

## CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

A SERIES OF STORIES, RESULTS,  
AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM  
SEVEN YEARS OF  
EDUCATION INVESTING BY  
THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



## GETTING TO **RESULTS**

THROUGH ITS EDUCATION INVESTMENTS, THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION HELPS ENSURE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE GRADUATE FROM SCHOOL PREPARED TO SUCCEED AS ADULTS BY SUPPORTING QUALITY SCHOOL CHOICES AND STRONG SCHOOL/COMMUNITY/FAMILY CONNECTIONS.

The core result that the Annie E. Casey Foundation's education program seeks to achieve is that:

*One day, all young people in tough neighborhoods will graduate from school prepared to succeed as adults in the worlds of work, family, and citizenship.*

The Foundation has a straightforward “theory of change” about what should happen to achieve this result: Quality Choices + Robust Connections = Core Result. If we create quality school choices for young people and their families, and if these schools foster robust connections among themselves, families, and community institutions, then it is possible for all young people to graduate from school prepared to succeed.

To achieve this core result, Casey's education portfolio has invested roughly \$35 million over seven years in two program areas that it believes hold special promise for closing the achievement gap and helping low-income children in tough neighborhoods do well in life:

- Creating quality education choices for low-income families.
- Building strong connections among schools, communities, and families.

Through these two investment areas, the Foundation provides program support for start-up, planning, and early implementation efforts; technical assistance, capacity building, and network development; and policy and data analysis, advocacy, public will building, and documentation of lessons learned.



**“[Casey] talks about results in terms of impact, influence, and leverage. It’s a useful frame, and I’ve adopted it.” Jim Shelton, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation**

In addition to making grants, Casey uses program-related investments (PRIs) to advance its education program goals. A PRI is an investment in the form of a loan, a loan guarantee, a line of credit, a mission-related deposit, an asset purchase, a recoverable grant, or an equity investment. The Foundation has used PRIs to attract co-investments in the hard-to-finance area of charter facilities to significant effect, helping create thousands of new seats for inner-city students.

The *Closing the Achievement Gap* series explores Casey’s education investments in detail and presents stories, results, and lessons learned. This particular publication describes Casey’s efforts to develop a flexible but rigorous results measurement system that enables the Foundation and its grantees to reflect on practice and then course-correct as necessary to achieve the desired result. It also presents a list of selected aggregate results to show the Foundation’s own progress in the area of education results measurement.

### **Developing a Results Framework that Works for Everyone**

The education program strives to measure its own and its grantees’ progress toward achieving the core result while at the same time encouraging innovation, so the results measurement system must be flexible as well as clear and somewhat standardized.



## Getting the Most Out of Knowledge Management

Civic Builders is a nonprofit that finances, designs, and develops charter facilities in New York City. It has received Casey support in the amount of \$400,000 over four years to create a knowledge management system that includes documenting and sharing best practices and lessons learned and developing a way to use documentation to improve organizational effectiveness.

At first, Civic Builders wasn't sure how to use documentation to further its work. "Early on, we asked ourselves, 'What does Casey want to see?'" said Civic's co-founder David Umansky. "Now, we document projects that are important to our own learning. It's a luxury to get support to do this thinking, and we don't want to waste it."

For the past few years, Casey funds have supported a part-time knowledge manager who performs a number of jobs. During focus groups and knowledge-sharing gatherings, the knowledge manager listens

but doesn't talk. Later, during the debriefing session, the knowledge manager is a vocal participant who helps staff clarify what happened and distill what was most important from the gathering.

The knowledge manager will then create an appropriate product. If the organization's board needs to use information from the session to make a decision, the staff person will create a slide presentation and handout. If it's a best-practices meeting, the product might be a summary of ideas shared to send out to participants via e-mail.

Over time, Civic Builders has come to rely on knowledge management and documentation to trigger reflection and improve practice. "Three years ago, we might not have sought other money to support the knowledge management function," said Umansky. "Now, we are hooked on it. We would definitely seek to replace it if Casey support went away."

**"The results framework gives us tools to talk about results in a complex and meaningful way, and it reminds us that the bottom line is, did our work change anything for families and kids?"** *Mike Kromrey, Metro Organizations for People*

As its results measurement work has evolved over a period of years, Casey has found it useful to discuss its results in the categories of impact, influence, and leverage, and it has asked its education grantees to do the same.

- *Impact* refers to improvements in the success and well-being of children, families, or communities directly served by the grantee.
- *Influence* refers to positive changes in opinions, practices, or policies as a result of the grantee's work.
- *Leverage* refers to new or increased public or private co-investment in Casey-supported activities that lead to better results for children and families.

For the Foundation, the impact, influence, and leverage framework helps sharpen the education portfolio's strategic focus. It guides the selection of new investments, and it helps in the evaluation of existing investments and the portfolio as a whole. For grantees, the framework helps them refine their focus, better manage and improve their programs, and communicate about their successes to others. For both, it ensures that people are using a common language to discuss progress toward results.

Early on, Casey reviewed existing results measurement systems at other foundations and organizations. Those that had worked on results measurement emphasized the value of using templates to guide data collection, as well as the benefit of creating a system that

# LESSONS FROM DEVELOPING A RESULTS MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK

- Clearly articulate your vision of a core result and your strategy for achieving it before starting to create your results measurement system.
- Include grantees in the development of the performance measurement system to get their buy-in and to ensure that the framework is relevant.
- Make sure that grantees understand the logic behind the results measurement system, and give them the support they need to develop capacity to comply with the system.
- Test and refine your results measurement tools until they work for everyone.
- Building a robust measurement system requires years of effort at all levels of a foundation.
- Support evaluation, documentation of lessons learned, internal reflection, and knowledge management systems to help grantees learn from what they are doing, improve their performance, and share their knowledge with others.

**“We are focusing our thinking, now, with the end in mind, and we are asking how we can modify our activities to better achieve that end.”** *Bob Pavlik, Institute for the Transformation of Learning, Marquette University*

## SELECTED RESULTS

This partial list of aggregated results to which Casey has contributed is derived from results listed throughout the *Closing the Achievement Gap* series.

### **Impact**

- 81 percent of 6,110 students in 17 individual, Casey-supported charter schools have improved performance on state math tests.
- 59 percent of these students have improved performance on state reading tests.
- 57 new charter schools are open in Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Indianapolis.
- 50 new charter schools with English language learner (ELL) focus are open in 16 states.
- 9 new charter school facilities are open in New York City.
- 193 new charter leaders.
- 100 charter schools trained in effective ELL techniques.
- 300 DC charter teachers trained in effective special education techniques.
- 300 parents trained each year to understand student achievement data and the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

### **Influence**

- A gradual shift in the national climate of opinion regarding school choice policies.
- A more nuanced view of charters in national and state news coverage.
- Increased national interest in mayoral role in public education.
- Numerous active partnerships in Atlanta, Indianapolis, and Washington, DC, in which organizations are working together to achieve Casey’s core result.
- Districts in Indianapolis are collaborating with charter schools.
- Supported creation of a model for improving student outcomes in a district feeder pattern.
- Supported creation of effective and replicable charter authorizing and accountability systems in Indianapolis.
- Supported creation of an effective and replicable results reporting system in Indianapolis that will work for both charters and traditional public schools.
- Supported progress in creating results measurement tools for programs that connect schools, communities, and families.
- Supported a rigorous evaluation that will provide nuanced data on voucher impact, benefits, and challenges.

- Supported the creation of the first national leadership organization for charter schools.
- Supported the creation of the first national research center on charter schools.
- 6 state charter laws improved.
- 30+ publications on evidence-based school improvement policy and practice.
- 4 evidence-based improvements in the national special education law.
- 3,700 people who work for improved education policy and practice convened each year by nine organizations.
- 700 philanthropists trained each year in effective education grantmaking practices.

### **Leverage**

- \$50 million for charter facilities.
- \$18.4 million in private philanthropic support to charter schools in Indianapolis.
- \$4.4 million in private philanthropic support invested in the DC voucher program.
- \$1.9 million in public, private, and in-kind support for improvement in a district feeder pattern in Atlanta.
- Numerous investments by other national and local donors in Casey grantees that are working to achieve the Foundation’s core result in education.

makes it possible to aggregate results. They also suggested that grantees would need hands-on support from consultants to develop capacity to use any results measurement tool.

Casey has included grantees in the development of its results measurement system from the beginning, in order to make sure the Foundation asks the right questions and to ensure grantee buy-in. During the development process, Casey found that many grantees were eager to create a results-based culture within their own organizations. The biggest challenge has been to create a data collection template that enables the Foundation to aggregate results while giving grantees room to name their own additional performance measures and express their individuality.

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**“Telling our affiliates that they have to do documentation and ongoing evaluation isn’t enough. We have to provide them with materials and templates and teach them how to use them.” *Dr. Velma Cobb, National Urban League***

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In 2007, Casey drafted a performance measurement guidebook and accompanying spreadsheet for education grantees. Currently, the Foundation is field-testing these tools throughout the education portfolio. It will continue to adjust and refine the tools based on user experiences.

### **Encouraging Internal Reflection to Improve Results**

A key component of any results measurement effort is regular reflection on progress toward outcomes in order to refine and improve programs and practice. Casey’s education program encourages grantees to reflect on and learn from what they are doing by supporting a variety of activities. These activities include setting up knowledge management systems, documenting stories and lessons learned, and using evaluation and data to drive and refine programming.

Casey has provided support to a number of grantees, including Civic Builders, NewSchools Venture Fund, and New Leaders for New Schools to set up internal knowledge management systems. These systems typically include online libraries of all documents created by an organization, so staff can easily find and retrieve knowledge, along with documentation of lessons learned in the field that is distributed widely outside the organization.

Organizations usually benefit from having a dedicated knowledge manager to set up and manage these online systems, and to train staffers to use them. This person can also sit in on meetings, trainings, and other gatherings, participate in subsequent debriefing sessions, write up summaries for a variety of internal uses, and help leaders check in on progress toward desired results.

“Casey helped us understand the concept of being a learning organization by encouraging us to be intentional about knowledge management,” said Julie Petersen of NewSchools Venture Fund.

The Foundation has also supported documentation and lessons learned activities that encourage internal reflection. “Documentation improves our performance,” said David Umansky, co-founder of Civic Builders. “We have greater impact if we do the thinking and analyzing that documentation forces us to do. It encourages reflective practice.”

Casey has found that data and analysis from external evaluations can also help organizations learn from what they are doing to improve practice and make better progress toward results. For example, Casey’s early support for ongoing evaluation at New Leaders for New Schools enabled that organization to align its programmatic work to its ultimate goal of improving student achievement in urban schools.

### **Sharing Knowledge About What Works**

In another effort to encourage effective results-oriented work, Casey’s education program encourages its grantees to share best practices and lessons learned by supporting publications, gatherings, and online communities.

With Casey support, a national network of education philanthropists called Grantmakers for Education has created and disseminated a series of case studies about effective grant-making practice.

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In Denver, the grassroots community organizing group Metro Organizations for People created a lessons learned publication that spread the word about how to mobilize urban families to influence local school policy.

In Washington, DC, Washington Scholarship Fund uses Casey support to create annual chronicles and lessons learned publications to describe what has happened, explore challenges, and share lessons learned as they create and implement the first federally funded voucher program in the country.

Casey also invests in large knowledge-sharing gatherings for a number of different affinity groups, including charter school operators, education philanthropists, potential school leaders, people who work with English language learners, and those who specialize in after-school programs that support standards-based learning. Some grantees share what they learn from their work in small face-to-face meetings.

Online communities are the next step in knowledge sharing among groups of people with overlapping experience and interests. NewSchools Venture Fund has launched an exciting online forum where people who are working to transform public education through charter schools can engage in collective problem-solving, share effective materials and

**“We share what we are learning primarily in face-to-face conversations.”** *David Umansky, Civic Builders*



## Using Online Communities to Share Knowledge

NewSchools Venture Fund (NSVF) is a nonprofit venture philanthropy firm that invests in education entrepreneurs and performance-driven organizations that seek to have a big impact on public education.

With support from Casey totaling \$900,000 over six years, NSVF has developed an internal knowledge management system and enabled charter school leaders and others to share best practices through written documents, community-building events, and an online community.

In 2006, the organization launched the NewSchools Community, an online forum that allows the NSVF network of people it invests in to share expertise and resources. The website includes organization profiles and contacts, a discussion section, and an extensive library of best-practice documents and implementation tools for charter schools, including curriculum and student assessment materials.

A total of 400 people currently use the website, and any visitor can see that it is a groundbreaking resource. Being on the front edge of the online community wave does pose some challenges, however. NSVF finds that it is proving difficult to get network members accustomed to regularly uploading new content, even though people in the network are constantly generating useful tools and documents. “We expected to be more hands-off by now, but we’ve had to stay involved,” said Sarah Klem, operations analyst and community website guru for NSVF.

The organization is currently developing a set of tracking metrics so staff can understand who is using the site and how they are using it. They will use this data to take the online community to a new level of sophistication and utility.

approaches, and find contact information for organizations and people that they want to follow up with more personally.

### Next Steps for Casey and Results

Casey's education program will continue to refine its results measurement framework based on individual feedback from grantees that are starting to use it. The Foundation is also making plans to convene its education grantees to share their experiences with results measurement, internal reflective practice, ongoing evaluation, and knowledge sharing, so that they can learn directly from one another.

As grantees and the Foundation continue to forge a common language to talk about results, Casey's education program will improve its ability to aggregate its results and make the case for the most effective ways to improve K-12 public education and help children graduate prepared to succeed as adults.

## Learning to Use Evaluation Data to Drive Programs

New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) recruits talented people with strong leadership potential and trains them to be outstanding urban school principals. The organization currently has 450 new leaders in district and charter schools, including 240 principals, 100 assistant principals, and 100 new leaders in training.

With Casey support totaling \$322,000 over four years, NLNS began to develop an ongoing evaluation in 2001. At first, staffers weren't sure about what questions to ask and why, but the early Casey-supported evaluation work ended up being of pivotal importance in helping the organization align measurable goals with daily operations.

"Now, evaluation has a huge value to the organization, but it took time to make it valuable," said NLNS co-founder Jon Schnur. "The data and evaluation people didn't become truly integrated ... until we actually started seeing our data, which was in 2005."

Since then, NLNS has created effective, simple tools to help staff report on progress and make sure that what they are doing is leading to improved student achievement in urban schools.

Through the evaluation, NLNS has learned that students in schools led by its principals are making faster gains than students in other schools in the public system, but they need to do even better if they are to reach the organization's ambitious 2014 goals of having at least 300 schools with NLNS leaders in place for at least five years and more than 90 percent of students proficient in core subjects and graduating ready for college.

"We look at the data to do analysis and figure out what is and isn't working," said Schnur. "All of our conversations are grounded in data now."



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