

Principles for effective education grantmaking

DRAFT – v.4

Effective education grantmaking results in positive changes in the educational outcomes of children and youth. It does so by influencing changes in policy, practice, resources or attention. It isn't accidental: To be effective, education grantmaking must be both well-conceived and well-executed – accomplishing what it sets out to do by carefully identifying needs, specifying desired outcomes and acting on new knowledge.

Our country and our communities need an effective education system with great classrooms and talented instructors, more opportunities and strong supports for children and young adults. More than ever, skills and knowledge are the ticket to self sufficiency and civic participation – especially now for children from poor or immigrant families. Strong education systems lead to strong democratic and economic systems.

Philanthropy – with its assets of independence, risk-taking, knowledge creation and working capital – can play an essential role in improving education programs, institutions and systems from pre-kindergarten through higher education to help all students achieve. Our principles for effective education grantmaking seek to reflect the wisdom, craft and knowledge funders need to maximize their work.

The role of Grantmakers for Education in strengthening education philanthropy

Strengthening philanthropy's capacity to improve educational outcomes for all students is Grantmakers for Education's mission, which it achieves by:

- Sharing successful grantmaking strategies, best practices and lessons learned that exemplify responsive and responsible grantmaking in education.
- Creating venues to collaborate on projects, build and share knowledge, develop leadership, advocate for change and debate strategies with other education grantmakers.
- Interpreting data, illustrating trends and conducting research to improve the effectiveness of education grantmaking and to highlight innovative or proven educational approaches.

To guide these programs and activities – and to ensure these efforts are truly helping grantmakers increase their impact – Grantmakers for Education has prepared the following principles for effective education grantmaking. We intend for these principles to inform the design and content of our work and to help us measure our own effectiveness as an organization.

How principles for effectiveness can advance the field

Even as these principles shape the work of GFE, we also hope they inform the larger field of education philanthropy. We don't intend for these principles to serve as a checklist of activities or to suggest that grantmaking is a simple mechanical process. Instead, we hope they challenge grantmakers to reflect on *how and why* they make their choices and not on *which* choices they make.

“Education philanthropy” encompasses a wide variety of strategies, approaches and types of grantees. We recognize that, while aspiring to these principles, each funder will face unique trade-offs and tensions – judging how to balance, for example, reactive vs. proactive grantmaking, a single area of work vs. several issues areas, short-term vs. long-term grants, or investing in direct services vs. activities such as research, advocacy and capacity building that influence direct services. Moreover, we know well-laid plans are easily foiled by the complexities of the education system and the volatile forces that shape it.

Nonetheless, we hope foundation program staff, CEOs, trustees and other leaders use these principles both informally – to reflect on their own efforts – and formally – to generate conversations about the work and results of their foundation.

Finally, we hope these principles affirm a set of positive attitudes about the future – that philanthropy, done wisely, can contribute solutions to the problems that prevent too many children and youth from learning and achieving.

Education grantmaking that is effective – most likely to make a lasting social impact – is characterized by:

1. Discipline and focus.

Especially in education, where private investments will always be dwarfed by public dollars, the more disciplined and focused the work of a foundation, the more likely it is to have an impact. This means:

- *Choosing a discrete, manageable area of work and controlling the natural tendency to branch out into many areas.*
- *Considering where the foundation can add maximum value to a specific problem and leverage its comparative advantages and finite resources.*

2. A clear rationale that links resources with results.

A clear theory of action should guide grantmaking investments in education. This means:

- *Making a rational and conscious set of decisions about which actions by the foundation are most likely to achieve the desired change.*
- *Considering what level and type of resources will be needed given the foundation's focus and the capacity of grantees and the community.*

3. Knowledge.

Wise choices come from good information and data, ideas and advice from many quarters, and openness to criticism and feedback. Philanthropy that is effective is well-informed. This means:

- *Understanding the problems in education: the needs; the social, political and economic landscape – including the impacts of federal, state and local education policies and priorities; the barriers to progress; the limitations working for change from either outside or inside the system; and the links between education problems and other areas such as youth development and community development.*
- *Understanding the field of education philanthropy: how and where other funders are working on similar issues; what is being learned from this other work; and the assets and expertise other funders, networks and organizations can bring to the foundation's efforts.*
- *Understanding the opportunities: the histories, politics, cultures and readiness for change of the communities in which the foundation operates; which practices and strategies for addressing specific education problems are research-proven; ways that new knowledge can be developed and brought to bear; fresh conceptualization of the issues and exceptional leadership in the field; and principal points of leverage, including creative uses of the foundation's own positioning in the field.*
- *Understanding how organizations change: how complex organizations and systems like schools and universities change; the incentives and disincentives they respond to; and the roles of culture, leadership and politics.*
- *Avoiding parochialism and isolation by reaching out to both content experts and community partners for help and ideas.*

4. Strong partners.

Foundations are most effective when they ensure their grantees are most effective. This means:

- *Performing due diligence in selecting grantees, including considering the administrative and fiscal health of possible grantees and not just their program work.*
- *Ensuring a good fit exists between the foundation's focus, rationale, knowledge and resources and those of the grantee – and that the work to be accomplished is a priority for both organizations.*
- *Setting clear expectations about outcomes and contributions for both the grantmaker and grantees.*
- *Tailoring grants and procedures to best support grantees' work.*
- *Developing a clear plan for how the grantee will sustain the program of work after the grant period.*
- *Staying engaged with grantees after their grant awards to learn from and leverage their work.*

5. Engaged communities.

In the end, communities – geographic, ethnic, economic or institutional – must develop the tools to solve the education challenges their students face. This means:

- *Providing the means for communities to help define the problem, identify viable solutions and participate in the design of the intervention.*
- *Building a broad constituency for a program so that the solution to a problem is viewed by all participants as a shared responsibility.*
- *Resisting the temptation to think that grantmakers have all the answers.*

6. Persistence.

Intractable problems in education will take time to solve. This means:

- *Committing to work for sufficient time to gauge results and make a lasting difference.*
- *Determining explicitly whether and when an exit strategy is appropriate.*

7. Leverage.

A single foundation can't solve the problems in the U.S. education system, and effective grantmaking strategies mobilize and deploy all the resources available to the foundation to advance solutions. This means:

- *Considering whether local, state or federal public policies and priorities ultimately need to be changed – and thus need to be an explicit part of the foundation's change theory – to solve the problem on which the foundation is working.*
- *Using the foundation's knowledge, reputation, ability to convene and communications – and not just its grants – to increase the likelihood of success and to attract the participation of other partners.*
- *Valuing collaboration and coordination with other funders and working in tandem with them (rather than in isolation from them) whenever possible to tackle a specific need, problem or geographic area.*

8. Learning.

Even as it seeks to act on the best available knowledge (Principle #3 above), philanthropy should create new knowledge about best ways for improving education opportunities and achievement. Tracking results, understanding costs and identifying what works is essential to helping both foundations and grantees make an impact. This means:

- *Being clear about what the foundation seeks to learn from its education grantmaking and then using the most appropriate tools to gather the information (such as monitoring, participation evaluations, implementation evaluations, cost evaluations, logic and knowledge-base evaluations or impact evaluations).*
- *Using rigorous studies to identify which educational practices and strategies are effective and which are not.*
- *Making public significant information regarding what they have learned about the results of their activities.*
- *Assessing the foundation's success, reflecting on progress and adjusting assumptions and strategies to improve implementation.*
- *Understanding the limitations and appropriate uses of research and evaluation data.*
- *Remaining adaptable to emerging ideas and open to unexpected learning.*