



# Many Voices, One Goal:

## How an informal foundation collaborative helped make California history

### Participating Foundations

The foundations in this informal collaborative represented divergent views on public education, but embraced the common goal of education finance reform.

- Stuart Foundation
- Dirk and Charlene Kabcenell Foundation
- Silver Giving Foundation
- Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation
- Broad Foundation
- Walton Family Foundation

In 2013, the state of California passed sweeping changes in the way it funds public schools. New legislation shifted \$50 billion from a convoluted, very ineffective and inequitable system to a new system, called the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), by which funds flow more equitably to school districts. This unprecedented change in education finance didn't happen overnight. It came after copious research from leading academic institutions, mobilization by dozens of advocacy organizations, leadership from key elected officials and the support of private philanthropy.

Along with five other philanthropic entities, the Stuart Foundation entered into a very informal yet focused collaboration in 2012 and 2013 to provide support for the policy development process. Members of the collaborative leveraged the knowledge gained from earlier philanthropic collaborations and the expertise of individuals who had been working on the issue of education finance reform for years. The Stuart Foundation published a case study of its experiences in that collaboration, which contains observations on the characteristics of the collaborative effort, its activities, lessons learned, and the challenges and benefits of working collaboratively to inform public policy.

### What the Collaborative Did

At its most basic level, the collaboration brought participating foundations together around a common goal and kept them together through ongoing communication. The group relied on the efforts of a lead nonprofit organization, Children Now, to coordinate with a number of advocacy organizations in the field, keep the collaborative abreast of ongoing developments, and supply nonpartisan research and data when needed. Individually and collectively, the members of the collaborative made strategic investments in organizations that could:

- Help inform the discussion of finance reform through research and financial modeling.
- Build trust and transparency in the process of designing a new education finance formula.
- Foster consensus among both policy makers and grassroots/grasstops leaders.
- Amplify the voices of underrepresented stakeholder groups.

- Continually monitor and contribute to the public conversation as LCFF moved toward passage.

Above all, the funders maintained strict adherence to Federal tax law. None of the funds provided by private foundation participants were earmarked for lobbying.

### Collaborative Characteristics

#### Organic and Informal Structure

There were no formal agreements or requirements that members come to common agreements, and – most importantly – no pressure on participating foundations to make grants to any particular organization. Instead, the collaboration provided a structure of regular conference calls, email threads, and periodic in-person meetings that provided opportunities for members to share thoughts and ideas and stay informed.

#### Diversity of Opinion

Although the overall agendas for supporting public education are quite different among these collaborators, they were all united on one clear, common goal: education finance reform. In pursuing that goal, each member of the collaborative was open and honest about what they wanted to fund.

#### Communication Rather than Direction

The collaborative was clear about its purpose — to work together to ensure that policy makers had the best possible information and non-partisan analysis available as they developed the new school finance policy. The focus was on sharing information and there was no attempt to direct any particular policy approach and funded research organizations remained completely objective.

#### Independent Grantmaking

Each member of the collaborative played to their own strengths and followed courses of action and grantmaking that made sense to them, yet bolstered the effort overall. Foundations also supported different activities within the lead grantee organization, thus helping that grantee extend its impact.

#### Flexible and Timely Investment Decisions

Three of the leading foundations could respond quickly to funding requests, often within a matter of days without having to go through multiple levels of approval.



## Many Voices, One Goal (continued)

### Shared Respect

The collaborative fostered a culture of honesty, openness and respect, which helped to create a relatively “safe space” for grantees to discuss what was going on and when strategy needed to shift. This common transparency led to a feeling of mutual respect.

### Challenges and Benefits

The collaborative’s work was not without challenges, but they were minimal. They included organizing day-to-day logistics and updates in an informal structure, overcoming differences between the foundations’ broader education agendas, differences in geography, allocating staff time to the work, and keeping pace when the speed of the work accelerated once a policy solution gained traction.

Beyond the obvious legislative win, participants in the collaborative realized other benefits that are helping inform their thoughts and practice moving forward.

- The participating foundations now have lasting relationships that extend beyond the geographic boundaries of their grantmaking.
- The grantees involved had the benefit of multiple foundation perspectives all in one place.
- Because no single foundation was driving the collaborative’s work, the group maintained credibility as an objective, nonpartisan source of information.

### Lessons Learned

#### About Working Collaboratively

- **Be open to opportunity.** This collaboration began with a single conversation. But once the opportunity arose, foundations recognized the chance to jump into new territory.
- **Participants don’t have to agree on everything — just a common goal.** This allowed the foundations in this collaborative to remain focused, friendly, productive and efficient.
- **Trust is everything.** The success of this collaborative was due in large part to the high levels of trust at play among collaborators and between collaborative foundations and grantees.
- **Know your collaborators.** Participants made an effort to understand one another’s theories of change, work styles and missions, in order to better anticipate what each wanted from the collaborative and plan accordingly.

- **Communicate.** This collaboration worked so well because foundations made a concerted effort to share what they were doing, learn what others were doing and discuss one another’s ideas.
- **Designate a point person.** Having a consistent point person to make sure everyone was informed, manage scopes of work, and coordinate grantmaker roles based on their interests kept things running efficiently.

#### About Collaborative Grantmaking

- **Consider the “quarterback” approach.** Choosing one lead grantee to coordinate others helps maintain focus, efficiency and accountability.
- **Streamline where possible.** Collaborative funding is fertile ground for using shared application and reporting systems for grantees.
- **Know the field.** Understanding who’s who can help foundations choose lead partners and other grantees confidently.

#### About Working in Policy

- **Consult with legal counsel.** While foundations shouldn’t shy away from opportunities to explore policy change, it’s important to consult with legal counsel to ensure clear understanding of the applicable regulations.
- **Commit to the long haul.** Policy change can take years of patience and unwavering support.
- **Watch for windows.** Keep an eye out for opportunities to move policy discussions forward, such as changes in opinion, new research, new leadership on an issue, or changes in related policies.
- **Do your homework.** Always research the implications and context of any policy you want to support, and anticipate unintended consequences.
- **Provide flexibility for rapid response.** Policy issues can often move and change very quickly, and access to discretionary funds can make a huge difference as the pace accelerates.
- **Ensure that many voices are heard.** Maintaining a diversity of networks and contacts can do a great deal to enhance the diversity of voices engaged in policy discussions.
- **Don’t walk away when the win happens.** Policy is only as good as its implementation, and implementation requires ongoing engagement.



Download the full “Many Voices, One Goal” report at [www.stuartfoundation.org](http://www.stuartfoundation.org)