

Theory of Change – Education – K-12

Education – K-12

We believe that young people deserve a world-class education expanding their opportunity for success.

A. ULTIMATE GOAL(S)

Ensure that all young people in public K-12 schools in our 13-parish service area attend high-performing schools.

Rationale: Improvements in education have the potential to lead to large social and environmental return on investment including reductions in inequality, improvements in health and well-being, and increases in wealth.¹

B. OBJECTIVE(S)

- To ensure that public education reform efforts are effective and receive wide support.

Rationale: For decades New Orleans students have attended failing public schools. However, recent education reforms have many stakeholders optimistic about the potential of public schools to provide a quality education. Reforms include decentralizing control of the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) bureaucracy and supporting charter school growth, which gives school leaders authority to make decisions at their schools. Although these reforms appear to be positive, and charters have shown greater improvements in school performance scores (SPS) than direct-run schools, 53 of the 79 (67%) Orleans Parish public schools were rated a “D” or “F” in school performance in 2011.² While this level of performance is unacceptable, some aspects of the reforms have been successful and some schools are performing better than they had in previous years. To continue improving public education in New Orleans, successful reform efforts should be replicated and ineffective practices should be eliminated.

- To ensure key stakeholder engagement in all aspects of education reform.

Rationale: Creating systemic change to improve public schools is labor-intensive and requires the sustained efforts of many including parents, teachers, administrators, community

¹ New Economic Foundation, Social Return on Investment, <http://www.neweconomics.org/projects/social-return-investment>

² http://media.nola.com/news_impact/other/sps-scores-100810.pdf

members, and outside organizations.³ This type of effort can be accomplished through education organizing, which refers to the actions parents and other marginalized community residents use to transform low-performing schools to high-performing schools.⁴

- To support the research, development, and use of best practices in financial management to ensure the long-term sustainability of charter schools.

Rationale: Achieving financial sustainability is the goal of all charter schools; however, this is a major challenge for all charter schools including those in Orleans parish. In April 2010, the Center on Reinventing Public Education and the Gates Foundation convened a group of school leaders, researchers, and financial analysts to discuss and better understand the financial sustainability of charter management organizations (CMOs). The following themes emerged (1) financial self-sustainability is an aspiration, not yet a reality; (2) public funding levels clearly limit, but may not completely explain CMO scale-up difficulties; (3) CMOs are experimenting with different cost and service delivery models, but there is little evidence yet about which ones are the most cost effective; and (4) there is need for a research and development strategy to create financially sustainable CMOs.⁵

C. WHAT WE FUND

To most effectively meet these objectives, the Greater New Orleans Foundation will, through its IMPACT program, support organizations that:

1. Advance successful public education reforms in Orleans parish and other underserved areas in our region, and/or hold public agencies accountable for the success of our public schools by examining the decisions and outcomes related to public education reforms.

Rationale: To continue improving public education in New Orleans successful reforms should be replicated and ineffective reforms should be eliminated, and those public agencies and individuals responsible for education reforms should be held responsible for their decisions when reforms are not successful.

2. Work to improve student achievement by training and engaging parents, school leaders, and other key stakeholders in education organizing, policy research and analysis, policy advocacy, and the use of data to make policy recommendations.

³ Giles, H.C. Parent Engagement as a School Reform Strategy. <http://www.ericdigests.org/1998-3/reform.html>

⁴ Mediratta & Fruchter, 2001, p. 5. Mapping the field of organizing for school improvement.

⁵ Center on Reinventing Public Education and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. 2010. Paying for Scale: Results on a symposium on CMO finance.

Rationale: Education organizing focuses on the policy and system changes necessary to reform schools and ensure student achievement.⁶ Systemic change is change that occurs at all levels and aspects of the educational process, and it affects all involved in the process including students, parents, teachers, administrators, community, and the school district.⁷ However, most parents and community members involved in the process are not equipped with the knowledge and skills required for this type of complex engagement. To develop the necessary knowledge and skills for education organizing, parent leaders and others must increase their knowledge and develop their leadership skills. By participating in trainings and mentoring sessions, parents and community members can expand their understanding of educational issues.⁸ From these experiences, they have the opportunity to learn how the school system works, including issues related to curriculum and instruction, budgeting, and the use of school data to effect change. Through this training, parents and other community members become skilled advocates who can speak publically, research issues, lead meetings, and negotiate with public officials.

3. Conduct research and/or work with school leaders and other financial decision makers to address the financial sustainability issues within our system of charter schools.

Rationale: As a result of Orleans Parish education reforms, most public schools have been converted to charters. Charter school leaders have the autonomy to increase per pupil spending well above Minimum Foundation Program (MFP)⁹ allocations via private source fundraising (e.g., from individual donors, and foundations).¹⁰ Although this financial freedom has allowed charters to implement alternative, but costly instruction methods which are expected to improve academic achievement, it is not financially sustainable. There are also significant gaps in research and practical knowledge regarding how to achieve institutional financial sustainability. Likewise, in New Orleans there needs to be development and implementation of strategies to address these issues in individual schools and at the system of schools level, and continued examination of financial sustainability issues.

D. OTHER WORK WE DO IN SUPPORT OF THESE GOALS/OBJECTIVES

On April 16, 2011 the Greater New Orleans Foundation convened a group of school leaders to explore ways to improve the institutional and financial capacity of charter schools.

⁶ Lopez, M.E. 2003. Transforming Schools Through Community Organizing: A Research Review.

⁷ Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands. 1995. Facilitating Systemic Change in Science and Mathematics Education: A Toolkit for Professional Developers.
<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/profdevl/pd2syst.htm>

⁸ Lopez, M.E. 2003. Transforming Schools Through Community Organizing: A Research Review.

⁹ Cowen Institute, The State of Public Education in New Orleans: 2010 Report, 2010.

¹⁰ Report on An Education Convening of School Leaders: The Sustainability of Charter Schools in New Orleans, GNOF, 2011