

some of the nation's leading

**Rabble
Rougers!**

**BEST PRACTICES &
LESSONS LEARNED
BY CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS
WORKING TO IMPACT
EDUCATION REFORM**

Prepared for:

THE JOYCE FOUNDATION

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Gathering Lessons from a Growing Movement

Across the country, a success story repeats itself. A small, committed group of civic leaders says “enough!” to its state’s lack of progress in improving its public schools and decides to take action. The action evolves differently in various states but usually involves the creation of a new organization to support and pressure on reform efforts. In some states, business leaders lead the effort to create the new organization bent on reform; in others, foundations convene the first conversation. But regardless of who makes the first call, committed leaders convene, debate purpose, size and form of the new organization; identify funding; hire staff; and begin the constant, unrelenting work that is education reform.

Effective reform organizations do not exist in every state, but where they do exist, they prove that focused resources and a few talented individuals are a potent force for progress. These groups assert a clear voice in a noisy policy environment; one so steeped in evidence and grounded in common sense it is hard to ignore. And so these relatively small organizations quickly become crucial players in the work of state-level education policymaking.

We call them “Rabble Rousers” with affection, because regardless of the degree of professionalism with which they conduct themselves, the research foundations that ground their work, the credibility of their funders and founders, or the pains they take to maintain the higher ground, their first task is always to defend their intentions. Or, their “real” intentions. Their detractors charge: *How dare they suggest that a new voice is needed in the debate over public schooling! What’s their hidden agenda? Who is really backing all this?* The most effective groups rise above the noise keeping their focus—and that of their state’s leadership—on the issues that impact students.

The Joyce Foundation, a Midwest-based foundation with a particular concern for the vitality of public policies affecting education, health, the environment and the economy, was interested in learning more about these organizations. The foundation contracted with Cross & Joftus, LLC to conduct a benchmarking study toward this end. The intent was to learn from the influence of the state-based reform organizations and from any hindsight they might offer looking back over their own histories.

The goals of this study are to identify...

- Leading organizations for civic engagement in education policymaking;
- Key variations in the models for creating and sustaining these organizations; and,
- Lessons learned across the country in these efforts, focusing specifically at the start up phase.

Who and Why

The first step of selecting groups to participate in this study was drafting a list of the top 20 or so of the most respected groups working at the state level to impact state-level reform. We then narrowed this group to 10 organizations that represent a diversity of approaches (i.e., lobbying, research, legal, etc.), organizational models (i.e., membership organizations, policy vs. funder boards, etc.), and geographic balance. In addition, we considered size and organization tenure, seeking a balance on a continuum of small to large and start-ups to veterans.

In addition, because the Joyce Foundation has a special interest in teacher quality issues, we sought to include several organizations whose core mission includes improving teacher quality. As a Midwest funder with a special interest in Illinois, we also sought to include groups working in a large state with a similar political context, including leadership that leans heavily democratic, strong activism, and a strong union environment. (Therefore, California figures heavily in the mix.)

Through these lenses, we narrowed our list to 10 groups. We should note that we do not assert this list as the top ten in the country as much as a list of ten that represent the best. We also did not use a particular policy lens for selecting groups; therefore, in some cases groups in this sample might hold opposite views on policy issues even though all groups would fairly be described as working for the improvement of the education system.

We spoke at length with the Executive Directors of each of the following organizations and in some cases talked with additional staff or reviewed background materials provided:

- The Business Education Partnership (Rhode Island)
- The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (CFTL- California)
- The Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (Washington)
- ConnCAN (Connecticut)
- EdVoice (California)
- The Education Trust – West (California)
- The Prichard Committee (Kentucky)
- Public Advocates (California)
- The Rennie Center (Massachusetts)
- The Partnership for Learning (Washington)

We also want to thank a few individuals for lending a national view on this question. Those people include in no particular order: Chester Finn, President, Fordham Foundation; Bill Jackson, Great Schools Inc.; Bill Porter, Executive Director of Grantmakers for Education; and Adam Kernan-Schloss and Andy Platner of KSA Plus Communications.

What We Asked

The interviews for this study were really conversations with the executive officer about their experiences leading the organization. Our questions were drawn from the following topics:

- History & Political Context
- Policy Focus
- Key Tactics for Advocacy
- Funding, Governance, Membership
- Trade-Offs, Hindsight, Lessons Learned

Notes from each interview are available and show the detailed version of the questions.

How the Report Is Organized

The Joyce Foundation's primary interest in funding this work is to gather advice that might help other start-ups launch state-level reform organizations. Not surprisingly, we found no overwhelming conclusions about the "right" model for this work. Therefore, in presenting our findings, we often resisted making recommendations and instead strove to clearly identify the choices in approach that organizations considered as they began their work. In order to help a new generation of rabble rousers more quickly identify their options, we often present variations and questions, then summarize some of tradeoffs, cautions and considerations leaders offered.

There are a few issues that cut across the range of topics and should be carefully considered as an organization develops; those we identify in the first section of this report. We conclude with a section we call "Top Ten Tips for Start-ups" in which we lift up the most fundamental advice and lessons from these leaders.

We present this work in three sections:

- **Big Considerations**, or a summary of some key, overarching issues.
- **Nuts and Bolts**, which identifies the variations in methods and approaches
- **Tips for Start Ups**, which lifts up some of the best advice offered in hindsight from the organizations with whom we spoke.

BIG CONSIDERATIONS

There is no universal model.

There are no formulas for this work. Rather, there are a series of judgments made considering a range of variables. In fact, we often found that even where organizations made divergent choices, their rationale for doing so was equally sound, given the context. As important as it is to consider organization and approach, then, it is far more important to analyze context, policy aims, and beliefs about how change occurs.

Leadership, not funding, is the most precious resource.

All the organizations with whom we talked are making a bigger impact than their size would predict. Of course, the variable here is leadership: the ability to inspire, strategize, build relationships, and find and nurture top talent. The heads of these groups are often important players in their own rights. The members of their boards often have political lives beyond the work of the group which can create complications, but also enhances the power of the organization. The leaders with whom we spoke understood that they lead an organization, not an individual crusade, and are mindful of that in the ways they represent themselves in public.

The other critical role of leadership is the work being done within the policy making environment to build momentum for change. Building relationships with leading policy makers is critical to the long-term efficacy of this work. In almost every case, organizations include as a part of their story reference to the key policymakers who work with them to advance their agenda. Managing these relationships can also be complex, but the ability to do so remains a key variable in the organization's success.

Creating credibility is the most immediate and central task.

As one person interviewed said, "credibility is slow to earn and quickly squandered." Credibility might be most simply defined as the power to elicit belief. In every way, the launching of a new organization is really the work of establishing credibility, of inspiring belief in the group's cause, in the information they provide to back it up, and in the assertion that the organization will remain relentless in its efforts to advance its agenda. At the start-up phase, credibility is created (or lost) when the organization responds to the most basic questions about its mission, purpose, and base.

The anticipated questions from potential detractors provide the fundamental tests:

- Who are your leaders? Are they politically honorable? What are their intentions?
- For whom do you speak? Do you have a legitimate basis to do so?
- Who funds you and what is their agenda? How do we know this group represents more than just a narrow interest?
- Is your research (data) credible and reliable? Who is behind it? Can we trust them?
- Is your agenda transparent and widely understood? Do you practice what you preach?
- Is the organization's agenda consistent even when politics change? (Or, do your policy aims shift when political winds shift?)
- Do you practice the fundamental courtesies of politics, such as working constructively even with the groups with whom you disagree, speaking well of them in public, offering the same degree of transparency as you would expect of your opponent, and recognizing that your opponent might be your ally on the next issue?
- And, a question which is never asked directly asked but is carefully scrutinized: do you mean what you say you will do or are you just running a good bluff?

Power has to be demonstrated.

Especially in today's scandal-ridden political climate, the word "power" can be construed as an impolite or even brutish word. But power is the currency of politics and understanding it is critical to success in a political world. The word "power" comes from the Latin "to be able." Where we talk about power, then, we are referring to the organization's ability to get things done.

At some point in the first few years of a start-up's tenure, the honeymoon will be over and the group will be called upon to prove that it means what it says and that it can and will take action to ensure its agenda is taken seriously. It will be called upon to exercise its power. In politics, power comes from three sources:

- **Organized money**, or a consolidation of resources sufficient to support the work for the time it takes to realize the agenda. Detractors might be asking, is this a group with sufficient backing from significant interests or are they scrapping by year to year? Perhaps a more fundamental question over time will be, does this group demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the interplay of money and politics enough to cut-in on that dance with equally sophisticated policy recommendations, or do they make simplistic, absolute demands?
- **Organized people**, or the ability to influence the thinking of key decision-makers and to mobilize advocates to support the group's agenda by making phone calls, writing letters, showing up for forums and events, and, most critically, influencing policy makers to adopt and pursue the organization's cause. This is a reminder that power is always relational; the mythic Lone Rider does not work as an archetype in this work. In some organizations, leaders bring their relationships to the cause, but the work of an "organization" is really the work of continuing to build relationships that enable the work to get done.
- **Organized information**, or the ability to assemble credible information backed by data that frames an undeniable argument for action, then gains attention and eventual commitment of opinion leaders to those ideas. Here it is critical to note that data alone is never powerful. It is powerful if used effectively to influence. As a source of power, then, information is somewhat derivative of power that comes from relationships and resources.

Effective organizations know how to use all these sources of power. The best use them all well. Sometimes, the staff people bring powerful connections and relationships, so power is consolidated there. Sometimes, the group is generating data and then promoting it in such a way that power comes from that source. Equally important, they recognize the limits of each. Big resources without a thoughtful agenda can be rejected as cynical. Rallies of uninformed advocates can fail to sway. Any new organization enjoys a brief honeymoon in which its claims are taken on faith, but soon it has to deliver. Therefore, new groups should make claims cautiously. It is far better in politics to be underestimated than to be defrocked.

Effectiveness evolves through a series of judgments informed by the context in which the organization works. What we offer in this section, then, is the dissection of parts in order to help aspiring start-ups more quickly identify the choices they need to make and to weight some of the tradeoffs inherent in those choices. We present these in roughly the same order in which they should be considered: first, what is the organization trying to accomplish (**Focus & Issues**); then, what are the considerations for accomplishing that work (**Context & Tactics, Governance & Membership, Staffing & Organization, and Fundraising**). In each of these sections, we summarize some of the thoughts interviewees had about these tradeoffs under **Some Cautions and Considerations**.

Focus and Issues

The organizations with whom we talked had different policy priorities. But they faced similar choices related to creating their overarching policy framework. The clarity, transparency, and basis, and success measures for a group's agenda are all critical ingredients for building credibility needed to advance policy aims.

Clarity:

- **Focus:** How much can the organization reasonably accomplish? Are those targets measurable?
- **Long view:** What values, beliefs, or objectives do you hold that provide a longer view of the organization's objectives? What does the ideal world look like?
- **Action vs. reaction:** to what extent will you lead particular issues versus focus on the issues policy makers queue up for action?
- **Problems or solutions:** Sometimes, framing a new problem, such as raising the awareness of the need for higher standards or the importance of closing the achievement gap, is a critical first step to solving those issues. But, in time, groups find that they need to offer solutions to the problems they surface. Where will the organization play in this continuum?

Transparency. Is the organization's agenda:

- Clearly communicated as a part of its mission, policies or other defining information about the organization?
- Conveyed in such a way that allies and other supporters can easily identify the ways they can help?

Basis. Will the organization's agenda be formed by:

- Conducting its own research with internal staff?
- Funding research conducted by credible local institutions?
- Basing its work on readily available information about goals and practices?

Measures of Success. How will the organization hold itself accountable?

- **Ultimately:** Did student achievement in the state improve? (Or in what other measurable ways can the effectiveness of the group's policy objectives be evaluated?)
- **Annual (or culminating) strategies:** Did the strategy achieve its aims? (Did we win?)
- **Interim strategy measures.** If we hosted a meeting, did people come? If we posted a press release, where did it run?
- **Measures of seeds planted:** creating buzz or changing the conversation are important first steps; these can be measured by media placements or other critical references to the group's agenda.

A Word on Research.

All "research" is not the same. For what purpose does your organization need research? What is available from allies, local research initiations, or other sources, and what new research must be generated? Reform organizations might seek research to:

- **Define or describe the problem.** Seeks as much data as possible to gain understanding.
- **Agitate action by framing or changing the debate.** Uses data selectively to make an argument or reinforce a point of view.
- **Investigate feasibility.** Includes benchmarking, case studies, evaluation, and data used in the context of stories.
- **Inform tactics and strategy.** Includes polling, focus groups, interviewing, and political "meet and greets."

Who decides on the organization's policy agenda?

We'll say more about governance later, but the role of boards and advisors in guiding policy is worth mentioning here.

- **What role for boards?** In every group, staff played the leading role in identifying, researching, and recommending the policy focus. But that agenda was often approved or anointed by the organization's board of directors, a step critical to increasing the credibility of that agenda. A group that can say its agenda was backed by a powerful board is much harder to dismiss than is an agenda created by a dynamic but small staff team.
- **What role for advisors in setting policy?** Every organization had some variation of a kitchen cabinet or formal group of advisors that lent additional expertise and credibility to their issue agenda. Presenting the agenda to these groups is critical not only for credibility, but the process of gaining that input and feedback provides crucial seasoning within a circle of supporters, strengthening the group's ability to anticipate and respond to potential detractors.

Some Cautions and Considerations Regarding Focus and Issues

- It is better (more credible) to publicly expand an agenda than to collapse it. Commit publicly only to those goals toward which the organization can claim impact.
- Follow your data. The “next” issue naturally emerges from research seeking to understand a problem.
- Practice what you preach. A group can’t credibly call for public transparency while at the same time insisting that it deserves privacy for aspects of its organization. Similarly, it’s hard to argue for better use of data if data doesn’t figure prominently in the organization’s policy pursuits.
- Be transparent about who and how your positions are determined. If that isn’t clear, it will pull attention away from the issues the organization is trying to solve. If the group resists straightforward answers to these questions, it will attract more attention to the group’s functions and away from its agenda.
- Don’t hold onto your agenda so tightly that others don’t feel ownership as well. Giving credit away can be a more powerful way to move an agenda than claiming credit.
- Data alone aren’t powerful. Tactics for promoting its conclusions make it powerful.

Context and Tactics

All the groups we interviewed shared in common the tactic of advocacy, or spending face time with policymakers to broadly inform their thinking and decision making regarding issues. But from here, tactics varied a great deal. Many groups use data and research as a part of their tools to influence. Some focus most on mobilizing people in support of their agendas. Some heavily leverage the media and public opinion to create an environment of support for their agenda among the broader public. And one group has taken the additional step of creating a formal PAC in order to influence the broad political motivations of elected officials as well as informing their thinking on policy.

Considering three critical questions will help to determine the right mix of tactics:

1. How does the organization believe change is most effectively achieved? (Or, what counts as effective progress toward change?)

- By making incremental changes over time?
- By seeking big, massive changes, even though you might not always win every battle?
- By securing moral victories that change values even when they don’t change policy?
- And, will the organization stay tightly focused on its own agenda, or does it believe lending its might to supporting other’s agendas is critical for building allies and good will?

2. What does the organization believe about the nature of how political decision-making?

In some way, every group is trying to influence policymakers. What groups assume about the abilities and motivations of the leaders in their state as well as the general trend of the mix of leaders informs their tactics. For example, they might assume key leaders:

- Are well meaning but lack good information; therefore, providing better information (i.e., sound policy analysis and better data) will create an environment in which better decisions are made.
- Are well informed, but lack opportunities to discuss issues in environments that draw out the values and tradeoffs inherent to all policy debates. Here, a convening role can be a useful contribution.
- Are primarily driven by political will and will be moved by louder voices and a show of focus from their political constituencies.
- Are image conscious and thus poll and media driven. Influence the media and you will influence public opinion.
- Are juggling complex and competing interests. Members do want and use good information but also have political motivations and pressures that can be at odds with doing the “right thing.” In this view, effective advocacy requires creating political incentives as well as providing better information.

3. Who else is working in your state to influence education?

- Does the state have a few strong leaders who are already motivated to address the organization’s policy agenda, or are the state’s leaders distracted by other interests and causes, which means the first take is to get someone’s attention?
- Does the state lack strong intelligence regarding the organization’s issues or are a host of groups trying to provide policy advice and data? If the latter, what distinguishes the organization in this noisy environment?
- Are there allies in the state whose work you can borrow, enabling the organization to build power in different ways?
- Does the state suffer from an overabundance of data, recommendations, and leaders, and simply need some impetus to sit down together and hammer out solutions? Or are clear data and analysis lacking?

Tactics. The following list of tactics is illustrative but certainly not exhaustive of the ways groups attempt to influence policy:

- Research / white papers / public opinion polls
- Communications /P.R./ awareness
- Lobbying / Advocacy
- Legislative action
- Voter mobilization at the grass roots (g.o.t.v. efforts, letter writing, rallies, etc.)
- Legal action
- Advocacy training
- Issue forums and debates
- Outreach to opinion leaders and the media through public appearances and press releases
- Web generated advocacy and communications (push lists, blogs, etc.)
- Political contributions to members
- Public forums and dialogues
- Legislator trainings

Outreach and Communications. There are three broad stages for of outreach:

- **Raise consciousness:** Generate “buzz” about a problem through communications with opinion leaders, media, and interested allies. Often the work starts here.
- **Interest sustaining:** Maintaining commitment to the cause by continuing to remind partners and the public why the organization’s agenda continues to matter.
- **Call to Action:** These communications, designed with a desired reaction in mind, can focus on policymakers or grass roots. The reminder here is that people aren’t likely to act on an issue upon first briefing. Information build-up is key.

Virtual Organizing: the New Civic Organization? One set of tactics deserves special mention. Several groups count as a leading tactic the mobilization of the grass roots. Technology is easing this work considerably, enabling those interested in the organization’s work to sign-in on line to regularly receive information and to manage their information in the group’s data base. Blogs now create forums online, forgoing the burdens of making name tags and serving coffee. These same tools enable organizations to create a virtual lobby that sends letters as prompted by push emails.

The biggest challenge in managing this kind of outreach, is eased by not eliminated by technology: the task of maintaining information to contact an active base of support for broad issues and then focusing communications when mobilization is needed around specific issues. Even when technology helps to gather information for mailing lists and provides for some degree of self-maintenance for data bases, it does not entirely eliminate the challenges of list maintenance. If the organization intends to use this tactic, then it should build in time for maintaining its virtual organization.

Some Cautions and Considerations Regarding Context and Tactics

- Developing a theory of change is time well spent, especially if it includes research about the state’s political context. This kind of analysis can inform tactical choices and help the organization prioritize where it spends time and resources.
- In some instances, groups report that years of work that educators view as supportive helped develop the credibility needed when it was time to push hard on difficult issues. The advice, then, is to not operate only as oppositional. Now and again, find ways to support issues that matter to the established interests.
- Regardless of the medium for spreading the message, tell stories backed by powerful data. Stories alone are moving but easily negated. Data alone are credible but unemotional. The combination is powerful.
- In sophisticated policy environments, most tactics and their mechanisms are well understood. Tactics that are too slick or that take shortcuts to building real buy-in can backfire and damage credibility.
- Use outreach tactics sparingly. As quickly as on-line letter campaigns became technologically feasible, the emails calling us to act became tiresome. Too much information turns communication into noise and can make it harder, not easier, for people to figure out what is most important for them to do. Call for action only when it is most needed to ensure the welcome is not worn out.

Membership & Governance

When launching an organization, the first questions that will demand answers are: *Who are you? Who is on your team? Who do you represent? Who cares about the issues you care about? How do you know they care?* These questions lead to boards, participants, advisors, and other associates and allies.

Boards

Variations in how boards evolved include:

- A board grew out of the formalization of the “kitchen cabinet” that initiated the organization (ConnCAN, EdVoice, or Prichard Committee are examples).
- A sole funder or group of funders initiated the organization, and then found staff and formed a board (CFTL and CSTP are examples).
- An organization shares a board with another group, so while the organization may look and act like another organization, it is really a project of another organization. (The Partnership for Education is governed by the Washington Business Roundtable; the board for the The Education Trust – West is the same as the Education Trust’s national board.)

Regardless, incorporation bi-laws require groups to name a board and define its role. In most cases, groups keep the bi-laws and other formal rules simple. Formal meetings range from once or twice annually to quarterly. The board of one group studied meets monthly. Most boards approve the appointment of the senior staff person, authorize the organization’s budget, and formally adopt the policy agenda.

The specific role that boards play, however, varies considerably across the groups with whom we spoke. The following variations might help to think of the different ways to configure a board:

- **Power Board.** Some boards are organized to amplify the power of the organization. Its members are powerful individuals who have political identities in their own rights. Power boards also tend to be the leading (or in one case, the only) funders for the organization either through defined contributions or via the organization they represent.
- **Policy Board.** Some boards are primarily tasked with helping shape and approve the organization’s policy work. This tends to be the model in which the organization was created by one or several start up funders.
- **Representative Boards.** Some boards are organized to assure that the communities affected by the organization’s decisions are represented on the board.
- **Membership Boards.** In membership organizations, every member has representation on the board. In this model, members typically make contributions as a part of membership. In a few cases, the “board” was made up of a sizable membership (i.e., 100 members) who then elects a smaller executive group to lead the organization’s governance decisions. In this model, the members approve

policy and the executive committee is involved in the more detailed finance and staffing decisions.

- **Functional Boards.** While no group in this sample uses a board this way, another variation is to build a board that extends the functional expertise of the organization by assembling a group with the various kinds of expertise needed in non-profit organizations, including legal, fiscal, P.R., skills as well as policy insights and community connections. In this model, board members understand they will put in significant hours outside board meetings to assist the organization in its operations.

Advisory Groups

Some groups name a formal advisory group to extend their affiliates—and with that their credibility—beyond its immediate board. Advisory groups also provide a formal way to affiliate influential people without including them formally in governance decisions. Where those groups are formalized, they meet once or twice annually, although one group found that advisors preferred to be tapped on an “as needed” basis and not to attend meetings.

Most groups at least have informal advisory groups, ad hoc committees, or kitchen cabinets they pull together as needed. A few groups are considering whether to formalize these committees, while others have already considered and rejected that idea. Those who prefer the ad hoc approach to committees do so because formal committees can quickly take on a life of their own, drawing staff focus inward. Also, many found that working on an information basis with advisors creates a healthy burden on the organization to use people’s time in more meaningful ways.

Regardless of whether an advisory body is formally named or operates on a more ad-hoc basis, the lesson is to wait to schedule a meeting until there is something real to discuss. Do not commit to regularly scheduled meetings that require staff to invent agendas to meet artificial calendars or those agenda risk degenerating into mere entertainment.

Members or Participants

A few of the organizations (e.g., The Education Partnership in Rhode Island and the Prichard Committee) with whom we spoke were membership organizations. But where that was not the case, organizations have not tended to think in terms of members per say. Few groups with whom we spoke had formalized “membership” opportunities if they were not membership organization. But every group understood the critical importance of involving a constituency broader than the board in their work. Some regularly convene allies and interested stakeholders for forums or discussions. All maintain some kind of distribution system for disseminating information to broad audiences.

Role of Educators?

With one exception, the groups we spoke with declined to involve educators on their governing boards. The rationale was clear enough: if the goal is to be a voice for the public's interest, educator involvement confuses that voice. As one group explained: "Educators already have the overwhelming voice in the capital. If we brought the interest lobby to our meetings, our discussion would get ruttled in the same issues that already complicate the public debate. Our goal is to have a conversation that looks at the issues differently, considering only the students without the adult agendas." Another brought the issue to a finer point: "We told the teacher's association that when they invite our leaders to vote on their boards, we will include union representation on ours."

The one exception is notable: The Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession solicits teacher involvement because teachers are at the heart of their message. But there too, the organization resists the posturing of interests, working to keep its focus on the data and the issues it raises. CSTP makes it clear that individuals, not interest organizations, hold seats on the board.

Role of Government Officials?

An old political adage sums up the advice here: Never make friends, only alliances. In general, civic groups decline to invite sitting policy makers to their governing board because doing so can often complicate their ability to advocate consistently for their agenda. Including public officials in meetings also risks creating a positional environment in which little gets done. Therefore, while all groups have strong working relationships with policymakers, those officials are not drivers of the organization.

Role of Business Leaders?

In many states, the business community has taken the lead role in providing an alternative voice in education policy to that of traditional special interest groups. In fact, it is fair to credit the national Business Roundtable and its call for state level affiliates for creating some of the momentum behind state level reform. Business involvement in education policy making is often sought both for financial backing and for the credibility that business leaders bring, especially to issues of managing large organizations.

However, we also found in these interviews that the sword of business involvement can be double-edged. Some groups reported that in their states, the "business agenda" for education has become a foregone conclusion, causing policy makers to dismiss business-aligned messengers as philosophically ruttled.

When it comes to business involvement, there tend to be three variations:

- Business members completely or partially comprise the board.
- The organization works in close partnership with an affiliated business group, which enables "good-cop/bad-cop" positioning.
- The group takes pains to distance itself from "business boards."

When it comes to “business”, one lesson is clear. Over the last decade, the model of business group advocacy has been so well studied that many are now wise to its ways. A “business voice” can not be propped up in an organization with a few figure heads and non-business funding. Nor does the fact that someone works for a business convey “business” leadership. Business credibility only comes to an organization that is led by credible, senior business leaders (ideally sitting CEOs) whose core passion is education, that is funded primarily by businesses (as opposed to foundations whose operations are distanced from their corporate founders), and that is run by an active business board (not delegated passively to non-business staff). Perhaps most important, a business group has to run on more than a good bluff. From time to time, the leadership must call in political chits to influence education policy.

Cautions and Considerations Regarding Board and Affiliates

- The best meetings are oriented toward action. Focus board agendas around the decisions that board members need to take. Or if advice is sought, carefully delineate possible directions and ask for a discussion of ramifications. Information updates are easily shared through emails; save the face time for the issues where critical deliberation and decision-making is required.
- Be as clear as possible about the reasons others are invited onto a board. Are they being asked to represent their own thinking or to represent a constituency? What is the role of the board as it relates to the organization’s policy agenda? Will they be asked to contribute or help raise money? Here, written statements of expectations can be as helpful for board as they are for staff.
- In politics, decisions are often needed fast. In most groups, boards approve broad policy goals, but leave the detailed implementation to staff. If staff must continually bring issues back to boards and committees, it slows their strategic abilities.
- Groups that started with larger boards found that for directing key organizational issues, a smaller group was more effective at making clear decisions. If the board is large, consider charging a small executive committee with ongoing decision-making responsibilities.
- Formal committees require staffing. Most groups preferred to stay small and nimble, keeping staff focused outward, not on the care and feeding of the organization.
- One the first questions organizations are asked to explain is, Who drives your agenda. Resisting direct answers can keep detractors focused on that question—and fuels suspicions that there’s a “hidden agenda” lurking somewhere. Transparency about who is involved in the organization and in what way is critical to keeping the focus off the organization and on the problems it seeks to solve.
- If the group wants to affiliate with educators or public officials, advisory boards, not boards of directors, seem to be the best way to include those voices.
- Board are as likely to dwindle if they feel irrelevant as they are if they feel overworked. Board members want to help; give them serious jobs to do.

Staffing & Organization

When a small group of people is motivated to solve a problem, it will be tempting to charge out, staff up, and incorporate quickly so it can begin to pull in the resources needed to support the work. But here, form should absolutely follow function. The steps taken to staff and formally incorporate are crucial, defining ones and should be taken thoughtfully.

Staffing

Without exception, every organization stated that its people were the key to its success. Unfortunately, here is where the magic formulas most elude us. The best lesson is that the more an organization is able to define what it expects of its staff, the better chance it will have of finding people to meet those expectations. And the good news is that these organizations demonstrate that amazingly talented people can be found to run small, focused non-profit organizations; there is no need to compromise in the search for talent.

Start-up staffing. With few exceptions, most organizations started with a small team of one to three people working with the support of consultants. The consulting talent included researchers, communications, and political strategist. The groups built up the size of their teams cautiously. Similarly, offices and other organizational issues provided only the essentials; these too were seen as potential drags on staff time.

The decisions about how to initially configure staff evolve from the organization's leading tactics. In those groups whose work includes grass roots mobilization, the outreach team was viewed as the most critical staff. Where tactics were to promote research, researchers and communications staff were most vital. As the leading tactics changed, staff changed to reflect that. If there was one constant, it was in the need for strong outreach and communications early in the organization's work to credential the group and build its constituency.

Two of the organizations studied run with sizable staff (The Education Partnership in Rhode Island and the Prichard Committee in Kentucky). But these organizations are also different in that they run large programs as well as lead advocacy. Most advocacy teams tend to top out at five or six people.

Staffing vs. consultants? A few guiding questions might be: What are the leading tactics for success? Should that talent be in house and available to help drive the day-to-day work? What projects and issues take place more cyclically? What talent requires specialty skills not easily found in the labor market? Another consideration is that consultants can sometimes bring connections and visibility due to their work with multiple clients, so add value differently than full time staff.

Incorporation

How an organization is defined in its incorporation will drive (and constrain) many aspects of how it does business. Incorporation status drives how an organization manages accounting and reporting, sets parameters around the sources from which a group can seek funding, and sets the rules for how, if at all, a group can lobby. These decisions are expensive both in terms of actual costs and how their eventual effects drive staff resources. Slow and steady might be the wisest course here.

The temptation to file for incorporation quickly can be driven by the desire to receive funds needed to launch the work. But there are mechanisms through which funders can support a lean staff and the initial research needed to get an organization started without first filing for incorporation. For example, fiscal agency or affiliation provisions enable a group to buy fiscal support and oversight from an established organization. Two groups in this sample (the Rennie Center and Education Trust-West) launched as affiliates of other organizations. The Education Trust-West still operates under its national organization's status, while the Rennie Center eventually incorporated independent of its start-up affiliate. A third group (The Washington Partnership) started as an independent organization but found it made sense to merge with a group with whom it works closely.

Details on the financial and legal issues of incorporating are outside the scope of this analysis. When the time comes, organizations should consult with experts to guide them. Our aim here is to begin to describe some of the variation to help start-ups begin to understand the terrain.

Variations For Incorporation Options

There are four big variations of incorporation that organizations might consider. For each variation, there are two considerations: the first is whether an organization is allowed to enjoy not for profit status and the second is who can enjoy tax benefits by giving to the organization.

- **501c3 nonprofit status** basically enables an organization to enjoy non-profit status and allows its donors a tax deduction for their gifts, but then prohibits the organization from “substantial” participation in lobbying efforts.
- **501 (h) elections** establish guidelines under which a 501c3 organization can elect to participate in lobbying activities without loss to their non-profit status, with varying tests for grass roots and direct lobbying.
- **501c4 nonprofit status** enables the organization to lobby on issues of public policy and enjoy the benefits of nonprofit status, but prohibits funders from taking tax deductions for their donations.
- **Fiscal agent or affiliate** basically enables a group to receive tax deductible donations through another organization's 501c3 status, usually for an agency fee. In this scenario, the incorporated agency is ultimately accountable for the grant.

Questions To Help Start-Ups Get Started

When a group does seek legal counsel, answers to some of the following questions will help start the process:

- How much time do you expect to spend with policy makers?
- To what extent does the organization expect to engage grass roots activists in its work?
- Does the organization want the ability to contribute to or comment on specific legislation or regulations?
- Does the organization anticipate asking the public to comment on specific legislative proposals?
- Would the organization be satisfied with conducting broad information campaigns about issues without specific reference to candidates or legislative proposals?
- Are there potential allies of the organization with whom it can partner to accomplish formal lobbying gains?
- If the organization opts for the options to lobby, can it sustain itself with the more limited pool of donors this will create?

More Devilish Details

Incorporation paperwork is only the beginning of the paperwork for formalizing an organization. New organizations need to create by-laws for governance, make decisions about employee compensation packages including insurance, workers comp, and retirement issues. It should consider whether directors and officers liability insurance is a wise investment (it most likely is). And, it will at some point need to find office space, furnishings and supplies. It will need to design its public brand for its logos, letterhead, and business cards. The caution here is to not allow these details to overwhelm the momentum needed to convince funders, policymakers, and other important constituencies that the organization means serious business. In the start up phase, leaders should find ways to delegate these details rather than letting attention to them drive out attention to the core mission.

Cautions and Considerations Regarding Staffing and Organization

- Stay lean. Keep the issue agenda front and center and build up staffing and infrastructure cautiously.
- Prioritize issues and tactics, then staff and organization needs will naturally follow.
- Advocacy is hard enough without people wearing one another down on the inside. Invest time in building a constructive team.
- Explore options for formal incorporation carefully and don't rush to finalize details. Similarly, build staff slowly. Consultants can help to round out a team until the work needs stabilize.

- Pay attention to diversity among staff, especially in selecting the people to represent the group publicly. As one leader advised, you can hear the same things differently from different people.
- A few groups regretted not bringing full time communications support on board sooner. One explained that they didn't realize there was so much readily available and affordable talent for hire in their labor market. The lesson, then, is to test assumptions about what talent costs and who is available. The number of smart people eager to work for a good cause can be pleasantly surprising.

Fundraising & Funder Obligations

The work of fundraising is really another version of building a constituency and testing the viability of the organization's agenda; it is an important ingredient in building power. While fundraising might be a chore, it is a defining one. It pushes leaders to effectively make their case for their agenda and strategy.

Variations in funding

Start-up funding comes in two ways:

- A high profile group of funders launches and funds the group, acting as its board.
- A few foundations launch and fund the group, working to expand the interested funders.

On-going funding is grown by drawing from the following sources:

- Member contributions
- Foundation grants
- Corporate contributions
- Individual contributions
- Government funding to support programs
- Fundraising events
- Earned revenues

Sole funding: Blessing or Curse? Some groups started with sole funders. All have done well over time. But two lessons emerge here. First, the groups that started with sole funders all said that while the security of a start up guarantee was appreciated, all wished they had diversified sooner. And what looks like stability can be a huge vulnerability where program priorities of the funder shift. The second big lesson is that the groups starting with large donor bases had less work to do in defending the interests of their funders. It's simply harder to accuse a large coalition of a hidden agenda.

Cautions and Considerations Regarding Funding

- Taking funding from the government can burn hours of staff time completing compliance paperwork. Worse, it can tie the organization up in conflicts.
- The work of fundraising is not over when the check is deposited. All funders have reporting requirements. With any funder, accept funds cautiously and evaluate whether or not the organization has the staff capacity to respond to a funder's reporting expectations.

- A broad funding base can also protect any one funder for the heat that sometimes comes when a group takes a controversial stand. There is strength in numbers. Anticipate that, over time, even the most enthusiastic funders will take a year or so off. Some see this as a way of challenging the organization to diversity its base.

TOP TEN TIPS FOR START-UPS

In addition to inquiring about issues and logistics, we asked every group to reflect back on the lessons learned over the history of their organization. We offer here our top ten list of the advice these leaders had to offer to start-ups.

1. Focus first on issues, not on organization.

Form should absolutely follow function. While the temptation will be to file incorporation papers and staff up, those temptations should be tempered by careful planning. Build with purpose; it is easier and more credible to expand than to retract and redefine.

2. Lead from purpose, not from function.

Detractors will focus on a group's form and function, trying to find hidden agendas in the mix. The challenge for a start-up will be to command as much attention to the mission of the organization as to its form. When the public asks about the group's agenda, be ready with a data-rich answer. One group announced its organization as it released the results of a major study. In doing so, the organization focused the public's attention on the issues and effectively minimized the usual barrage of questions about the funder's intent.

3. Build a clear constituency.

In any organization, leadership is key. But in advocacy work, a solitary, compelling leader can be more easily dismissed when they are not clearly backed by a larger constituency. Power comes from relationships. Regardless of the tactics or issues, define your organization clearly in terms of who is involved. Be transparent with that information. And, be prepared to demonstrate that the people behind the organization's mission are ready act if necessary to advance the cause.

4. Build and protect credibility.

One leader warns: credibility is slow to build and easily squandered. Transparency, consistency, and staying on the political high road are all critical to maintaining credibility.

5. Tell compelling stories backed by powerful data.

Opponents to change are effective at using emotional anecdotes about the dangers of disrupting the status quo. Data are critical to combating that strategy. But data, while credible, are unemotional. A clear, student-centered story backed by data that illustrates how many times that story is true is a powerful combination. Many organizations use it to keep students at the center of their advocacy.

6. Maintain momentum.

It is much easier in the long run to maintain momentum than to rebuild it. Make regular outreach to members or participants, availability to the press, and communications with funders part of the group's regular habit. One leader says, "We think of our organization as a campaign. We are always ready for action."

7. Stay lean and nimble.

Even where funding is available to support more staff, most organizations resisted building a large organization on the advocacy side, opting instead to stay lean and nimble. Most groups augment their staff with consultants when bigger staff efforts are needed. This advice also applies to boards. Most organizations found that smaller decision making groups got more done. And most avoid creating complex organization structures that burn staff time on internal meetings.

8. Diversify funding.

A few groups in this sample spoke appreciatively of a founding funder who provided them with a stable few years running time to launch the organization. But all regretted not seeking other funders more quickly, advising that it is easier to address questions about the intentions of funders when there is a large coalition. And a larger coalition of funders makes the organization more stable.

9. Support outreach with technology.

There is so much technology now available to make outreach easier. Established groups are converting mailings list to online tools. It is easier for new groups to simply build their constituencies supported by those tools.

10. Hire the best people.

This seems obvious, yet every organization, in the end, says its team is really the engine behind its success. The more clearly defined expectations are for staff, the more likely it is for the organization to find people to fill those expectations. One leader advises: hire people so good they leave you breathless, people so good that you have to run to stay a step head of them.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Cross & Joftus, LLC provide education leaders with personalized, expert policy assistance in the following areas.

- **Policy Analysis and Development** Cross & Joftus, LLC work with policy makers at the district, state, and federal levels to analyze and develop legislation, regulations, and guidance to improve outcomes for children and youth.
- **Program Evaluation** Cross & Joftus, LLC work with administrators, policy makers, foundation and corporate officers, and senior staff of nonprofit organizations to conduct formative evaluations of education and social service programs and provide recommendations for how such programs can be improved to better serve children and youth.
- **Communication Strategies** Cross & Joftus, LLC work with organizations in a variety of ways to help them communicate with key constituencies. From giving presentations and speeches, to writing policy papers and brochures, to developing strategic marketing and communications plans, Cross & Joftus, LLC will make sure that you get your message out.
- **Strategic Planning** Cross & Joftus, LLC work with organizations charting a new course to set a vision, create measurable goals and benchmarks, and develop and implement practical and effective strategies for meeting the goals.
- **Executive Coaching** Cross & Joftus, LLC work with education leaders in the public, private, and public sectors to develop the skills that will enable them and their organizations to be successful.

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Mr. Cross chaired the National Assessment of Title I Independent Review Panel on Evaluation for the U.S. Department of Education from 1995-2001 and the National Research Council Panel on Minority Representation in Special Education from 1997-2002. He is a member of the board of directors of the American Institutes for Research and on the board of trustees of Whittier College. He also serves on the board of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, The New Teacher Project and EdSource and in March 2002 facilitated the negotiated rule-making process on Title I for the U.S. Department of Education.

In 2001, he completed a six year term on the Board of International Comparative Studies in Education for the National Research Council, and chaired the National Council for Education and Humanities Development of the George Washington University from its inception in 2000 through 2002. From 1994-1997, Mr. Cross served as president of the Maryland State Board of Education. He was a member of the National Education Commission on Time and Learning. He

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Mr. Cross' book (Political Education: National Policy Comes of Age) on the people and events that have shaped federal K-12 education policy from the time of the Eisenhower administration through the passage last year of the 2001 amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was published in November 2003 by Teachers College Press. He is also the co-editor of Minorities in Gifted and Special Education, published in 2002 by the National Academies Press. He has lectured on American education issues in Hong Kong, Japan and the United Arab Emirates.

Mr. Cross has a B.A. degree from Whittier College and a Master of Arts degree in Government from California State University, Los Angeles. He is married to the former Diane DeRoche, has two children, and resides in Danville, California.

Suzanne Tacheny, PhD has extensive experience in education policy, strategy, and communications. From 2002 to 2005, Dr. Tacheny served as a member of California's State Board of Education during the most crucial years of California's developing accountability program. Dr. Tacheny also served as the Program Officer for Education at the San Francisco Foundation where she led a high school reform funding initiative. Prior to this role, Dr. Tacheny led California Business for Education Excellence, a statewide coalition of leading businesses and business organizations working to improve standards and accountability in California public schools. She has administrative experience working in California's largest school district and has served in various roles in several leading non-profit service and advocacy organizations. Having worked to improve education from many vantage points, she considers a broad landscape in her work.

Dr. Tacheny is committed to the movement to raise standards, close achievement gaps, and ensure accountability within the nation's public schools. She has worked with effective leaders across the country using standards, assessments, and other performance measures to enable all educators to better serve students. She credits the teachers and principals with whom she has worked for providing her best training in the effective use of data in the classroom. Dr. Tacheny also has worked with parent organizations in East and South Los Angeles and is a passionate advocate for parents and their involvement in their children's schools.

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Dr. Tacheny is a member of the Board of Directors of WestEd and a member of California's P-16 Council. She was a National Director for the Education Leaders Council and a Director of the California Theatre for Children, Inc. and the Consortium for Children. She has served in an advisory capacity to organizations such as the Public Policy Institute of California, the Broad Foundation, and Great Schools, Inc. Recently, she returned to her hometown of Minneapolis, Minnesota where she now lives and works.