

THE HEINZ ENDOWMENTS

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The Evolution of the Education Program's Current Priorities

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During its twenty-five year history, the Education Program at The Heinz Endowments has been committed to improving educational opportunity throughout the southwestern Pennsylvania region. The Education Program's work began in 1985 when an education review of Pittsburgh's schools sanctioned by the Endowments identified two major issues: (1) ineffective school governance and leadership and (2) inequitable academic progress among African American students. This review found that a lack of quality teaching and school leadership inhibited the system from being all it could be for students, especially those living in poverty and those who are African American. This educational crisis was exacerbated by the fact that these same families were faced with few school options. If they were attending a poor performing school or district, they did not have the financial means to seek out private school options. Therefore, instead of ameliorating inequity, this review found that the system of schooling in our region perpetuated academic, social and economic inequities limiting opportunity, access and achievement for our most vulnerable student populations.

Given this backdrop, the Education Program sought to create capacity through its grant making so that quality teaching and leadership could exist in a system where students and their families were afforded the resources to improve their academic performance and future learning outcomes. Additionally, the program's grant making sought to create options outside of the traditional system for these families understanding that education should never be a one-size-fits-all experience. Over the course of the intervening years, the work of the Endowments in this area evolved into our current strategies: Schools That Work, Leaders for a New Era and Technology for Learning. A recent review of these strategies and their regional context by new staff in the Education Program led to the conclusion

that, sadly, the two issues identified 25 years ago were still relevant and in need of more focused attention - schools were still suffering from ineffective governance and leadership and African American students were still falling behind their white counterparts. In addition, it was clear that time had changed the way these two issues presented themselves, as had the tools available to address them. Other changes - in program personnel, in the education sector itself, in philanthropy's approach - provided an opportune window to reshape the education program agenda and enhance its influence on education throughout the region.

Ironically, the initial conclusions harken back to the findings of 1985. Under Dr. Joseph Dominic's leadership, the Education Program had long been committed to achieving educational parity for those students most at risk of not succeeding, although it was not always easy to discern its translation into effective grant making. However, after considerable thought and conversation with colleagues, it became clear that the original pair of issues were more effectively joined under a single theme: Equity. Hence, while staying committed to its founding priorities, program staff felt compelled to engage in a strategic planning process in order to determine an approach that would offer a chance for real movement in what has been a seemingly intractable challenge to Pittsburgh. Moreover, although current program staff has not engaged in an official analysis of the Education Program's grant making from 1985 to 2008, it knows that one must be completed by knowledgeable professionals who can systematically identify its inadequacies to ensure that its future work does not fall prey to the paradigm of paralysis.

Why conduct a review of the Education Program's current grant making goals and strategies now?

There are several compelling reasons why the staff of the Education Program chose to engage in a review process now rather than later: (1) Change in leadership, (2) increased cross- programmatic grant making, (3) local initiatives like The Pittsburgh Promise, (4) The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

grant to PPS, and (5) the U.S. Department of Education's focus on the reauthorization of NCLB (ESEA), innovation and choice as school reform strategies. As a prominent education funder in the region, THE's Education Program staff acknowledged that these events presented opportunities for it to increase its effectiveness through more strategic grant-making priorities.

First, with significant changes at the Education Program level and the appointment of a new president, Education Program staff saw an opportunity to examine the efforts of past grant making, assess its long-term impact on its grantees and the region, determine the true alignment to program strategies and goals, and look for ways to create more fidelity and focus in its work. Second, the intra-program changing strategies in the Pathways strategic alliance and African American Men and Boys Task Force made this assessment a timely consideration. Program staff believed that a strong Education Program silo could lead to more targeted and aligned education focused grant making throughout the organization.

A third reason that motivated the Education Program to engage in a review process sooner than later were two local events which have ongoing implications for students and their families, teachers, administrators, teachers' unions and higher education. The first event was The Pittsburgh Promise, the city's dual economic development and education opportunity initiative which is designed to academically, socially and economically change the complexion of Pittsburgh's citizenry. In order for this potential to be truly realized; however, creating a means that will enable every child to become "promise ready" will require rethinking what schools do to prepare all students for post-secondary learning, especially those who are African American and those living in poverty. The second event, the \$40 million "The Empowering Effective Teachers" grant awarded to the Pittsburgh Public Schools by The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to address key challenges to effective teachers, gets at the heart of the matter of school reform. It specifically addresses the way teachers are prepared, hired, placed,

assessed and dismissed in school environments. The research literature is clear that students who have teachers who are effective in classroom instruction and have a mutually respectful relationship with their students, do more than prepare them for an academic and self-serving life; they prepare them for life as individuals who learn to use their minds well for the benefit of their communities and democracy (Sizer, *Horace's Compromise*, 1989). The Education Program staff understands how connected these two events are in promoting high quality life outcomes for all students. However, it also realizes that some students have access to effective teachers everyday while others, usually African American students and those in poverty, are stuck with the “leftovers” -- the undesirable educators who do not see achievement as a thing attainable by their students. Recognizing inequity and the opportunities afforded by these local events, the Education Program engages in this review process to identify strategies and policies to alleviate social injustice and neglect.

The fourth reason for the review is found in the state of Pennsylvania's policy efforts to affect school change. In addition to local conversations about school reform, there is a discourse throughout the Commonwealth between policy makers and educators around two main issues: (1) high school exit exams and (2) high quality school choice options and learning environments. For example, the Pennsylvania Department of Education has announced that by 2014 all students who plan on receiving a high school diploma will need to take and pass the PDOE's Keystone Exit Exams, the state's formal assessment instrument. Six out of 10 subject areas from a student's core academic coursework must be assessed at the proficient level if she is to receive the “high school graduate” designation. Although it initially appears that this is an admirable goal, this proposed initiative focuses too heavily on outputs rather than those necessary inputs that increase student achievement. The Education Program sees this proposed assessment as a potential equity issue and is reviewing its current goals and strategies in an effort to address this possible barrier for African American students and those who live in poverty.

Concurrently, there is movement around the state that is exploring innovative learning environments which provide families and their children options for more personalized learning and multiple ways to measure student proficiency.

The fifth and final reason the Education Program has pursued a review process is because of the national discourse of school reform instigated by the U.S. Department of Education. Through new conversations about the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (ESEA), The Race to the Top Fund, i3 Initiative (investing in innovation) and Promise Neighborhoods, the U.S. Department of Education has encouraged states and districts to become innovators, to think beyond the traditional designs, policies and strategies in teaching and learning that have yet to establish consistent, high gains for all students. The Education Program staff sees promise in the federal government's financial commitment to creating a system where innovation is commended, policy frameworks are thoughtfully developed to support fairness and equity and where collaboration of effort is viewed as a must if programs are going to thrive and become sustainable, even in some of the most difficult learning environments throughout this nation. It also sees an opportunity to rethink some of its goals and priorities in order to align them with and complement these efforts.

Why Educational Equity?

As was the case in 1985, current Education Program staff must raise its voice and use its resources to change those practices, policies, and structures that impede our most vulnerable children from achieving all that life has for them; not because it is the politically correct thing to do, but rather it is the right thing to do. The Education Program staff sees two themes as being the centerpiece of its work: (1) Equitable academic progress for African American students and those in poverty and (2) School choice for students and their families. This focus is especially relevant given the recent court cases involving school desegregation in Seattle, Washington and Jefferson County, Kentucky where the rulings

have the potential to create a new version of social, cultural, economic and academic inequity for African American and low-income students.

Additionally, The Brookings Institute released findings from a study it conducted this past winter on “first-tier suburbs” and their student populations, and found that they were faring slightly better in their learning performance - but not much - than their urban core counterparts. The findings seem to indicate that inequity and low-achievement issues are not simply an urban core matter. Moreover, the research literature published by The Ford and Schott foundations, highlighting the crisis for African American boys and used by the African American Men and Boys Task Force, as well as the Culturally Responsive Arts Education work commissioned by The Heinz Endowments’ Arts and Culture Program, have informed the thinking and contributed to the current strategy work of the Education Program staff. Resonating through the language of these documents is the admonition to affirm student identity and ability; establish equitable learning environments; create education policy that is just and culturally relevant; and promote the pursuit and completion of post-secondary education.

Given the importance of these efforts, the Education Program staff has decided to be bold and define its work under the auspices of Educational Equity for African American students and those who live in poverty. Although it was initially believed that the Schools That Work, Leaders for a New Era and the Technology for Learning strategies could provide solid guidance for its grant making, program staff has recognized their shortcomings and is no longer convinced that they alone provide the depth and the essential elements needed to move the program to a more powerful place that is aligned with multiple school transformation efforts - both internally and externally, locally and nationally. Furthermore, using the classroom as the initial point of entry for this work, the staff is determined to use the following objectives to accomplish its future grant making: (1) Advance Effective Teachers in Secondary Learning Environments; (2) Empower Students As Education Reformers; and (3) Eliminate Policy and Structural

Barriers to Educational Equity. In order to increase its impact, influence and leverage in its grant making, the Education Program will seek to embed its work in Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, and in its Choice Schools throughout the region.