

## HOMING IN: PHILANTHROPIES WITH A SINGULAR FOCUS



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1) Ruth Medsker, principal of Mercer Middle School, has increased students' achievement levels through tools like "word walls" that line the corridors. (Photos by Rhonda Barton, except where otherwise noted)

2) Robin Pasquarella is CEO of the Alliance for Education, which helps align community resources with Seattle School District goals.

3) Cynthia Guyer (right) of Portland Schools Foundation meets with Wendy Puriefoy, director of the Public Education Network (PEN). With members in 21 states, PEN provides resources for public involvement in education. (Photograph by Troy Plair)

4) During a break, Efen and Gabriel play chess in the hallway fronting Mercer's administrative offices.

5) Shaunita, a 10th-grader, and math teacher Terry Cornelius wait for the bell to ring at Cleveland High, which has restructured with the help of a Gates grant.

# FOUNDATIONS FOR CHANGE:

## School District Philanthropies

By Rhonda Barton

**SEATTLE, Washington, and PORTLAND, Oregon**—Desperate times can sometimes lead to desperate measures. In Eugene (Oregon) School District 4j, parents from the small alternative Family School rolled up their sleeves last spring and sold their plasma to a blood bank in a last-ditch effort to raise funds. Their goal: to collect \$73,000 to save one teaching position.

“We realized all the bake sales in the world were not going to cut it,” Lorrie Burns, the mother of a second-grader told *The Oregonian* newspaper in April. “It’s definitely our last stand,” said another parent, Catherine Flynn. “It’s a bizarre and poignant place we’ve come to, when we’re reduced to donating our bodily fluids to support our schools.”

In the end, the radical fundraising scheme garnered international attention but failed to yield enough money. Although 150 people showed up at the blood bank, only 10 percent passed the rigorous screening for donors. The families ultimately raised a little more than \$1,500 from plasma sales and lost one of the five teaching positions in their five-grade school.

The Family School’s experience underscores a fact of life that schools around the region are wrestling with: Spaghetti feeds, rummage sales, and magazine drives can’t fill the void left by insufficient state and local funding. Only a handful of

public schools can rely on affluent parents to foot the bill for basic services, and when they do, the thorny issue of equity raises its head.

That’s why the two largest public school foundations in the Northwest are explicit in their refusal to buy back teachers and pay for other fundamentals. “If all you do is raise money to plug the holes in the district budget, to get the politicians and legislature off the hook, and to hire back teachers who were laid off because there wasn’t adequate state funding or the levy didn’t pass, then you’re not doing anything except allowing a bad situation to continue,” says Robin Pasquarella, chief executive officer of Seattle’s Alliance for Education.

Cynthia Guyer, director of the Portland Schools Foundation, echoes that sentiment. “We target our resources to key leverage points to improve the school system,” she says. Supplementing, not supplanting, school budgets is what the two organizations are all about, along with marshalling corporate and community resources to affect systemic change.

In the case of Portland, that role means diving into the political arena by organizing grassroots lobbying, staging mass protests, and campaigning for tax measures. Since it was founded in 1996, the foundation has helped to lead five successful K–12 funding cam-

paigns, says Guyer, raising more than \$325 million in public tax support for Portland Public Schools—the largest school system in Oregon and the region.

Seattle has taken a more cautious, conservative approach, staying neutral on political issues but providing research and public information. Though their styles differ considerably, the two organizations have amassed impressive track records. And, both offer hopeful lessons for smaller school districts that are searching for a blueprint to improve public schools through philanthropic partnerships.

### SEATTLE: SERVING AS A CATALYST

In Terry Cornelius’s Integrated Math classroom, the din of traffic streaming by on Interstate 5 accompanies the lesson on probability. Odds are that motorists passing the aging brick school perched next to the freeway don’t realize there’s a revolution going on inside Cleveland High.

The South Central Seattle school has just split into four “academies” with 200 students each. Since fall 2003, each school within Cleveland has boasted its own faculty, student body, and unique focus ranging from arts and humanities to information technology, health and environmental science, and global studies. The transformation of this low-income, ethnically diverse

school is being underwritten by part of the five-year, \$25 million Seattle district grant received by the Alliance for Education from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Cleveland is the first school in Seattle to make such a change, and the only one where all students are eligible for college scholarships through another Gates initiative, the Washington State Achievers Program.

The Gates grant paid for planning time for faculty teams that researched small-school models, visited other sites, and wrote proposals suggesting different themes for the academies. The funds also went for professional development and other support to implement the change.

Could any of this have happened without outside money? Teacher Melissa Johnston emphatically shakes her head “no,” recounting how all teachers got two hours of release time each week for a year to plan the move. Johnston has high hopes for the new career-based thematic curriculum, which she thinks will help stem Cleveland’s 35 percent dropout rate. “The attitude is ‘if it’s not relevant to me, I’m out of here,’” she notes. “The structure we had wasn’t serving students’ needs . . . and our test scores sucked.”

Cornelius agrees that something radical needed to happen. “If we hadn’t changed, the prognosis would have been the same: low test scores,

high dropouts, poor attendance, a high number of behavior problems. Our clientele hasn't changed, and if we didn't do something drastic, nothing (else) would change. You have to make some kind of leap," he declares.

Paving the way for such leaps is where the Alliance for Education comes in. Working in tandem with the 47,000-student Seattle School District, the nonprofit organization has developed a broad vision to transform an educational system that has become increasingly obsolete and to ensure that all children achieve at higher levels.

"We need to move away from a system designed 100 years ago to sort and select students," says the Alliance's Robin Pasquarella. The passionate reformer spends most of her time rallying business and community groups around the idea of moving from a one-size-fits-all approach to one that's individualized. Her finely-honed message, succinctly summed up on a 5- by 7-inch card, calls for discarding K-12 education in favor of a prekindergarten to 20-plus model and changing from a seat time-based system to one based on demonstrated mastery.

When the Alliance first sketched out this vision with the Seattle School District leadership, the question became "how are we going to deliver on it?" Serendipitously, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

was just starting to launch its education program with a focus on reinventing public schools. Gates chose its hometown as the first place to invest in a K-12 initiative. "The Alliance became their first grantee because the foundation understood the benefit of having an external, independent organization that would guarantee the involvement of the whole community and the effective stewardship of their private dollars," notes Pasquarella. Beyond that, Gates wanted to see its investment leverage other dollars.

In the eight years since the Alliance was formed, it's helped raise more than \$73 million in charitable donations. Pasquarella calls the private funds "the venture capital of school reform." She speaks about building a new model of philanthropy for public schools—much like the United Way—where everyone in the community develops a habit of charitable giving to public education.

The key to getting that kind of buy-in is sharing a strategic agenda for change that realizes a vision of all kids achieving. "It's really a question of focus," Pasquarella believes. "It doesn't matter how small the community is or how many dollars there are. You've got to get the community leaders mobilized to be partners with the schools in the work they're doing and recognize that whether you're a teacher, a parent,

an employer, or whatever you do, you share responsibility for the academic achievement of (all) students."

**PORTLAND: RALLYING TO CLOSE THE GAP**

The Portland Schools Foundation motto is "Support great schools . . . whatever it takes." In the case of the eight-year-old foundation, it sometimes takes 30,000 people marching through downtown Portland to send a message to state legislators about the need for stable, adequate school funding.

The 1996 March for Our Schools, organized by the foundation, was the largest demonstration of support for any statewide issue in the history of Oregon. Since then, the organization has mobilized Portland voters—both parents and nonparents alike—to pass a \$78 million local property tax option in 2000 and a three-year income tax in Multnomah County just last spring. The income tax will raise \$50 million for Portland Public Schools alone in each of the next three school years—a significant contribution toward the district's \$390 million budget.

"We've decided to do grassroots lobbying for adequate public funding of our city's public schools because it's hard to close the achievement gap, transform your high schools, and create high-performing schools for all kids if you're constantly lay-

ing off 600 teachers or having five weeks less in the school year," says foundation director Cynthia Guyer. "We decided, rather than trying to make up for budget cuts, we would try to run these political campaigns where we got decent public investment in the public school system."

By convincing the community to provide additional tax support for Portland's 100 public schools, the foundation is able to put its \$4 million annual budget to work investing strategically in comprehensive school improvement, principal and teacher leadership, and arts and music education.

Individual schools vie for the foundation's New Vision Grants of up to \$50,000 that are earmarked for closing the achievement gap for children from low-income families, children of color, and English language learners. The seed money for these grants—from \$300,000 to a half million dollars a year—comes from a unique revenue-sharing formula devised by the school district: One-third of all money raised through five independent local school foundations in affluent Portland neighborhoods is given to the central foundation. The money is redistributed in a competitive grant-making process, with funds targeted to schools that have aggressive and well-crafted plans to close their achievement gaps.

One of the beneficiaries of this

## CONSIDER THIS

Teachers at Seattle's Asa Mercer Middle School have a special adjective for themselves. They say they've been "Mercerized."

That means they've adopted a rigorous set of teaching practices established by principal Ruth Medsker. All 50 instructors craft a purpose statement for each day's lesson, prominently displayed on a whiteboard in their classroom. Students are required to use agenda planners. Word walls adorn classes and hallways, sporting vocabulary that may appear on the Washington state achievement tests. Teachers who are new to the school are assigned a partner, even if they've been in the educational trenches for years. And, everyone—new and old—can expect regular visits from Medsker, who spends half of her day observing classrooms and writing up her "reflections."

Medsker is able to free herself from time-consuming administrative tasks and provide her staff with extras like literacy training, math coaching, and planning time for curriculum mapping thanks to a variety of small and large grants. Here's her advice on how to use outside money to the best advantage:

- Have a "strong, clear vision of where you want to go"; it makes it easier to figure out where the money is to help you get there.
- Leverage your funds by hiring a skilled grant writer who can help craft proposals that build on your momentum.
- Use consultants in a way that gives you "a bigger bang."
- Figure out accountability systems so you can show funders how their investments are making a difference.
- Don't be afraid to turn down money if it doesn't align with your needs.

The Portland Schools Foundation and Seattle's Alliance for Education are part of the Public Education Network (PEN). Founded two decades ago, PEN is primarily concerned with building demand and mobilizing resources for quality public education through a national constituency of local education funds and individuals. With 85 members in 31 states and the District of Columbia, the network provides a variety of tools and resources for public engagement and school improvement. For more information, you can access the organization online at [www.publiceducation.org](http://www.publiceducation.org). Additional resources are available through Portland Schools Foundation at [www.thinkschools.org](http://www.thinkschools.org) and the Alliance for Education at [www.alliance4ed.org](http://www.alliance4ed.org).

approach is Woodmere Elementary, where 80 percent of the children receive free or reduced-price lunch and more than a third don't speak English at home. "Everybody should have an equal chance, and this (redistribution) is one way that we can all recognize our responsibilities to the whole community," says former Woodmere Principal Vonnie Condon. With two grants totaling \$95,000, Woodmere instituted a new program with strategies for independent, shared, and guided reading and writing. The funds paid for a team of trainers to make three school visits a year, working with planning groups and individual classrooms.

Results at the outer Southeast Portland school were "outstanding," says Condon. Reading scores shot up from below 50 percent to up to 80 percent of students meeting state standards. "More important," Condon recalls, "it gave teachers the ability to plan and to integrate science, social studies, and math into the literacy curriculum over our two-year teaching cycle." Teachers saw math scores soar from 40 to 80 percent of the students meeting Oregon benchmarks.

Woodmere received the grants on the strength of its proposals. "If a high-poverty school has a whole staff commitment and a strategic plan of action, and they know they need \$25–50,000, they'll get support," says Guyer. "If they just say,

'We have an achievement gap,' and it's clear they don't know how to approach the issues and challenges, we don't fund them."

Condon, a 36-year education veteran, agrees that the key to getting and using money successfully is "focus, focus, focus." She advises, "You have to be really sure of where you want to go, you have to have everyone on board, and you can't be distracted by other things that may look great. A lot of people will come to you and say, 'Have I got a deal for you!' It can be very compelling, but if you don't know where you're going, you can get sidetracked and you'll get in a lot of trouble." ■