

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

POSITIONING FOR THE POSSIBLE: INVESTING IN EDUCATION REFORM IN NEW MEXICO

A Discussion Paper for the Philanthropic Sector

JANUARY 2011

At the beginning of 2010, the New Mexico Association of Grantmakers asked Chris Sturgis of MetisNet to explore ways to effectively engage philanthropy in education reform. This paper is designed to provoke discussion among funders and education leaders to discover ways to maximize the benefits of philanthropic investments in New Mexico. The paper reflects the initial insights of the author and does not reflect an official position of NMAG.

I. Introduction

New Mexico is leading the nation as one of the first “majority-minority” states. National foundations are seeking ways to partner in supporting innovations that effectively serve students from a range of cultures. This paper offers an investment framework that considers the unique conditions of New Mexico to support philanthropic collaboration. Working together, New Mexico donors can play a catalytic role in shaping performance-driven education reforms. Working together, we can lift our expectations for our children, offering them a challenging and meaningful education.

II. Discussion on Key Findings

Too often New Mexico’s low educational outcomes are blamed on poverty and the dynamics of rural communities. This does not explain that New Mexico ranks low across all income groups.ⁱ In addition to raising overall standards through the adoption of the Common Core of Standards,ⁱⁱ New Mexico’s economic strength depends on addressing the disturbing inequities across income, racial, and ethnic groups.

“Rural and poor, with great cultural diversity and a high proportion of scientists and engineers”—this is the typical, and relatively accurate, description of New Mexico today. However, it is only part of the picture, failing to take into account other complexities that shape New Mexico’s schools. These characteristics are

important in shaping local solutions within the context of national policy. There are six dynamics to be considered in shaping investments:

1. *Low Expectations:* Too often educators blame poverty or parents for low academic achievement, thus relieving the education system of responsibility. Lowered expectations result in lower performance of schools.
2. *Political Gridlock:* At the state level, political gridlock is holding that status quo in place. Although state legislators have made progress in creating a meaningful policy environment, there is concern that the influence of the “Education Partners”ⁱⁱⁱ constrains aggressive reforms.
3. *District is Weak Link:* In many cases, school districts are not providing appropriate or adequate leadership in improving academic achievement. Although the state needs to establish the policy environment to support education reform, it is the school boards and superintendents that are in the critical positions of addressing the low performance of schools across the state.
4. *Fragmented Community Voice:* Advocacy is fragmented by the assumption that Native American and Hispanic children have unique educational interests. Exploring ways to build a common set of issues can help generate the public support necessary to force the education system to respond to the needs of students.
5. *Ineffective Use of Data:* New Mexico has yet to create a performance-driven culture that uses data to inform strategic decisions and ensure high-quality implementation.
6. *Philanthropic Limitations:* The philanthropic sector in New Mexico has less strength than in other states, with only a few foundations that have adequate budgets to effectively partner with districts.

III. Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to offer a range of different approaches for donors investing in New Mexico to maximize the impact investments. Depending on the interests of the donors, one or all of the recommendations can be used to design investment frameworks to support philanthropic collaboration.

Recommendation 1: Embrace Common Design Principles for Philanthropic Investments

Design principles can ensure that the unique qualities of New Mexico are taken into consideration while shaping investments among local and national foundations.

- ◆ *Cultivate cultural competency and social cohesion:* Design with the flexibility to respond to different cultures. Seek out empowerment techniques or high engagement among existing organizations with networks to ensure

opportunities for self-determination. Incorporate time for relationship building across cultures and perspectives.

- ◆ *Raise expectations and efficacy:* Ensure that there are high academic standards integrated into projects. Draw on techniques that increase sense of efficacy including asset-based approaches that build on previous efforts, identify growth and progress, and use “beat the odds” techniques in comparing classrooms, schools, or districts to identify who is doing better than expected.
- ◆ *Nurture performance-driven culture by strengthening relationships:* Data-driven efforts can move us through ideological stances and past the status quo. However, given the general level of wariness in New Mexico, data can also be perceived as something that is disempowering. Investments should balance data-driven processes with a commitment to building relationships so that participants have the opportunity to help design and use data for their own purposes.
- ◆ *Design for affordability:* Given today’s economic pressures and state fiscal environment, it is critical that we design for affordability from the get-go. Pilots should be designed so that they might one day be absorbed into public funding.
- ◆ *Commit to adequate resources for full implementation:* Addressing the “implementation gap” requires adequate resources as well as leadership development. Grantees must include ways to measure progress and results in implementation plans.
- ◆ *Co-design for excellence:* Co-design or collaboration will help to improve investments and build a strong philanthropic network in New Mexico. It will also increase the intellectual capital of the donor community.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen Demand and Capacity for Change

New Mexico is hampered by its limited education reform infrastructure, much of which lacks independence from the state government. There is little in place that can confront the political gridlock to change the status quo. The following three investment opportunities are designed to build an informed citizenry that can seek improvements in which all candidates—school board, municipal, county, and state—would be asked to declare their platform and position for improving education.

- ◆ *Community Engagement: Generating Demand and Capacity from the Ground Up*
Given that one of the weakest links in New Mexico’s educational reform effort is at the district level, vigorous community engagement is needed to elect effective school board members, monitor their effectiveness, and demand leadership from superintendents in improving schools. This strong district-level advocacy can then be coordinated to build the needed state-level community voice to counter the Education Partners.
- ◆ *Educational Intermediary: Strengthening Innovation Capital*
New Mexico can benefit from looking to cities that have been caught in political gridlock. When confronted with public sectors that are stuck in the status quo, many cities across the country have created intermediaries to fill

a number of leadership, advocacy, innovative, and civic roles. New Mexico can benefit from creating a statewide educational intermediary that can strengthen the four types of capital needed for innovation: financial, design, social, and intellectual.^{iv} If constructed with its roots in the community, this educational intermediary could provide an alternative voice to the Education Partners at critical times. An intermediary will also enable national foundations to invest in New Mexico.

◆ *Leadership Development: Nurturing Performance-Driven Leaders*

Leadership development should be taken into consideration during all grantmaking. It is essential to cultivate emerging leaders who can take on roles as community-level advocates, principals, superintendents, school board members, and state-level leadership to move New Mexico beyond its status quo education system to one that is driven toward excellence.

Recommendation 3: Medium-Term Options for Educational Investments

There are four initiatives that have a policy platform, as well as multiple organizations working together, that could benefit from philanthropic support: STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), online education, high school reform and the graduation crisis, and school turnaround.

IV. Conclusion

Improving education depends on strengthening the collaborative infrastructure that supports education reform in schools, districts and state policy. It is imperative that philanthropic donors in New Mexico think critically about what will work for the state, engage others to think about the implications for different communities and cultures, stay focused on creating a performance-driven culture, and invest in high-quality implementation.

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- i. New Mexico ranked 44th on achievement of eighth-grade students from higher-income families on the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress eighth-grade mathematics test. The Education Trust, EdWatch 2008, in “Education Watch State Report, New Mexico,” April 2009. For the complete report, go to www.edtrust.org/dc/resources/edwatch-state-reports.
 - ii. See Common Core State Standards Initiative at www.corestandards.org.
 - iii. The Education Partners include the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the New Mexico Coalition of School Administrators, the New Mexico School Superintendent Association, and the New Mexico School Board Association.
 - iv. The four types of innovation capital are discussed by Andrew Hargadon, Center for Entrepreneurship, University of California, Davis.