

# Case in Brief No.4

## PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATION GRANTMAKING

### Learning by Doing:

### The Noyce Foundation's Every Child a Reader and Writer Initiative

#### PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATION GRANTMAKING

|                    |           |                             |                    |                  |                                     |             |                                |
|--------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|
| Discipline & Focus | Knowledge | Resources Linked to Results | Effective Grantees | Engaged Partners | Leverage, Influence & Collaboration | Persistence | Innovation & Constant Learning |
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Grantmakers for Education's Principles for Effective Education Grantmaking identify *innovation and constant learning* as a core proposition for achieving results in education philanthropy.

To illustrate this principle, “Learning by Doing” examines the Noyce Foundation’s efforts to apply new information to its grantmaking. As part of its significant commitment to the Every Child a Reader and Writer initiative, the foundation worked alongside its grantees, assessed what was needed to solve unexpected problems and provided extra resources and expert assistance when needed.

The Noyce Foundation’s efforts to improve elementary literacy began in 1994, with initial grants supporting teacher training in reading in 26 Bay Area school systems. Despite modest gains in student performance, by 1999 the foundation’s trustees were frustrated that more had not been accomplished. Concurrently, the California Board of Education began to mandate the use of highly prescriptive approaches and materials for teaching reading.

The trustees began to rethink their strategy. Founding trustee Ann Bowers recalled, “After five years, we were unable to show that our grants had dramatically improved students’ reading skills; we knew we needed to shift gears. The question was how? We needed help finding a new point of entry.”

Consultants brought to the foundation’s attention research demonstrating that developing students’ writing skills also strengthened their ability to read. They also introduced the foundation to Writer’s Workshop, a unique, research-based teaching approach >

to improving students' writing skills. Soon after, Bowers proposed to her fellow trustees that the foundation's literacy programs focus on writing instead of reading. The new initiative, called Every Child a Reader and Writer, had three goals:

- Improve the literacy skills of students in kindergarten through grade five.
- Promote the replication of effective literacy practices in the San Francisco Bay Area by establishing a core group of districts and schools that would serve as models for the region.
- Through the process of using and supporting Writer's Workshop, help districts and schools enact deeper, lasting changes that would dramatically improve teaching and learning in all subjects.

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In the summer of 2000, the foundation invited the 26 local school districts that had received its prior literacy grants to apply to participate in Every Child a Reader and Writer. Through a competitive application process, the foundation selected five partner districts, called "core districts." Each district proposed a single school to be the first to implement the workshop and serve as its flagship "staff development school," modeling exemplary instruction and supporting schools added in future years.

Each year, the Noyce Foundation provided the core districts and implementing schools with the same flat funding: \$25,000 per core district and \$5,000 per implementing

school. In addition, it covered many program-related expenses, including sponsoring teacher professional development workshops on literacy throughout the year and paying 50 percent of the salary for each district's new "literacy teaching coach."

In exchange for the foundation's funding and significant hands-on support, each participating district agreed that every one of its elementary schools would gradually adopt Writer's Workshop and commit to the 60 minutes a day of classroom time it required. In addition, district and school staff promised to participate in and ultimately lead teacher professional development opportunities focused on writing instruction, regularly assess students' learning, share best practices and assume increasing responsibility for the entire initiative.

While districts had agreed to add schools to the program each year, a specific number was not specified and a concrete time line for completing the districtwide rollouts was not established. Amy Gerstein, the foundation's executive director, explained, "We acknowledged it would roll out differently in each district and did not want to be constrained to a 'one-size-fits-all model.'"

The foundation made a key strategic decision to engage the school districts as full design partners. By problem solving with grantees and making adjustments over time, the foundation believed that Every Child a Reader and Writer would improve as it evolved, that districts' capacity to lead the initiative would grow, and that a viable model for improving student achievement in public school systems would develop.

The Noyce Foundation utilized four main vehicles to facilitate learning:

- Formative assessments provided real-time feedback about how the Every Child a Reader and Writer model was working in schools and classrooms.
- Regular meetings and focus groups with participants provided time to discuss common problems with the work, share lessons learned and brainstorm potential solutions.
- External evaluations commissioned by the foundation analyzed Every Child a Reader and Writer's impact on student achievement.
- School visits and case studies offered opportunities to uncover both challenges and best practices as they emerged.

**I**n response to challenges that cropped up during implementation, the foundation made major changes to bolster the capacity of the core districts to successfully implement Every Child a Reader and Writer between the program's start and 2006. Changes included hiring a cadre of literacy experts to deliver teacher training, developing quality assessment tools for school leaders to use and withdrawing funding from one of the core districts for lackluster progress.

The Noyce Foundation hoped the initiative would not only raise students' literacy skills but also help school districts to enact changes that would improve teaching and learning in every classroom. "Every Child a Reader and Writer is unique because it involves working on the system and in the classroom—the curriculum piece—at the same time. I truly believe this is the only reason why we've made as much progress as we have," said Gerstein.

## Lessons learned

This case study—the full text of which is available at [www.edfunders.org](http://www.edfunders.org)—suggests four important lessons for grantmakers seeking to increase their impact:

- **Create deliberate ways to learn from your grantmaking.** The Noyce Foundation relied on rigorous and constant evaluations—formative, summative, internal and external—to improve its strategy over time. "The program has looked different each year," observed the foundation's executive director. "Our ability to respond to what we learned has been one of the keys to success."
- **Tailor grants to support grantees.** "Since our goal was for the districts to own and eventually sustain the work without us, we believed that it was vital that they become our design partners," said trustee Ann Bowers. Between 2000 and 2006, the foundation made major changes in its initiative to bolster the capacity of its school district partners.
- **Learning and improvement require curiosity, humility and a commitment to act on lessons learned.** According to one grantee, "The partnership with the Noyce Foundation is truly unique. We know we can be completely honest with the program staff about our challenges." As one of its tools for tracking progress, the foundation hosted regular meetings and focus groups with participants to discuss common problems with the work, share lessons learned and brainstorm potential solutions.
- **Find the right balance between learning and accountability.** Doing so is difficult, and the Noyce Foundation frequently revisited this issue. Recalled Bowers, "We had no idea how long it would take to build the districts' capacity to lead and sustain the work on their own. But we were always clear that our continued support hinged on additional schools adopting Every Child a Reader and Writer each year and increased student performance."

Progress had been achieved by 2006. Thirty-four schools—representing 40 percent of the combined five districts—had adopted Writer’s Workshop. In at

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least two of the foundation’s five partner districts, the writing performance of students participating in the daily writing workshop exceeded the performance of other students, as measured by California’s state writing exam. Two districts and several schools had also adopted the workshop model for teaching reading skills. Anecdotally, teachers, principals and district leaders reported that teachers’ knowledge and skill had also improved and that students were more engaged in the classroom.

Yet only one of the five districts had implemented Writer’s Workshop in every

elementary school. Districts’ and schools’ capacity to take on more ownership for the initiative varied, and all five districts faced challenges due to budget constraints and state policy mandates. And, perhaps most troubling for the foundation trustees and staff, while the percentage of students meeting the program’s grade-level standards in writing had steadily increased for the first five years of the program, student performance had plateaued in 2005.

The results caused Noyce Foundation trustees and staff to embark on a strategic review of Every Child a Reader and Writer in January 2006, the results of which are detailed in the full case. The foundation grappled with several key questions: How could the foundation help districts sustain and deepen the work? What had the organization learned about trying to significantly improve teaching and learning in public school systems?

Drawn from the experience and wisdom of our members, GFE’s Principles for Effective Education Grantmaking are designed to help strengthen philanthropy’s capacity to improve educational outcomes for all students. Our series of accompanying case studies is designed to help donors, leaders and program staff reflect more deeply on what the principles mean for their own grantmaking, how to integrate them into their efforts and how to improve the results of their grants in education.

This Case in Brief provides a synopsis of an in-depth case study and the lessons it suggests for education funders. We encourage you to review and consider the full text of the case study; free copies of it and others are available online at [www.edfunders.org](http://www.edfunders.org) or by calling 503.595.2100. In addition, the case studies in this series are being taught at many of GFE’s programs, and also can be taught in individualized settings by special arrangement.