,
- (2) recommendations around recruitment and retention in the district,
- (3) collecting stories about great teachers during the Thank A Teacher Today campaign, and
- (4) the issue of maldistribution of teachers in schools.

Working to Engage the District

It was difficult for the Ed Fund (as it is for many LEFs and community-based organizations) to determine how much to push the district relationships in order to get the desired progress. The Ed Fund has therefore focused on two main targets through which to advance its agenda: (1) collecting and analyzing teacher data, and (2) supporting the creation of the master plan for professional development.

Data Collection and Analysis

The Ed Fund is working with a statistician to pull data points from the district on teacher quality, retention, and workforce trends from 2004-2006. The Ed Fund held extensive meetings with the district to emphasize the need for data collection, as well as to determine what data they would be able to access. The district is now using these workforce data to make determinations with respect to the hiring process. The Ed Fund continues to collect and analyze district data and report trends to the broader community.

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Master Plan for Professional Development

In order to address the priority of implementing sustained and quality professional development for teachers, the Ed Fund has been working with the district to develop a **Master Plan for Professional Development** that supports teachers throughout their professional careers. In the face of decreasing educational budgets, the district's professional development programming must prove efficient, available, and accessible to all teachers.

The Ed Fund has worked to promote the master plan within the district, which has been a challenge. The superintendent and her close advisors see a need for a master plan (and use those terms), but those who are responsible for developing and implementing the plan are less supportive. Reluctant district personnel argue that the district already has a de facto master plan and do not believe that it needs to be codified.

The Ed Fund acknowledges that it has work to do to move the plan forward. It will continue to work with the district to make sure that the master plan remains a priority, meeting with district personnel and preparing research that speaks to the strengths and weaknesses of the current professional development system.

Lessons Learned

Policy change takes a long time. The work that the Ed Fund has done over the past few years is proof of that. Two of its five policy recommendations—increased salaries and housing assistance—require major changes in city and/or district budgets and policies. The Ed Fund has been unable to move forward quickly on these, but continues to offer support and assistance to the city, district, and union. While many changes—such as a lack of enthusiasm for the master plan beyond the superintendent level—have taken more time than anticipated, some policy developments, such as the Mayor's involvement in the Thank A Teacher Today campaign, occurred quite quickly when forces aligned or priorities converged. Since 2006, the Ed Fund has continued to make strong progress, including helping to advance a city-funded incentives program to recruit and retain teachers, and securing district driven recommendations for the creation of a master plan for professional development. Please visit www.sfedfund.org for more information.

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sanfrancisco **education** fund
Collaborate. Innovate. Advocate.



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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