



Street-Level Democrats: Realizing the Potential of School, University, and Community Coalitions

by *Dennis Shirley*

Abstract

Faculty members pursue external grants to support educational initiatives, but must do so mindfully because grants inadvertently can undermine core instructional activities. To reach full leadership potential, faculty members should act as “street-level democrats,” focused on the needs of students, teachers, and the communities served. This article illustrates how the leaders of the Massachusetts Coalition for Teacher Quality and Student Achievement used this concept to enhance the preparation of student teachers to work in urban school systems.

In an age of heightened marketplace competition, educational leaders must acquire grants or other external funding resources to grow programs. With proper funding, school leaders can hire staff, acquire technical support, compensate teachers, and purchase curricula. Without funding, leaders are forced to impose upon individuals to donate their time and energy for the good of a cause, and hope that intrinsic rewards will induce others to participate in worthy activities. With the latter approach, however, leaders are not likely to build programs or effect changes that last over time.

Hence, school leaders are thrown, often willy-nilly and with little or no preparation, into the search for external resources. These leaders must learn how to write in the stilted, often jargon-laden argot of grant proposals; take funders' language and feed it back to them in ways that confirm the validity of their objectives; and court financiers in careful, behind-the-scenes negotiations that can make or break proposals.

After a while, leaders learn how to break the code, and one grant builds upon another. Infrastructures, playfully called “empires,” are built. Leaders learn to hire and fire staff, conduct performance reviews, and fill out work plans and performance

reports. However, if administrators aren't careful, teaching students falls into the background as the empires get larger and larger, and require more and more time and energy. If leaders aren't mindful, they often forget why they got into education in the first place and become just as avaricious as Donald Trump in pursuing the next big deal. Michels's (2001, 224) famous "iron law of oligarchy" takes over and the pursuit of grant funding becomes the driving force, almost regardless of whether or not a given proposal will have a positive impact.

Second-guessing grant-seeking activity may seem like an exercise in futility. If you work in urban schools, however, the need for additional resources is so great that at first glance it seems you really can't go wrong in pursuing the grant du jour. Whether one seeks grants for teachers' professional development in a hard-to-staff discipline like chemistry or physics, mentoring support for struggling beginning teachers, or cutting-edge computers for an English or science classroom, it's all needed—so let's roll up our sleeves, get the lead out, and get that proposal off by the Friday 5:00 p.m. deadline!

At a certain juncture, however, the pursuit of grants as a *summum bonum* (highest good) becomes unsatisfying. One realizes that funders can be fickle and just plain wrong. For example, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, powerful philanthropies, inspired by Conant's (1959) *The American High School Today*, launched a national campaign to eliminate small, rural high schools and consolidate them into larger units. According to Conant, small high schools were mired in local folkways, lacked the staff to offer large numbers of electives, and needed the same economies of scale that benefited modern corporations. This crusade against the intimate connections between rural high schools and their communities was fought throughout rural America. However, few educators dared to challenge the mighty philanthropies, and many rural Americans—lacking the formal education, status, and self-confidence to take on Conant, the former president of Harvard—swallowed hard and watched one of their core community institutions get shut down in the name of progress. Yet, a generation later, new research supports the many social and academic benefits of small high schools. In fact, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has poured millions of dollars into a new, small-school movement.

The pursuit of grants, if not carefully conducted, can contain an anti-intellectual component that contributes to the low status of schools of education. Grants are rarely, if ever, based upon careful reading of research. Rather, as Cohen, March, and Olsen (1988) acknowledged, grants—particularly those offered by public agencies—often are developed through a partisan mutual adjustment that bears certain bemusing affinities to pieces of refuse in a garbage can. For example, in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), liberals wanted more funding for Title I, so that was thrown into the Act. Conservatives wanted marketplace models of reform, so parents were given exit options from public schools. A hybrid alliance wanted to reduce the achievement gap between students of color and European-American students. Therefore, a new accountability system, which was seen as a way of doing that, was built into NCLB as well.

Nothing is inherently wrong with these kinds of processes. On the contrary, these methods are, in many ways, the essence of democratic negotiation and consensus-building.

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The problem arises, however, when educators and teacher educators take grant goals as givens and turn themselves into uncritical functionaries of state or private philanthropy. This problem becomes especially acute when classroom teachers and the public-at-large

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indicate real dissatisfaction, if not raw anger, with the manner in which policies are imposed on schools. If grant recipients are not careful, they can turn themselves into part of a state apparatus that reinforces teacher disempowerment and cynicism. In doing so, teacher educators can betray their professional ethic to serve the public and especially those students and communities most in need of responsive public schools.

Consider, for example, the emphasis in NCLB on opting out of the traditional public school system. What evidence attests that this strategy will improve student achievement? Recent studies (Dillon and Schemo 2004) indicated that students in charter schools have lower academic achievement on standardized tests than their public school counterparts. None of the countries (e.g., Finland, South Korea, and Japan) that outperform American students on tests such as the Trends in Math and Science Studies (TIMSS) provide public revenues to the for-profit sector as an exit option for low-achieving students. Rather, this recourse (Hargreaves 2003, 73) for the private sector—a core component of NCLB—is primarily an exercise in “market fundamentalism” decoupled from anything that educational research can tell us about meaningful strategies for raising student achievement.

How should educators respond to these complex policy-related challenges? If it is irresponsible simply to apply for, receive, and instantiate grant goals without critique, is it just as indefensible to refuse to apply for grant opportunities, especially when one aspires to assist struggling urban schools and their communities? What is needed is a mediating concept that will empower educators to assert their civic professionalism and serve the public with genuine moral integrity.

Street-Level Democrats

These dilemmas, complicated as they may seem, are capable of resolution, but only with sustained mindfulness and a strategic enactment of the concept of “street-level democrats.” This idea is adapted from Fung’s (2004) felicitous interpretation of Lipsky’s (1980, xii) notion of “street-level bureaucrats.” Lipsky (1980) observed that though policy makers can (and do) impose an array of mandates on civil servants, they often do so with little sense of the on-the-ground realities of their legislation. At the “street-level,” where problems must be addressed, civil servants have considerable discretion over how they will implement new guidelines. As street-level bureaucrats, civil servants can enforce rules rigidly—if that is their wont—or bend them to assist clients. The key points are that policy (Lipsky 1980), in many ways, is actually made on a daily basis at the street level

between civil servants and clients, and civil servants have considerable discretion over how they enact policy at that level.

Political scientist Fung (2004) recently radicalized Lipsky's (1980) notion of street-level democrats. According to his interpretation, individuals at the street level can assert their powers as citizens and view policies as points of departure for creative interpretation and development. Policies are not to be enforced blindly, but to serve the public good. Serving the public good can be done through skill sets that bear many commonalities with community organizing and democratic deliberation, such as one-on-one conversations, house meetings of friends and neighbors, research actions, agenda-setting, broad-based public mobilization, and holding elected officials accountable.

If you are an educator and have a grant or are applying for one, you may want to assert your capacities as a civic professional and street-level democrat to advance the public good. An example of an assertive stance that this author and his colleagues took in creating and leading the Massachusetts Coalition for Teacher Quality and Student Achievement is described here.

Title II and the Massachusetts Coalition

In 1998, the United States Congress and President Bill Clinton approved the largest teacher preparatory federal grants in the history of the country. These Title II Teacher Quality Enhancement Grants had three strands: state grants, recruitment grants, and partnership grants. State grants, as their name suggests, were offered to help state departments of education design special programs for their educational systems. Because more than half of the funding for state departments of education comes from the federal government, this new funding source was critically important. Recruitment grants were created to help high-need districts bring promising new teacher candidates into their schools in light of anticipated teacher shortages. Partnership grants were developed to link the resources of universities, especially arts and sciences faculty members, with the priorities of high-need schools.

In 1999, representatives from Boston College, six other higher-education institutions, and the urban school districts of Boston, Springfield, and Worcester conducted two needs-assessment meetings involving teachers, administrators, parents, and community-based organizations to identify priorities in the preparation of urban teachers in Massachusetts. Intriguingly, many of the conditions in the Title II Request for Proposals did not surface during the needs assessment meetings.

School and community constituents wanted teachers who could teach culturally and linguistically diverse learners and help to overcome the disconnection between schools and communities. They wanted to prepare culturally responsive educators. They understood what practitioners and parents throughout urban school systems know only too well: issues of mistrust cut across urban schools and communities, and much of the mistrust falls out along racial fault lines. Research on urban schools has documented the pervasive nature of these complicated social and political issues (Anyon 1997; Henig et al. 1999; Orr 1999; Payne and Kaba 2001).

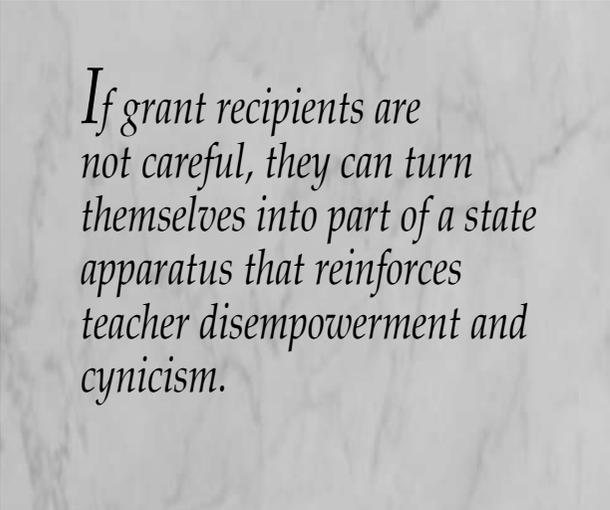
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The assessments indicated that collaboration with arts and sciences faculty members, evidence of a plan to place certified teachers in high-need districts, and collaboration with businesses were all requirements that were nonnegotiable. The needs assessments reiterated what many participants knew from research studies (Oakes et al. 2000) and years of practice: urban school improvement is not likely to be advanced by technical solutions that overlook the human side of school reform. When grant funders look for outcomes, they typically construe outcomes quantitatively, such as an increase in the number of teachers prepared through an innovative program or a rise in student test scores. Conversely, these needs assessment meetings indicated that constituents viewed cultural conversations and community-based collaborations as necessary preconditions to successful school reform.

Fung's (2004) notion of street-level democrats became critical at this point. The writing team began a process of cultural synthesis, mediating the goals of grant funders with the priorities of core school and community stakeholders. The first defined nonnegotiable objective was collaboration with arts and sciences faculty members in teacher preparatory activities. The second objective, which emerged directly out of needs assessment conversations, was to make teacher education school- and community-based. The importance of schools—settings rich in their own local cultures, norms, and practices—was stressed. Four other objectives were to create communities of inquiry and practice among diverse stakeholders, focus on literacy, increase the number of teachers of color graduating from higher education institutions, and develop research to inform public policy.

The emphasis on schools and communities in the group's emerging agenda extended prior research activities of Coalition members. One colleague, Peter Murrell (1998), Northeastern University, had written a widely read critique of school and university partnerships that excluded the community from partnerships. Other members, such as

Najwa Abdul-Twaab, Lenore Carlisle, Rebecca Corwin, Rachel Curtis, Tom Del Prete, Bailey Jackson, Mieko Kamii, and Lee Teitel, had decades of experience working in urban schools and communities, and understood the need for new strategies to improve school and community relationships. Shirley (1997; 2002), the author of this article, spent more than a decade working with community-based organizations, extending a tradition begun by Saul Alinsky (1946; 1971) in the 1930s, who used union-organizing tactics to develop political power in urban neighborhoods.



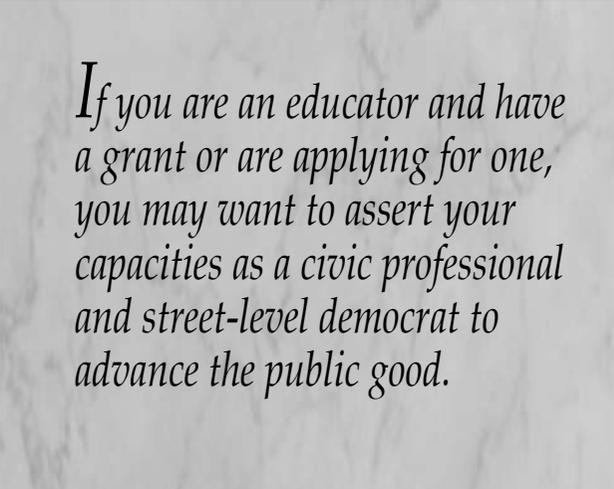
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The group hoped that this integration of community would give the Coalition a more radical, grassroots edge than other school and university partnerships had evinced. Above

all, the Coalition wanted to help prepare future teachers to be culturally responsive and knowledgeable about strategies for engaging urban parents and communities in the improvement of city schools.

Outcomes

The Coalition worked diligently over a five-year period, but some efforts to integrate community stakeholders into school and university partnerships fell short of the group's initial high expectations. The original grant proposal asked for \$15 million, yet only \$7 million was received, prompting the curtailment of many planned activities. The onset of the fiscal recession in 2000 meant that many Coalition activities were converted into stopgap measures to help struggling urban schools that suffered waves of staff cutbacks.



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Nonetheless, one outcome from the Coalition's activities does merit special mention. A survey of more than 500 educators by Abt Associates (2003), an external evaluator, revealed that teacher candidates from the Coalition's colleges and universities were viewed by experienced teachers as more proactive and knowledgeable about their students' communities than teacher candidates from other higher-education institutions. Forty-four percent of Coalition student teachers took the initiative to communicate frequently with parents, compared to 34 percent of non-Coalition student teachers. Forty-six percent of Coalition student teachers were familiar with their students' neighborhoods, compared to 23 percent of other student teachers. Forty-six percent of Coalition student teachers were very effective or effective at working with community members to support school and classroom learning, while 30 percent of non-Coalition student teachers had these characteristics. Though the Coalition wanted these numbers to be higher and has continued working diligently toward this goal, it is encouraging that an entity such as the Massachusetts Coalition is making a difference in the attitudes of student teachers regarding working with parents and community members.

Discussion

Research consistently has shown that positive relationships between schools and communities are a key precondition of student achievement (Henderson and Mapp 2002). Grant funders play a critical role in developing policies which encourage the growth of intermediate associations that can serve as catalysts in parent engagement at the local level. When grant funders omit criteria related to community relationships from their requests for proposals, grant applicants should engage in democratic deliberation with their constituents, including community members, to establish the priorities of stakeholders at the local, micro-level of civic engagement.

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If grant applicants treat themselves as technical implementers of funders' ideas, valuable local knowledge about impediments to student achievement will be overlooked. Conversely, if grant applicants are willing to gather local school and community partners, listen actively to their priorities, and build those into grant proposals, we as street-level democrats and civic professionals can mediate the grant-shaping process. Policy in American society is not inert, but supple, and can be shaped by local educators and activists addressing local priorities. Teacher educators should work with core constituencies to address critical cultural and social issues in teacher preparation, and collaborate with teachers, parents, and community members to build those into grants and the coalitions they support.

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