



ALLIANCE FOR EDUCATION

Case Study: Teacher Evaluation Alliance for Education, Seattle, WA

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Authored by Sara Schwartz Chrismer

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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.

Alliance for Education, a nonprofit organization, exists to help ensure the academic success of all students in Seattle Public Schools. Every child can achieve. Setting high expectations is key. Students who achieve at high levels are more likely to graduate and be better equipped for successful lives. Established in 1995, Alliance for Education is an independent voice and external catalyst for excellence in Seattle's public schools. By sharing the goal of all kids achieving, the Alliance actively works as partners with the school district to identify needs, develop initiatives, and channel private resources toward programs which ensure the academic achievement of all students.

Guided by a broad-based coalition of business, civic, education, and philanthropic community leaders, Alliance for Education has helped generate more than \$90 million in charitable support to Seattle Public Schools. Each year, these community-generated resources bring additional training, materials, expertise and innovation into our schools—supporting the belief that all children can achieve.

Overview

The Alliance for Education, the Seattle-based local education fund (LEF), has focused its efforts on teaching quality issues since participating in the Annenberg Teacher Quality initiative in 2001. The Alliance's work began with a grassroots effort to engage the community, especially those who had been traditionally disenfranchised, around what it would take to for teachers to provide high quality instruction, and how the public could support teaching quality in Seattle. The Alliance aimed to build trust between the "community and the classroom" because it perceived that a lack of trust could undermine reform initiatives. In addition to listening to the community, the Alliance worked strategically with key stakeholders in the district (e.g., the union, district office, parent-teacher association, university fellows, etc.) to understand and accomplish its reform goals.

While engaging this diverse set of stakeholders, the Alliance heard repeatedly about the importance of teaching quality and the need to improve professional development in the district. The district was heaving investing in professional development at that time, but it was ineffectual. The Alliance also understood that the system of retaining and evaluating teachers needed improvement. Because stakeholders agreed that professional development and the opportunity for continual learning was important for teachers, the Alliance decided to focus on supporting the redesign of the evaluation system in the Seattle Public Schools (SPS). To be more effective, the new evaluation system would be based on the district's professional standards and be aligned with professional development opportunities. Through the Public Education Network/Goldman Sachs Teacher Quality initiative, the Alliance brought its PEN/Annenberg experience to bear on helping the district and union collaborate in designing and implementing a new evaluation system.

Engaging the Public

In an effort to engage and learn from the public, the Alliance built on its model of community conversations that had occurred around high school graduation rates. The LEF partnered with grassroots community organizations and reached out to a broad spectrum of citizens throughout Seattle. Traditionally, the Alliance had had strong ties to school district leaders and other prominent members of the community. This led to skepticism among grassroots groups about the Alliance's commitment to including all voices in the public engagement process. However, through its actions at community meetings, the Alliance was able to demonstrate its commitment to engaging in a two-way dialogue with the public over teaching reform.

After pilot-testing community dialogues facilitated by community members, the Alliance conducted 44 public dialogues with community groups and organizations throughout Seattle in late 2003. More than 1,500 community members participated. To maximize attendance, the Alliance ran the dialogues as part of gatherings that other community groups were already hosting. While this tactic

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led to higher attendance rates, it also left less time to focus on educational issues.

The structure of the dialogues included data presentations, followed by open discussion. The discussions revolved around three main questions:

1. In your opinion, what is required for teachers to meet the individual academic needs of all students?
2. Based on your answer to question 1, what can the community do to support this idea?
3. How do we go about rebuilding trust between schools, teachers, and the community?

The Alliance learned much from these public meetings. But though the conversations generated interest, they did not produce policy changes. The concept of teaching quality was both very important and too abstract. The public-at-large lacked the tools and background knowledge to fix the problems they raised. The Alliance therefore refined the structure and purpose of the community dialogues. The conversations served as large forums where community members and policymakers would talk (with a lot of energy) about big educational issues. This would galvanize the community behind the issue while policymakers informed them about the nature and impact of the issue. At the same time, policymakers saw the will of the public and would be called to action. They then could craft and enact the necessary policy changes.

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Engaging Key District Stakeholders

While working at the grassroots level, the Alliance also met with civic leaders through its newly formed Public Education Task Force (PETF), which included many key stakeholder groups including: SPS and the Seattle Education Association (SEA). The Alliance provided a safe and neutral place for these stakeholders to meet. The University of Washington School of Education joined in the effort to transform teacher induction and teacher evaluation in the district. This process, and the support of the Alliance, not only allowed SPS and SEA to improve their relationship with one another, it also caused them to embrace authentic public engagement.

A major breakthrough was realized during an early set of conversations with executive level stakeholders from the district, union, parent teacher association, University of Washington, and the community. The union wanted to distinguish between “teacher quality” and “teaching quality.” They stated that unless the terminology of the district changed, they could not engage in further conversations with the district. This began a series of dialogues that were larger than phrasing; the issue was respect. The union believed that it was more respectful to talk about improving *teaching*, whereas “teacher quality” connoted improving teachers – judging teachers and their capabilities

personally. A real dialogue about respect internally among this executive group brought all parties closer together.

Because of these conversations, district and union policies began to shift toward strategic support for teaching quality. The district's professional development dollars were re-budgeted, the district and the union agreed to work together to improve the teacher evaluation system, induction programs were overhauled to better support new teacher retention, and interviews were conducted to provide new information about how to improve teacher support.

Pulling Together the Different Voices

These sets of conversations showed that educators and non-educators saw effective teaching as central contributors to increasing student achievement. The stakeholders strongly supported the teaching profession, and agreed that as in any profession, teachers needed time, resources, and ongoing professional development to meet the community's high expectations. Through analyzing the different conversations, the Alliance discovered that the community, educators and education experts agreed on key leverage points for improving teaching quality: teacher training, supportive working conditions, personalized learning environments and reforms to the compensation and retention systems. These ideas served as a foundation for the Alliance's work with SPS in identifying policies, strategies, and priorities that would lead to high quality teachers in Seattle's classrooms.

Through what it learned from the community dialogues, teaching quality became a centerpiece of the Alliance's new strategic plan. The Alliance defined teaching quality as: (1) the skills, experiences, and beliefs that teachers bring into the classroom, and (2) the structures, resources, and public perceptions that influence who teaches, where they teach, and what happens in the classroom. The Alliance realized that it needed to narrow its focus and more specifically identify areas where the organization was poised to make a difference. The Alliance planned to support professional development, help teachers improve practice, and enhance instructional leadership.

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Based on what the Alliance heard from both the public-at-large and organizational stakeholders, it was clear that the system for evaluating teachers in Seattle was broken. The Alliance decided to use its policy energy to support the joint union-district initiative to redesign the evaluation system. The Alliance had invested in professional development for many years and it seemed that the evaluation system could be most effectively used to drive improvement of teaching quality.

Developing a Professional Growth and Evaluation System

Viewing the revamping of the teacher evaluation system as a critical lever for improving teaching quality, Seattle focused on its improvement despite deep financial shortages. Grassroots efforts and coalition-building came to fruition in 2004, when a joint district-union evaluation taskforce was put into place. The unique partnership between SEA and SPS facilitated the development of the Professional Growth and Evaluation (PGE) system. The taskforce worked to ensure systemic ownership of the new PGE system, including: holding an executive-level planning meeting for plan approval, developing staff engagement tools and communications plans, and aligning all major district initiatives with the new PGE system.

In 2004 a joint district-union evaluation taskforce was put into place. The unique partnership between SEA and SPS facilitated the development of the Professional Growth and Evaluation (PGE) system.

The PGE system focused on Seattle's Professional Practice Standards, teacher support, staff development, student achievement, and collaboration. Similar to student accountability measures, administrators and teachers in SPS would now be held to their own high standards. Hundreds of educators throughout the district collaborated to develop and refine the Professional Practice Standards, which guide teachers and principals in improving the quality of teaching for all SPS students. These standards are built on the assumption that professional educators continually strive to improve their practice. The standards are a tool for teachers to focus their professional growth in such a way that it connects to student learning. The Alliance believes these standards are most effective when paired with high quality professional development.

Alliance Support for District Implementation of the PGE System

The Alliance knew that the PGE system was an important reform that aligned with its strategic plan. They also saw the district go through two superintendents and three chief academic officers without making much progress toward redesigning the evaluation system. The Alliance staff decided to use its resources to help push the work forward. While the district and the union made policy around the new evaluation system, they did not have financial resources to bring everyone together on the issue. The Alliance supported these efforts in a number of ways.

Under the teaching quality initiative, the Alliance devoted funds to creating a full-time position in the district – Professional Growth and Evaluation Project Coordinator. The coordinator's sole responsibility was to get different stakeholders onboard to roll out and study the pilot of the PGE system. This new charge encountered its fair share of resistance. Since the Alliance had created and funded the position, many within the district saw the coordinator as an outsider. Throughout the year, the coordinator was moved from department to department and some felt the appointment was the Alliance's attempt to co-opt the district. Despite these challenges, the district has extended the coordinator position through the end of the year. Additionally, since much of the

work of the district is driven by relationships, the Alliance may be better positioned to push its agenda and the evaluation system from within the district.

In the years leading up to implementation, the district had undertaken extensive research to create the professional practice standards for teachers. However, the district lacked funds to print and disseminate the new standards to those who needed them (i.e., teachers and administrators). The Alliance stepped in to ensure that the standards got into the hands of school staff.

Rolling out the System

In fall 2006, Phase I of the pilot began in five secondary schools. Phase II occurred in the spring 2007 and included elementary schools. The pilot was intended to involve elementary, middle, and high schools. However, since school closures and consolidations took place at the elementary level, those schools “sat out” Phase I of the pilot. The district and the Alliance are continuing to refine the system based on user feedback and will plan its expansion.

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Lessons Learned

The Alliance has worked to keep the attention and support of SPS senior academic leadership and other key constituents focused on integrating this initiative into the work of the district and developing the appropriate supports at every level to ensure its success. In order to drive policy change regarding teacher policy, the LEF utilized a number of tactics – engaging the public-at-large to leverage support, bringing the district and the union to the table for frank discussions, and attempting to gain inside access through funding a district position – to drive policy change regarding teaching quality. Some have proven more successful than others. With turnovers in leadership and competing initiatives, the Alliance has gained a new appreciation for what it takes to support and enact change in a district.

The Alliance’s historic role as a community convener on issues of public education, as well as its role as private fundraiser for SPS puts it in a unique position to drive policy change. Facing difficult and emotional community issues such as school closures, the Alliance has learned that it is not always appropriate to take a strong and public position other than support for increased academic achievement for all students.

The Alliance, like other LEFs, needs to pick its battles and be aware of opportunity costs associated with its stances, including the impact such positions may have on its fundraising and public perception. In fact, the Alliance realized that behind-the-scenes support for those stakeholders and leaders who are better positioned to speak publicly on the issues can often prove more productive.



Alliance for Education
 509 Olive Way, Suite 500
 Seattle, WA 98101-2556
 Phone: 206-343-0449
 Fax: 206-343-0455
www.alliance4ed.org
 Patrick D'Amelio, President and CEO
patrickd@alliance4ed.org



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).

601 Thirteenth Street NW - Suite 710 South - Washington, DC 20005

T: 202 628 7460 - F: 202 628 1893 - www.PublicEducation.org