

EDUCATION  
FUNDERS  
RESEARCH  
INITIATIVE

A CASE STUDY  
ON MOVING PHILOSOPHICALLY  
DIVERSE FUNDERS  
TO COMMON PRIORITIES

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Collaboration is a recurring theme among philanthropic funders and their grantees. Most funders have engaged in collaboration at some level. A few collaborations achieve outstanding success and are lionized in case studies. Others break up without conclusion or fall short of their original mission and are tactfully forgotten.

One standard assumption about funder collaborations is that the participants agree on an action agenda. The purpose of the collaboration is to carry out that commonly agreed agenda. But what if the funders in the room do not agree? What if the subject area is so divisive, so polarizing, that strife appears to be the natural order, rather than consensus? The most natural course would be for participants to agree to disagree and go their separate ways.

A group of education funders in New York City adopted an entirely different and even counterintuitive strategy:

This collaboration represents a different, even counterintuitive strategy: Bring a group of funders with diverse perspectives into one room, commission original research to identify the evidence base for a set of common-ground priorities and then use the consensus around those priorities to foster productive dialogue among key education stakeholders.

Bring a group of funders with diverse perspectives into one room, commission original research to identify the evidence base for a set of common-ground priorities and then use the consensus around those priorities to foster productive dialogue among key education stakeholders. The success of this initiative establishes an intriguing new collaborative model for the philanthropic world.

In July 2012, a group of education funders convened by Philanthropy New York developed a plan to prepare for the impending election of a new mayor only 16 months away. It would be a momentous changing of the guard, as Mayor Michael Bloomberg departed after three terms and 12 years of relentless innovation in the city's public education system.

They knew that executing any collaborative strategy would be challenging. Education policy is perhaps the most contentious policy area in the United States, even more so than healthcare because it sorts less clearly along ideological lines. New York City in particular has been (and continues to be) the setting for sharp-elbowed disputes over charter schools, standardized testing, teacher evaluation and school finance, just to name a few. Cleavages among education funders reflect these broader conflicts. Furthermore, funding portfolios diverge broadly, making any attempt at categorization inherently challenging.

The group's plan presented a striking case study in philanthropic jiu-jitsu. Rather than work only with like-minded funders or get bogged down in the heated debates already pervasive in the media and politics, these funders chose to acknowledge their differences and focus on areas

## TIMELINE OF THE EDUCATION FUNDERS RESEARCH INITIATIVE

2012

April

- Education Working Group (EWG) meeting considers three collaborative activities.

May

- PNY staff and EWG Co-Chairs outline in emails and meetings a basic "project description" to put before the larger group; contracts with Foundation Center for report on education investments in NYC public education.

of common agreement, eventually succeeding in identifying priority areas that applied across both traditional neighborhood schools and charter schools. The working group of 16 funders that took on this challenge eventually named themselves the Education Funders Research Initiative, or EdFunders for short, because they viewed research as the distinctive organizing principle of their project. EdFunders retained academic, philosophically unaligned researchers to draft a series of three policy-relevant papers. An intellectually diverse board of advisors commented on drafts of each paper to strengthen their intellectual rigor. The final paper distilled policy recommendations based on evidence and served as the basis for a set of six priorities that the funders officially endorsed. On February 14, 2014, leaders of the collaborative met with newly appointed Chancellor Carmen Fariña and presented their priorities.

Many philanthropic initiatives are deemed successful based on quantitative metrics. But there are no obvious metrics for an initiative of this kind. Many initiatives focusing on policy seek identifiable policy reforms. But, although EdFunders have welcomed Fariña's approval of the priorities they laid out, they acknowledged from the beginning that it would be an impossible task to accurately assign credit for reforms initiated by Mayor Bloomberg's successor. Yet we can measure the EdFunders initiative's success by the extent to which it achieved the goals the funders set for themselves:

- Modeled a process of collaboration among stakeholders of differing viewpoints;
- Informed public discussion with insights based on research and evidence;

- Informed the incoming mayor of education reform priorities that have supporting evidence and funder consensus;
- Deeply informed the work of participating funders; and
- Created a platform for more meaningful dialogue with the city's Department of Education.

These are remarkable achievements for a collaborative blazing its own trail in a field with few successful examples of consensus-building.

This study, carried out on behalf of Philanthropy New York, is a qualitative assessment of the EdFunders collaborative. It is not an evaluation. The author interviewed a number of funders, advisors and researchers involved in the project and reviewed extensive documentation compiled over the course of the initiative. The study briefly reviews the literature on philanthropic collaboration. It then describes how the EdFunders collaborative came into being, developed an operational plan, implemented that plan and concluded the project as it was originally conceived. The study then examines EdFunders' three primary components—collaboration, research and communication—identifying the strategies in each area and drawing out lessons learned. The study then closes with a set of questions for future common-ground collaboratives to consider.

## June

- PNY 33<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting focuses on education reform issues and brings U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, NY State Commissioner John King and NYC Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott together in conversation, bringing added attention and excitement to Education Working Group activities.
- PNY staff begins preliminary investigation into qualified communications firms to work on the project and asking each for a "ball park" estimate for the project as formulated.

## TYPES OF PHILANTHROPIC COLLABORATION: EDFUNDERS IN CONTEXT

Collaboration is a critical precondition for social change, because no single stakeholder has the resources and influence necessary to bring about change at a systems level. Major advances typically require collaboration across sectors. For example, the widely discussed and analyzed collective impact model posits the need for engagement of all major stakeholders in a given community for purposes of collective action.

Research into philanthropic collaboration can be viewed as a subset of the broader literature of collaboration. That literature is generally qualitative in nature, collected and analyzed by consultants in the field. No quantitative data on the extent or outcomes of philanthropic collaboration was identified.

Consultants for FSG, on behalf of the European Foundation Centre, analyzed case studies of philanthropic collaboration, including the Funders Collaborative for Children in Malawi and the Green & Healthy Homes Initiatives, a project to renovate poor quality housing sponsored by the Council on Foundations (Pfitzer and Stamp, 2010). FSG proposed a three tier construct of philanthropic engagement representing progressively increasing degrees of funder engagement (20-21). In the first tier are collaborative platforms that focus on *knowledge exchange* in which foundations share insights or jointly commission research. In the second tier are *joint projects*, which identify concrete projects or social objectives that will be jointly funded or delivered. They are generally time-limited and have a narrowly defined

agenda. *Thematic consortia* comprise the third tier. They have a longer time horizon and a broadly focused agenda aimed at systemic change and typically combine multiple philanthropic strategies, such as content research, grant funding, capacity building and advocacy.

The Bridgespan Group has conducted extensive interviews with philanthropic leaders to learn more about “high-stakes donor collaborations,” which they define as a shared multiyear vision around which donors pool talent, resources and decision-making. High-stakes collaborations “place results ahead of organizational or individual recognition.” (Seldon, Tierney and Fernando, 2013)

The Bridgespan researchers identify three general goals of high-stakes donor collaborations. Funder collaboratives can *access expertise* by pooling resources, which is especially valuable to new philanthropists who seek to learn from partners with specialized knowledge. The Energy Foundation, a joint initiative of three major philanthropic funders, has achieved world-class expertise in energy conservation, making it a major player in policymaking at all levels of government. Donors can also use collaboration to *achieve system-level change*, “taking advantage of their reputations, networks, expertise and financial resources to advance their common goals.” California Forward united five foundations to bring about changes in local and statewide governance in California, while the Donor’s Education Collaborative, an alliance of foundations in New York City, pools resources to drive policy reform of the city’s public school system. Finally, collaboratives may

2012

July

- Education Working Group agrees to advance a plan for the “2013 Reform Review Project.”

August

- PNY staff conducts intensive rounds of emails and phone meetings to gauge funder interest in contributing funds to make the project a reality, eventually raising commitments of \$330,000 (this effort continued throughout the Fall).

seek to *aggregate capital*. When a mission requires funding activities in multiple locations over an extended period of time, funders may develop a collective mechanism for pooling and allocating large sums of money. Living Cities serves this function for community development projects around the country; the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation established the Growth Capital Aggregation Pilot to support the expansion of three promising programs, ultimately attracting 19 other funders to the project.

Bridgespan also explored the characteristics of high-functioning collaboratives. They identified the following six factors:

- Productive personal relationships that predate the collaborative;
- Principals at the table, who may step aside during the process in favor of senior-level foundation staff empowered to make decisions;
- Clear structure and process, which includes three- to five-year grantmaking cycles, regular meetings, clear decision-making and a single grantee report shared among all partners.
- Ability to adapt to lessons learned and to changing circumstances;
- Willingness to take risks and avoid moving toward a soft center, where risky ideas fall by the wayside;
- Exit strategy that clarifies up front the timeframes for commitment and agreed-upon mileposts at which funders reflect on results achieved and agree on whether and how to move forward.

The EdFunders collaborative can be placed within the typologies of the FSG and Bridgespan analyses. It was founded explicitly as a joint project with a clear and time-limited purpose, to build an evidence-based consensus among funders on what had worked and not worked to improve college and career readiness in New York City's public education system. However, EdFunders differs from other collaboratives that carry out joint projects because they agree on the goal to be attained. EdFunders began with a group of funders who disagreed on many important issues. They used the process of publishing rigorous evidence-based studies to develop consensus and foster productive dialogue with policymakers and experts in the field. The dynamic of pervasive and chronic disagreement, so emblematic of education policy, prompted an unusual and creative response.

#### Common Funder Collaborative Types:

*Knowledge Exchange*

*Joint Projects*

*Thematic Consortia*

EdFunders differs from most collaboratives because it began with a group of funders who disagreed on many important issues.

#### September

- EWG meets and articulates more detailed plans for the initiative, refining common goals and ways to achieve them. From September through November, subcommittees meet to interview potential researchers.

#### October

- Staff begins formally interviewing prospective communications firms, starting with a list of 12 firms and specialists, receives full proposals from six.

## THE PROCESS: HOW EDFUNDERS DEVELOPED

Elections can be an energizing force for policy action. They pair the predictability of a fixed date with the uncertainty of the electoral outcome. The 2013 mayoral election was considered an especially critical opportunity (or threat, depending on one’s perspective), because Mayor Michael Bloomberg, after three terms in office, was not running for reelection.

The Bloomberg administration introduced seismic changes into the public education system during its twelve years, some made possible by its first major victory—winning mayoral control of the public schools from the State Legislature and Governor. Funding for the city Department of Education rose by almost one-third; the city’s school districts were dismantled and their funding transferred to schools; principals were given more authority over hiring and budgets; large high schools with low graduation rates were broken up and replaced by many small high schools (often “co-located” in the same building); charter schools were supported and expanded as never before; high schools were created to support students at risk of dropout; and student assessment using high-stakes standardized tests became important for funding

and teacher evaluation. And these are only a few of the many reforms introduced by Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellors Joel Klein and Dennis Walcott.

Some of the Bloomberg Administration’s reforms were controversial and their overall impact was widely debated across the political spectrum of New York City. The next mayor would have considerable latitude to stay the course or change course on many or all of the Bloomberg-era innovations.

### Convening and Framing

In spring 2012, Philanthropy New York, the regional association of grantmakers for the New York City area, convened the existing funder affinity group, the Education Working Group, that had as its co-chairs Fred Frelow of the Ford Foundation and Rich McKeon of The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust. This learning community for members who identified education as a priority was meeting regularly to present programs aimed at informing funders about contemporary education reform issues. But at this moment, Philanthropy New York brought the group together to discuss opportunities for future collaboration that went beyond information sharing. One such opportunity was the upcoming mayoral election. Other policy issues loomed as well, such as the implementation of new teacher and principal evaluation systems, changes in high school graduation requirements and the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. The existing Education Working Group put forward three alternative approaches:

Philanthropy New York brought the existing Education Working Group together to discuss opportunities for future collaboration that went beyond information sharing. One such opportunity was the upcoming mayoral election.

2012

November

- On October 29, Hurricane Sandy swept through the NYC region closing PNY’s office for a week. Much of PNY’s activities in this month focused on coordinating the philanthropic response to the disaster. Some activities on this project were delayed.

December

- Held an initiative update conference call with funder partners in which they voted to commission researchers recommended by subcommittees. The funders also received an update on staff efforts to identify a communications consultant.



1. Funder review of key investments, using a series of white papers to examine reform issues that members have supported. A communications specialist would summarize each paper and the papers would form the basis for a series of forums.
2. Broad collaboration around identified goals that might warrant collaborative action in a particular area, i.e., a place-based collaborative strategy modeled after the STRIVE partnership.
3. Helping educators and the general public to understand the Common Core and the need for college-ready standards, as well as the implications for students and educators.

At a July 2012 meeting, the Education Working Group settled on the first strategy, but framed in a much broader fashion: as a collaborative enterprise of funders working together to assess and learn from the work they had supported over the past decade, so as to assist in orienting new policymakers. PNY staff also presented an analysis of funders' investments in education. They found that over the past decade, philanthropies had invested at least \$2 billion in New York City's public education system (and almost certainly more, since the data source was incomplete), with more than \$350 million going to support low-performing schools and to improve teacher quality and more than \$300 million to strengthen college and career readiness. The analysis documented that tremendous resources were at stake in the decisions made by private philanthropic funders.

In two September meetings facilitated by New Visions for Public Schools CEO Robert Hughes, the loosely affiliated affinity group members considered how to navigate their differences and move forward with a common plan. Somewhat to the attendees' surprise, they were able to achieve a considerable degree of consensus. After breaking into workgroups and then reassembling, they agreed on a frame for the project, the achievement of college and career readiness. They agreed that the most productive course would be to sponsor the development of three papers that would be presented to the next Chancellor. They also agreed on a set of goals, which is further discussed in the next chapter. Ultimately, sixteen funders, most of whom participated in the Education Working Group, contributed funds to implement the strategy and later endorsed its "Six Priorities." The sixteen funders who contributed to the initiative and signed on to its priorities comprise the Education Funders Research Initiative.

It is worth considering why an already existing funders' collaborative, the Donors Education Collaborative (DEC), did not serve as the vehicle for this project. Founded by five foundation presidents in 1995 and housed in the New York

The funders agreed to a frame for the project:  
The achievement of college and career readiness.  
They agreed that the most productive course would be to sponsor the development of three papers that would be presented to the next Chancellor.

2013

January

- First joint meeting of researchers; held via conference call; staff begins to develop Advisory Committee, comprised of researchers, advocates, and practitioners, for project.

Community Trust, DEC's current members pool funding to support systemic change to improve the experience of students in New York City's public schools. DEC is a national model for effective pooled funding. Having given more than \$15 million over the past two decades and developed unparalleled experience in state and local education policy, DEC might have seemed like a natural candidate to manage a collaborative preparing research and proposals for the next mayor. But several funders, including DEC members, believed their collaborative was perceived as occupying a particular ideological space in the city's educational policy debate, one that supported equity issues and expressed skepticism toward the school choice movement. Furthermore, DEC is a pooled *grantmaking* fund that requires a high level of alignment. For these reasons, DEC played a supporting role in EdFunders. DEC contributed funds to the initiative and several DEC members joined EdFunders in their own right, including the Ford Foundation, whose program officer Fred Frelow served as an essential driving force in EdFunders. The collaboration was staffed by Susan Cahn, who had been a long-time consultant both to DEC and PNY.

Not all education funders agreed to participate in the new initiative. Some were reluctant to redirect resources to a joint project. Others agreed with the strategy, but

wanted to remain focused on practice rather than policy. One funder felt that the plan to commission and publish research papers was redundant with an earlier project carried out by researchers who published a book of original papers on the Bloomberg Administration's public education reforms (O'Day, Bitter & Gomez 2010).

## Preparation for Launch

After the September 2012 meetings, which took place only 14 months before the Mayoral election, the participants moved forward quickly. They had agreed to commission three studies: a context paper describing the larger historical environment for educational policy change related to college and career readiness in New York City, a data paper to review and analyze the underlying data on college and career readiness and a systems paper to draw guidance from the newly created existing research to inform a set of policy recommendations. These recommendations would form the basis for priorities which the funders would endorse. Because a key goal was to inform public discussion, the participants also agreed to dedicate close to half the project budget to communications and dissemination, including a website, high-profile events and a coordinated social media campaign.

Staff of PNY, in conjunction with funders participating in the initiative, began seeking writers for the three papers. They sought researchers with strong credentials in educational policy, but without a track record on one side or the other of contentious issues in the field. They contracted with Leslie Santee Siskin, a professor at New York University, to draft the context paper, Thomas Hatch and Douglas Ready of Columbia Teachers College to draft the data paper and the staff of the Center for New York

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2013

- Funder subcommittee on communications meet with staff's top three recommended firms, decides on BerlinRosen, but only after additional interviews with the firm exploring their relationship with Mayoral candidate Bill de Blasio.

February

- Staff works with BerlinRosen to flesh out a contract and fuller communications plan for the project.
- Researchers meet with funders to provide update on progress, plan and discuss relationship between papers.

City Affairs, led by Andrew White and Clara Hemphill, to draft the systems paper.

PNY staff considered and interviewed nearly a dozen communications consultants, seeking a firm that had deep knowledge of education policy and also strong connections to New York political leaders. Not all of the EdFunders members were enthusiastic about budgeting so much for the communications component of a research-based initiative. But the communications role ultimately proved important for the character and impact of the initiative. PNY chose BerlinRosen, a firm with expertise in grassroots advocacy campaigns, traditional media, social media and political communications. In fact, then-Public Advocate Bill deBlasio, who at the time was trailing far behind in a Mayoral bid, relied on BerlinRosen to provide communications support to his campaign. While both EdFunders leadership and BerlinRosen believe that they received no special benefits from the new administration because of the link, the firm clearly supplemented its media and publications expertise with a sophisticated understanding of the city's political landscape.

Concurrently, the collaborative recruited an advisory committee to review and comment on study drafts. Unlike the authors, Advisory Committee members were welcome to express—or to have expressed in the past—strong views on contentious issues. The main requirement was that each member should be deeply knowledgeable in their field. Members included Kim Sweet, Executive Director of Advocates for Children; Pedro Noguera, Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education at NYU and well-known writer on education policy and practice; James Kemple, Executive Director of the Research Alliance for New York City Schools; David Steiner, former Chancellor of the New York State Education Department and now Dean of the School of Education at Hunter College and founding director of CUNY's Institute for Education

Policy at Roosevelt House; James Merriman, CEO of the New York City Charter School Center; and several other highly qualified advisors (see appendix B for the full roster). Advisors were asked to submit comments on draft studies and to attend the review meeting for each of the three studies, if available on that date.

Of special importance was that the New York City Department of Education (DoE), agreed to participate in the initiative. DoE staff, led by Shael Polakow-Suransky, Executive Deputy Chancellor and Simone D'Souza, Executive Director of the Office of Research, Accountability and Data, reviewed and commented on each draft, pointing out possible inaccuracies and bringing the agency's perspective to the studies' findings and recommendations. DoE's participation provided valuable inside perspective from the agency overseeing K-12 education in New York City, as well as reducing concerns that the initiative might be intended to criticize the Bloomberg Administration's reforms.

EdFunders participants had to move quickly in light of the upcoming election, less than a year away. The commissioned authors had to develop and implement their research methodologies and meet their writing deadlines. Funders and Advisory Committee members had to read drafts and submit comments. PNY staff had to orchestrate the overall process, keeping the studies on schedule for an

The NYC Department of Education agreed to participate in the initiative, reviewing and commenting on each draft, pointing out possible inaccuracies and bringing that perspective to the studies' findings and recommendations.

#### March

- Researchers meet with funders to provide update on progress, plan and discuss relationship between papers.
- PNY's larger EWG hosts a learning session on indicators of college and career readiness that contributes significantly to funder focus on the initiative.

autumn 2013 launch schedule, as well as supporting components—construction of the EdFunders website, 2-page summaries of the studies, preparation of best-practice snapshots and the media campaign preceding and following release of the studies. It was an extraordinarily labor intensive lift for the small staff of PNY, which had many other programs and initiatives to manage.

In May 2013, the EdFunders Advisory Committee met to review and comment on the context paper by Leslie Santee Siskin. *College and Career Readiness in Context* reviews the history of reform efforts in public education nationally as they relate to college and career readiness and then discusses the Bloomberg Administration’s major reform initiatives (2013). The paper then considers the structural issues to be addressed in moving the city’s diverse student population closer to the ideal of universal college and career readiness.

In June 2013, the Advisory Committee discussed the data paper by Douglas Ready and colleagues. *The Experiences of One New York City High School Cohort: Opportunities, Successes and Challenges* follows the group of students who entered ninth grade in 2005 and hoped to graduate in 2009. The paper explores their K-8 as well as their high

school experience, including academic performance and key college readiness indicators and looks at postsecondary enrollment and persistence through the first year of college.

In August 2013, the Advisory Committee considered the systems paper by Clara Hemphill, Andrew White and colleagues, which was deeply informed by the insights from the two previous papers. *Building Blocks for Better Schools: How the Next Mayor can Prepare New York’s Students for College and Careers* differed from the first two papers, which were fundamentally retrospective in nature (2013). The New School study, in contrast, examined the Bloomberg education legacy and then proceeded to offer “recommendations for the new mayoral administration that will take office in January 2014 with an eye toward substantially increasing the number of students who graduate prepared for college and careers.” The New School team carefully reviewed the existing evidence base, as well as the findings of the previous paper by Ready and his co-authors and incorporated the insights gained from their own regular field visits to schools around the city.

The report provided more than two dozen recommendations in six topic areas. Some proposals echoed existing Bloomberg administration policies, such as expanding the Early Learn program for managing contracts with child care providers (21-22). Others shifted emphasis, such as strengthening geographic support networks for community schools (23-24). A handful of findings called for sharp departures from current policy, most notably a recommendation to scrap summative grades for each school in favor of a progress report with six different grades (39), a recommendation that has largely been implemented.

The *Building Blocks* study received the most scrutiny of the three papers and rightly so. The charge of the authors was to develop proposals that the funders themselves might

The third research paper reviewed the existing evidence base, as well as the new research findings of the previous paper by Ready and his co-authors, and incorporated the insights gained from their own regular field visits to schools around the city. The report provided more than two dozen recommendations in six topic areas.

2013

March

- Staff begins assembling a list—with recommendations from funder partners and advisory committee members—of potential schools and school support organizations to profile in special “snapshots” to appear alongside the research papers; also begins to identify potential journalists for “snapshots”.
- At the end of March, staff circulated to all funders, advisors and researchers a revised timeline for the production of the research.

adopt by consensus. The Department of Education’s Polakow-Suransky and his staff provided detailed comments to the study and in some areas forceful pushback. The New School authors adopted some comments from DoE and in other cases noted DoE’s views in the final draft.

One funder dissented from some of the study’s findings and recommendations and called on the group to require that substantive changes be made. The group did not adopt this position, however, for two reasons. First, a majority of funders and Advisory Committee members accepted the findings of the study and did not wish to change them. Second, all three studies were the intellectual property of their authors. Therefore the funders did not have the prerogative to dictate changes to the New School team. Funder respondents have commented that a lack of clarity about the ground rules may have caused confusion about what was and was not the right process for funders to inform and influence the study authors. This ambiguity may have been exacerbated by the nature of the systems study, one of whose purposes was to establish a set of priorities that the funders themselves could endorse.

The BerlinRosen consultants played an important role in the preparation phase. They helped to edit each study to be understandable to non-experts and helped prepare two-page summaries of each study for distribution. In the early stages of planning the initiative, BerlinRosen also suggested the name “Education Funders Research Initiative,” developed branding and a graphic identity for the project’s publications and built a website.

## Launch and Follow-Through

On October 8, 2013, the Education Funders Research Initiative went live and announced its intentions to the public. At a symposium attended by top DoE officials, state and local policymakers and other key stakeholders, EdFunders released their first two studies at a panel discussion moderated by Beth Fertig, education reporter for WNYC. EdFunders held back the third study until after the mayoral election, but they negotiated a consensus version of the study’s recommendations to serve as the collaborative’s own policy platform. These Six Priorities (see Appendix A) thus became the core of EdFunders’ agreed-upon approach to strengthening the public education system in New York City. All of the funders agreed upon the Six Priorities, including the funder who dissented from the *Building Blocks* study.

After the launch, EdFunders introduced a series of snapshots profiling six best-practice schools and organizations: New Visions for Public Schools, Internationals Network for Public Schools, Cypress Hills LDC, the Opportunity Network, iMentor and Uncommon Schools. The profiles highlighted concrete opportunities for innovation and engaged public interest in the initiative.

Just six weeks after she was named the new Chancellor, representatives of the EdFunders collaborative met with Fariña. They presented the priorities of the collaborative and discussed opportunities for future collaboration with the Chancellor and her staff.

### April

- Staff conducts multiple planning calls with BerlinRosen to map out the structure, timeline and content for the website. Has continuing conversations with firm about a new name for the project that would have more audience appeal. Name of project officially changed to “Education Funders Research Initiative”.

### May

- EdFundersResearch.org established as website URL and @EdFundersRI reserved on Twitter. Logo for the project developed with BerlinRosen graphic designers.

On November 4, Bill de Blasio was elected Mayor of New York City. Seventeen days later, on November 21, EdFunders released the New School study by Hemphill and colleagues at another panel discussion—this one introduced by Merryl Tisch, Chancellor of the New York State Board of Regents and moderated by David Steiner, formerly Chancellor of the New York State Education Department and a member of EdFunders’ advisory committee. The release of *Building Blocks* received news coverage from WNYC and several other outlets. At the same time, EdFunders released its Six Priorities.

In preparation for the October launch, BerlinRosen stepped up both traditional and social media outreach in collaboration with PNY staff. On the traditional media front, they lined up interviews with journalists and radio talk show hosts, including a partnership with WNYC’s education department, Schoolbook. Social media strategies were more varied. BerlinRosen organized two Twitter online forums that engaged parents, education advocates, researchers, bloggers, reporters and other interested parties. They also worked closely with PNY to host EdForum,

a weekly dialogue on high-profile education policy issues on the EdFunders website. The format was modeled after the New York Times’ “Room for Debate” website.

During this time, the de Blasio administration began making its major appointments. Education advocates, teachers and parents waited impatiently for the decision that would shape public education in Mayor de Blasio’s first term. Finally, on December 30, the mayor announced Carmen Fariña as the next DoE chancellor. On February 14, representatives of the EdFunders collaborative met with Chancellor Fariña. They presented the priorities of the collaborative and discussed opportunities for future collaboration with the Chancellor and her staff.

The first phase of the EdFunders initiative concluded with that Valentine’s Day meeting, when the collaborative met its formally stated goals. Since that time, EdFunders has moved into a new role, convening “listening sessions” on their six priorities. However, this second phase is beyond the scope of the current assessment. (See more information on the current activities of EdFunders in the postscript of this report).

## OUTCOMES OF THE EDFUNDERS COLLABORATIVE

Since the end product of EdFunders was a set of six reform priorities, it might seem that influencing city-level education policy was the primary purpose. In fact, one of the main objectives was simply to show that actors holding divergent viewpoints could collaborate.

Organizing a large funder collaborative is akin to setting up a venture capital fund. It is a high-stakes gamble that the intended outcomes will justify the large inputs of money, energy and time necessary to launch and operate the collaborative. “Don’t collaborate unless you have to,” warns Willa Seldon, the Bridgespan partner who led their firm’s research into funder collaboratives around the country (SSIR 2014).

### 2013

- EdFunders sets release date of papers 1 & 2 for September—after the primary but before the general election—and paper 3 with recommendations immediately following the early November election; this is the result of an explicit decision to stand back from participation in election debates about education.
- Symposium review of Paper #1: Context from May through September, the paper is revised, author responds to comments of EdFunders and Advisory Committee.

EdFunders was just such a high-stakes collaborative, with an operational budget of \$360,000 and a massive time commitment required from collaborative participants and PNY staff. Participants also surrendered one of any funder's most valuable assets—the autonomy a program officer maintains over an initiative that he or she personally manages.

The question, then, is what participants gained in return. Since the end product of EdFunders was a set of six reform priorities, it might seem that influencing city-level education policy was the primary purpose. Yet policy initiatives rarely yield outputs that can be quantified, since policy-makers listen to multiple stakeholders and are unlikely to attribute changes in policy to any outside interest. Furthermore, the EdFunders Priorities document goes beyond what the collaborative's members originally envisioned.

The EdFunders collaborative set forth five goals at the outset of the project (PNY 2013):

1. **Highlight and model collaboration among stakeholders of diverse—and divergent—viewpoints.** This goal represents the most unusual aspect of the EdFunders collaborative: testing the ability of funders who profoundly disagree on many issues to find common ground. By working collaboratively to identify six priorities that all participants could endorse, the EdFunders collaborative met this goal. One concern was that the priorities might be too watered down to engender real change. And in fact, they are more general in nature than an individual funder might endorse. But they also point toward clear departures from the status quo ante.
2. **Inform public discussion of education reform.** Publishing research may be viewed as a low-yield endeavor in our short-attention-span,

internet-obsessed society. But the EdFunders release strategy put considerable emphasis on disseminating the findings of the research and using the commissioned studies to spark informed discussion into the city's education policy. Coming at a time of passionate debate about education reform in New York City, EdFunders brought policy-relevant, research-informed evidence and—equally important—a commitment to advocate for policy interventions based on evidence and respect for the complexity of real-world practice.

3. **Inform the incoming 2014 DoE administration about realistic, yet effective, reform options.** EdFunders provided fresh information on student progression through the cohort study authored by Ready and colleagues, notably the strong correlation between 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading scores and graduation rates. The *Building Blocks* paper authored by Hemphill and colleagues provided reform options that could reasonably be described as both realistic and effective—although such judgments are inevitably subjective.
4. **Inform and improve philanthropy's own work.** Funder respondents expressed enthusiasm about the value of EdFunders for their own grantmaking efforts. They viewed the EdFunders process,

Building more meaningful and less transactional funder relationships with Department of Education staff was an important objective, which the initiative achieved.

#### June

- Symposium review of Paper #2: Data from June through September, the paper is revised; authors respond to comments of EdFunders and Advisory Committee.

#### July

- BerlinRosen produces a detailed communications and event week-by-week plan for release of all products and media/public relations roll-out.

#### August

- Invitations go out to high-profile speakers for launch event panel; staff and BerlinRosen develop plans for EdForum and begin reaching out to contributors.

particularly the three meetings devoted to reviewing study drafts with the Advisory Committee, as intellectually stimulating. While any concrete changes in grantmaking strategies will take time to emerge, respondents felt that the strong focus on evidence and the diverse range of informed viewpoints provided lasting benefits to their own thinking about the intersection of education policy and practice.

5. **Signal the willingness of the philanthropic community to partner with the DoE to achieve positive reforms on a school and system-wide basis.** Building more meaningful and less transactional relationships with DoE staff was an important purpose of the initiative. This goal was fulfilled in the short term by DoE's participation in the EdFunders review process. However, many of the participating staffers departed with the Bloomberg administration, including Executive Deputy Commissioner Shael Polakow-Suransky, now President of Bank Street College of Education. Nonetheless, the process concluding in the collaborative's endorsement of the six priorities marked a new seriousness in the funders' community about acting collectively to support

The fact that one funder broke off from the group at a key point due to differences over the third paper's treatment of the Bloomberg administration is a warning sign that principled disagreements cannot always be finessed. But the participants (including the dissenting funder) united to support the Six Priorities.

evidence-based systems change. The second phase of EdFunders could be viewed as an effort to harness the newfound collective action capacity of education funders toward building a partnership with DoE in the de Blasio era.

While benchmarking EdFunders according to its self-defined goals is important, a further point should be made: its successful completion of a collaborative project unprecedented in the national philanthropic community. "I am not aware of any other collaborative of this nature," says Lori Bartczak, Vice President for Programs at Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. The EdFunders initiative demonstrated a capacity to align funders at odds on many issues, reframe the discussion to find common ground, convene experts to share their knowledge and insights and come together to endorse major policy priorities. The fact that at least one funder broke off from the group at a key point due to differences over the third paper's treatment of the Bloomberg administration is a warning sign that principled disagreements cannot always be finessed. But the participants (including the dissenting funder) united to support the six priorities, which they presented to Chancellor Fariña—the successful conclusion of a process that could easily have fallen apart at some earlier stage.

DoE's actions since January 2014 have been consistent with several EdFunder priorities. These steps included seeking to strengthen early literacy instruction, reforming the accountability system to use a wider range of performance metrics, changing the school leadership structure in ways that establish a clearer "chain of command" and developing administrative structures to improve connections among schools.

## 2013

- PNY and BerlinRosen step up conversations with WNYC about possible joint promotion of the initiative, settles on live-broadcasting the launch event, with panel moderated by WNYC Education Correspondent Beth Fertig.
- Symposium review of Paper #3: Systems and recommendations from August through October, the paper is revised; authors respond to comments of EdFunders and Advisory Committee.



# KEY COMPONENTS OF THE INITIATIVE: STRATEGIES AND LESSONS LEARNED

For other funders to adapt the EdFunders collaborative to their own context, they need a more granular understanding of how it functioned. A good starting point is the organizational model that EdFunders leadership utilized (PNY 2014). They identified three core elements to the EdFunders project:

- Collaboration among the funders and among the researchers
- High quality and independent research
- A carefully planned communications strategy

This section reviews and analyzes each of the three components, identifying the strategies used and the lessons learned by participants. It should be noted that lessons learned do not represent a consensus among the respondents. If any of the respondents cited a particular lesson learned, it is included here.

The section concludes with a set of questions prompted by interviews, but which have no correct answer. Instead, they are intended for the organizers of future collaboratives based on the EdFunders template to consider.

## Collaboration Among Funders and Researchers

### STRATEGIES USED:

- Invited inclusive participation. Using the existing Education Working Group funder affinity group as a starting point, PNY invited a diverse range of philanthropic funders to participate in the initiative, as well as education funders outside of the existing Education Working Group and even outside of Philanthropy New York's membership.
- Relied on experienced staff and philanthropic leadership. PNY's proactive role made the collaborative possible by providing the backbone of time, expertise and funder relationships necessary to keep the initiative moving forward.
- Built common ground agenda through reliance on evidence-based inquiry. The Education Working Group brought funders with diverse perspectives into a single room, but it could not have yielded common ground on educational policy priorities given its members' very different starting points. The structured process of research and discussion into the evidence base for educational innovation, with participation from respected experts and practitioners, provided a solid basis for consensus.

#### September

- "Snapshots" finalized.
- Invitations go out for launch event to extensive list of education policy leaders, education activists, funders, government officials, education media etc.
- Short (two page) easy-to-digest summaries of papers 1 & 2 finalized.
- PNY hires a part-time consultant to organize "tweet teams" to live-tweet both EdFunders report release events.

- Obtained early buy-in from participants. As PNY sought funding for the EdFunders initiative from Education Working Group members, it provided a thorough accounting of the expected resource allocations and decision points. As a result, EdFunders did not have to send participants back to obtain approval for key decisions. Frontloading the approval process in this way expedited the consensus-building process among participants.
- Kept disputes in perspective by reminding participants of common goals. Disagreements are inevitable in a diverse group of strong-minded individuals. At difficult moments in the collaborative's progress, members reached out to PNY staff and each other to keep the group on track, highlighting the broader purpose of their initiative.
- Determining process for reviewing and editing reports—Who takes the first review of a draft report? What are the criteria for the reviewer's comments? At what point is the draft shared with the executive committee? With the Advisory Committee and collaborative?
- Maintaining clarity among funders regarding intellectual ownership—are the researchers contracted or independent? What is the appropriate level for comments by funders based on the intellectual ownership approach chosen at the outset?
- Recognize that relying on evidence and research can minimize differences but not eliminate them. A fundamental premise of EdFunders is that funders can move beyond the toxic polarization of the education policy debate to find common ground. But there are no guarantees. Conflicts can emerge that expose unbridgeable differences in key areas. From its earliest days, EdFunders offered participants the opportunity to walk away from the project silently. One funder took that opportunity, nonetheless participating in final discussions about the content and language of the six priorities that would represent the EdFunders' official position. The result was unanimous support for those priorities.

## LESSONS LEARNED:

- Make ground rules clear. This was by far the most consistent reflection of funders and PNY staff. Behind the apparent consensus in how the group would make decisions, relate to researchers and review draft reports lay dangerous areas of ambiguity. Respondents stated that in future collaboratives, ground rules should be more explicit, perhaps even written down in a non-binding contract for signature. Topics that would benefit from more clarity in future collaboratives include:
  - Determining the voting rule for major decisions—Unanimous vote? Two-thirds? Majority? All participants or just those present at meeting?
- Balance the pros and cons of hiring an outside facilitator. The President of PNY, Ronna Brown, facilitated each meeting of EdFunders, except for the September 2012 meetings facilitated by Robert Hughes. She found the role to some degree in conflict with her role as head of a membership organization whose members served on the collaborative. She recommended that

2013

September-October

- Intense discussions via email, telephone and an in-person meeting about the third paper's conclusions and EdFunder priorities. Several EdFunders met to discuss vision and language of priorities.

October

- Final opportunity for funders to decide whether or not to be identified with the project and its findings.
- PNY and BerlinRosen finalize press releases and other promotional materials for the official launch.

future collaboratives consider hiring an outside facilitator. Others argued the contrary: that an outside facilitator would have lacked the relationship history and authority to keep all the parties together, thereby risking a breakdown at some crucial juncture.

- Staff the initiative with an experienced professional. Susan Cahn provided the program support for EdFunders. She brought key assets that other funder collaboratives would want to replicate, notably deep familiarity with education policy and practice, strong interpersonal skills and experience in philanthropic collaboration.
- Take seriously the time and resources needed to achieve change. Managing the collaborative was an all-consuming project for PNY staff and leadership of EdFunders, especially after the initiative launched on October 15, 2013. Future collaboratives should be sure to budget for the work required, leaving some margin for error and assign sufficient staff time to implement effectively.

## High Quality and Independent Research

### STRATEGIES USED:

- Identified key policy-relevant topic areas for studies. Study subjects were carefully chosen and mapped out in EdFunders meetings and operationalized by PNY staff.
- Hired knowledgeable and respected researchers who had not staked out high-profile positions on controversial issues. Maintaining an objective stance toward education policy issues was essential to the EdFunders collaborative. Selecting researchers with a strong reputation in their field, but without the baggage of being linked to high-profile policy positions, enabled EdFunders to stay focused on evidence.
- Gave researchers intellectual property rights. Contracts with the researchers stipulated that those researchers maintained intellectual property rights to their work. Comments from funders were advisory in nature, not mandatory, shielding researchers from unwanted interference.
- Convened researchers to learn from one another. The researchers were brought together several times, not only to discuss the specifics of their research plan with funders, but also with one another. This process assisted the researchers in learning from one another and in developing their research plans to avoid overlap and redundancy with the work of other researchers.
- Strengthened research studies by convening advisory committee to provide expert feedback. The Advisory Committee played an important role in the process. Its members reviewed the draft reports carefully and submitted extensive comments. Advisory Committee members attended a meeting on each study to offer comments in person and engage in dialogue with the study authors. While advisors understood their role to be more time-limited than that of the EdFunders members, they nonetheless provided the study authors with valuable feedback and the funders with an immersive tutorial in education policy.

- Trinity Wall Street hosts public event and panel discussion on October 8 to publicly launch the Education Funders Research Initiative, release Paper #1 on context and Paper #2 on data, and begin intensive online activities with the newly launched website and building of a Twitter following. Panel included State Education Commissioner John King, and the kick-off event received many mentions in local education media.

- Developed clear criteria for inclusion of recommendations. Participants in EdFunders agreed to impose at least three screens on potential recommendations: that the recommendations should relate to college and career readiness, have a broad impact on public schools in the city and be based on hard evidence. These screens sidelined some of the most controversial issues before the collaborative. For example, funders took opposing positions on regulation and site co-location approvals of charter schools; but since charter schools teach only 9 percent of public school students in New York City, there was consensus that developing a set of charter-school recommendations would not impact college and career readiness citywide.
- Retained communications consultant to edit reports and create summaries for lay audiences. Recognizing that the researchers might not be accustomed to communicating with a lay audience (although this was not true of the New School authors), journalists and other stakeholders who lacked expertise in education policy, EdFunders retained the consulting firm BerlinRosen to edit the studies and help develop short summaries. In addition, they checked citations and flagged language that might be interpreted as partisan in nature.

### LESSONS LEARNED:

- Start early. The study authors were retained in December, with the expectation that drafts would be completed and presented for review in the spring and summer of the following

year—an extremely fast turnaround. These deadlines constrained the researchers’ options and limited the scope of work they could perform for the collaborative.

- Compensate researchers for review process, not just research and drafting of study. Funders may be accustomed to paying a standard amount for the commissioning of a research study. However, studies carried out through a collaborative approach comparable to EdFunders will be more expensive for the consultants because time will be required not only for research and writing, but for the extensive review process as well. Those costs should be estimated and included in the agreement.

## Carefully Planned Communications Strategy

### STRATEGIES USED:

- Identified communications as top priority. The EdFunders collaborative could have carried out its project in a low-profile way and released a dignified set of reports in the fall of 2013. If it had, they would have received little attention in the frenzied post-election media environment and might not have gotten on the mayor-elect’s radar screen. EdFunders took communications seriously, however. Not only did it invest in hiring a top-shelf consulting firm to manage the communications strategy, it allocated significant time

2013

- EdFunders, in partnership with WNYC, hosts its first online “twitter chat” focused on narrowing the achievement gap as identified in the findings of the first two research papers.

November

- Bill de Blasio elected Mayor of New York City.
- EdFunders, in partnership with WNYC, hosts its second online “twitter chat,” this one focused on strategies to help struggling schools succeed.

of PNY staff and EdFunders members in post-launch traditional and social media outreach.

- Hired communications firm early to participate in branding, editing and planning. The role of communications is easily reduced to external post-launch activities, such as sending out press releases, booking appearances and creating a social media presence. But EdFunders brought its communications consultant on board in January 2013, in the first stage of preparation, concurrently with retaining its researchers. This early involvement enabled PNY to plan key communications tasks, such as branding the project, summarizing the reports and editing them for readability and preparing the website.
- Edited reports to avoid even giving the impression of partisanship. Editing for word choice to avoid the appearance of partisanship is a critical task, especially for a high-profile report intended to represent the views of a diverse collaborative.
- Moved aggressively into social media. The world of traditional media outlets is no longer sufficient to reach important policymakers and stakeholders in the education policy field. EdFunders therefore explored fairly new strategies, such as weekly dialogues between education experts and practitioners on their website modeled after the New York Times' "Room for Debate" site, online Twitter forums and regular updates to both the website and Twitter.
- Held release of final paper and priorities until after election. A key decision was holding the final paper until after the election, so that that paper's analysis and recommendations would not be interpreted through an electoral lens.

## LESSONS LEARNED:

- Don't underestimate time and energy needed. An effective communications strategy requires considerable time and energy and not only that of the communications consultant. PNY staff were responsible for important elements of outreach, especially those which required outreach to education experts, policymakers and stakeholders.
- Plan role for participants in outreach. The participants in EdFunders are all philanthropic funders with their own networks and constituencies. These participants could have been more fully engaged in the communications strategy. Future collaboratives may wish to plan in advance how the participants use their own resources, such as newsletters, websites, twitter feeds and grantee networks, to communicate the findings and priorities of the collaborative.

## Issues to Consider in Each Phase

### CONVENING AND FRAMING

- *At what stage should outside experts and practitioners enter the process and what roles should they play?* The EdFunders collaborative began and ended as a collaborative between funders. Non-funders were not excluded by any means: experts, practitioners and policymakers played important advisory roles. But they entered in the preparation phase, after the fundamental decisions about the process and its desired outcomes had been made. This makes some sense, given the underlying focus on the relationships and common understandings

- Ford Foundation hosts high-profile event November 21 focusing on the release of Paper #3 examining Systems and including the initiative's "Six Priorities." The event was introduced by Meryl Tisch, Chair of the New York Regents.

- With the election and the event over, PNY begins conversations about specific avenues for connecting with the incoming administration leaders.

between funders that propelled EdFunders. It also meant, however, that outside experts had only a limited, circumscribed role in articulating the initiative's goals and strategies. An alternative structure might consider possible roles for outside stakeholders at the outset of the project.

- *What is the appropriate frame for the initiative and how to go about setting it?* The EdFunders collaborative framed the task for the writers of each report as setting a goal of informing future priorities for public policies and private philanthropy that build on what is working in New York City to better prepare all students for college and 21st century careers. Respondents outside the philanthropic sector expressed some reservations about this frame, largely because the term “college and career readiness” often fails to operationalize the concept of career readiness in favor of a narrower emphasis on college preparation, thereby excluding the many students for whom this pathway may not be realistic or helpful. However, they were not able to articulate a clear alternative frame and such an alternative may not be necessary if college and career readiness is applied in a broad and thoughtful way. Future collaboratives should consider how to frame the research and policy-setting mission to both clearly define the scope of inquiry and to include all affected students within its mandate.

## PREPARATION

- *How should the collaborative address controversial issues?* Certain issues divide education stakeholders into warring camps, e.g., standardized testing, charter school approval and co-location and funding equity. The EdFunders understood that attempting to address hot-button issues could break up their collaborative and defeat its underlying consensual purpose. On the most raw issue—charter schools—the funders simply agreed that they existed in the New York City school system and would neither decline nor vastly expand in the immediate future. And so, they set the issues around charter schools aside to focus on priorities that applied to both traditional neighborhood schools and charter schools within the public school system. They also sought a broad frame in which to address the issues that would influence the educational outcomes of the largest number of students. Funders in other collaboratives may or may not find this an effective approach. If they do not, they will need an alternative strategy for determining which issues are to be addressed and which set aside.
- *How can funders create a collaborative process that structures a role for participation and input from funders who bring experience working with on-the-ground reformers, yet also respects the intellectual autonomy of independent researchers?* The authors of the culminating study, the systems paper drafted by Hemphill and colleagues, did not accede to one funder's call for major revisions. But those authors did feel that they were responsive to an unstated imperative to craft recommendations that would meet the

2013

November 2013-January 2014

- “Snapshots” continue to be released and the EdForum posts new questions; including in January 2015 responses of high profile experts to EdFunders Priorities.

December

- Carmen Fariña named Chancellor of the NYC Department of Education.
- Traditional and social media follow-up to Systems paper.

needs of EdFunders. The tension between the author’s autonomy and the sponsor’s degree of input has no bright-line solution and could even be viewed as creatively valuable. Still, funders in future collaboratives should be clear with all involved what intellectual ownership was decided in the contract phase and what obligations each party must respect even during a process of open comment and input.

- *Who should facilitate meetings?* The EdFunders model presupposes an organization with a strong convening role, in this case Philanthropy New York. However, PNY staff did not altogether agree on whether having their CEO facilitate meetings was a strategy that other collaboratives should replicate. The argument against was that facilitation in some sense conflicts with the role of the CEO. The argument for was that facilitation benefited from pre-existing relationships with and knowledge of the members at the table.

**LAUNCH AND FOLLOW-THROUGH**

- *When should the collaborative formally launch its main proposals or priorities?* EdFunders went public about a month before the mayoral election and published its key systems paper and set of priorities roughly two weeks after the mayoral election. Some participants and stakeholders wondered whether the release was scheduled too early, given that there was no chancellor or upper-level DoE staff to receive the paper or participate in its release. But they also acknowledged that waiting until January or February might have created its own risks. Any time chosen for release will have risks and benefits.

- *How many priorities are optimal?* Another concern raised was whether EdFunders diluted its public message by offering six different priorities, which may be difficult for journalists and other stakeholders to clearly understand and explain. Settling on one or two priorities would clearly have made EdFunders’ goals more newsworthy. But it might have weakened the cohesion of the collaborative, since some funders would have little stake in the one or two priorities established. So a tradeoff may be inevitable between public messaging and internal consensus-building.
- *How does one determine which components of rollout are most effective in driving message?* The communications strategies used to support EdFunders’ launch were creative and well implemented. Respondents felt that the communications strategy was highly successful, based on a sense that it created “buzz” and raised Edfunders’ profile among audiences that could impact educational policymaking. But neither PNY nor BerlinRosen could offer an objective yardstick for the communications campaign, making it difficult to gauge the extent to which the campaign succeeded or which components contributed most to its success. Developing metrics for the post-launch communications campaign should be a priority for future initiatives.

2014	January	February
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bill de Blasio inaugurated as Mayor of New York City.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PNY Staff and representatives of EdFunders meet for the first time with Chancellor Fariña, discuss her priorities, the initiative’s “Six Priorities” and establish a line of communications for agreed-upon future meetings with larger groups of funders.</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSION

The Education Funders Research Initiative officially concluded its first phase in February 2014, when its representatives met with Chancellor Carmen Fariña to present and discuss its “Six Priorities.” At this point, EdFunders had achieved its original objectives. The collaborative has since begun a second phase consisting of a series of listening sessions for policymakers, funders and other stakeholders. Nonetheless, the conclusion of the original mission of EdFunders offers an opportunity for reflection about the collaborative, its achievements and its lessons for other funders.

The EdFunders project rowed against the current of philanthropic and societal discourse in several ways. Where many funders support collaboration in spirit more than practice, PNY helped to midwife a large and ambitious collaborative. Where advocates for systems change have increasingly written off big research projects in favor of social media and technology strategies that seem to embody a 21st century zeitgeist, EdFunders placed its bets on old-fashioned research and evidence-based inquiry—albeit promoted with cutting-edge social media tools. Where most collaboratives might assume the need for funders who are aligned in worldview and

goal agreement, EdFunders embraced its internal diversity of worldviews.

The project succeeded by several criteria: by completing the ambitious agenda its members planned on the agreed-upon timeframe and budget; by demonstrating the ability of diverse funders to find common ground; and by nurturing real dialogue on difficult, sensitive issues of education policy between participants, between researchers and between stakeholders. While the new administration has implemented actions that reflect several EdFunders priorities, the degree of influence on these changes is unclear. Nor would all of the EdFunders agree on the “in the weeds” details of how those policies have been implemented. Participants, however, had not set influence on policymakers as a short-term goal. The most impressive feat of the EdFunders initiative is to have moved beyond the divisive and rancorous disputes so characteristic of the education policy field to identify consensus areas for further investment and advocacy. Other funders may consider whether they find this goal appealing enough to attempt a similar enterprise.

EdFunders placed its bets on old-fashioned research and evidence-based inquiry—albeit promoted with cutting-edge social media tools.

Where most collaboratives might assume the need for funders who are aligned in worldview and goal agreement, EdFunders embraced its internal diversity of worldviews.



## POSTSCRIPT

What happened after that first meeting with the new Chancellor?

This case study has focused on the process of fostering successful collaboration among funders with different approaches about how to achieve an overarching shared goal: in this case, helping the public school system better prepare its students for college and careers. The funders and Philanthropy New York staff involved in developing this collaborative effort saw it at the outset as a time-limited initiative and beginning a relationship with the new leadership of the New York City Department of Education grounded on the priorities that had emerged from the research EdFunders sponsored, represents the successful completion of the project as it was originally conceived. So, that is where the case study ends.

However, the Education Funders Research Initiative continues. Following the first meeting with Chancellor Fariña and her team in February 2014, staff and funder leaders continued communications with the DoE team aimed at bringing the Chancellor to speak with PNY's larger Education Working Group.

In late March 2014, most of the funders who had participated in the initiative returned for an extensive planning discussion about whether to continue and, if so, what to do next. They were joined by a few additional funders who shared one or more of the "Six Priorities" identified by EdFunders. The consensus of the group was that the EdFunders initiative had been very successful in gaining public recognition and legitimacy and it made sense to explore ways in which the collaboration could continue to advance its Six Priorities. Thus began what Philanthropy New York calls the second phase of the Education Funders Research Initiative.

At that time, much public discussion of education was focusing on the de Blasio Administration's efforts to secure funding from New York State for universal pre-K. The EdFunders "phase two planning meeting" presented an opportunity to relay to the larger group of funders what had been learned from the Chancellor about the other areas she intended to concentrate on, which she had outlined in the February meeting. It was at this planning meeting that the basic idea to organize a series of "Listening Sessions" on key topics related to the EdFunders' Six Priorities blossomed.

Almost all of the original Edfunders and a few new members participated in planning the Listening Sessions. This next phase of the project required much less funding and three members stepped up to provide the needed resources quite quickly.

In conjunction with Philanthropy New York, the EdFunders also hosted a late April 2014 panel discussion among Chancellor Fariña and several of her deputies for a wide swath of education funders. At that meeting, Fariña elaborated on many of the priorities that had been reported in the media, related her priorities specifically to the EdFunders Six Priorities and took questions from education funders about the ways she intended to pursue those priorities. That meeting was particularly helpful in establishing closer working relationships with the deputies who would be responsible for implementing reforms with direct bearing on the EdFunders Six Priorities, especially the Deputy Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, under whose oversight implementation of the EdFunders priorities falls.

By June 2014, the EdFunders group had set out a plan to produce “Listening Sessions” in the Fall on the following topics:

- College and career readiness
- Implementation of the Common Core
- Early childhood education and literacy

The relationship with DoE would prove essential in developing the Listening Sessions, which aimed to bring together diverse education stakeholders—practitioners from within and outside of the Department of Education, researchers, funders and policymakers from the City and the State to explore the opportunities and challenges of implementing reforms on those topics. PNY staff and DoE maintained regular communication as the Listening Sessions developed and DoE leaders connected the EdFunders with specific DoE deputies for particular sessions.

Planning for the series extended from the summer of 2014 through early January 2015. Robert Hughes, President of New Visions for Public Schools, who also participated actively in planning them, moderated all three sessions:

#### **OCTOBER 7, 2014—LISTENING SESSION #1: COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS**

[Key Takeaways and Actions to Consider](#)  
[Full Meeting Notes](#)

#### **NOVEMBER 12, 2014—LISTENING SESSION #2: COMMON CORE**

[Key Takeaways and Actions to Consider](#)  
[Full Meeting Notes](#)

#### **JANUARY 21, 2015—LISTENING SESSION #3: LITERACY AND EARLY LEARNING**

[Key Takeaways and Actions to Consider](#)  
[Full Meeting Notes](#)

These Listening Sessions presented productive opportunities for education practitioners to communicate with each other and reflect on the challenges they face and share those experiences with leaders of the Department of Education. That sharing occurred both through leaders’ participation in the sessions themselves and with distribution of the “Key Takeaways and Actions to Consider” from each meeting.

Just a few days before the first Listening Session, the DoE released a “new framework and accountability measures to drive school improvement” that focused on their own “critical components” of their reform efforts: rigorous instruction, supportive environment, collaborative teachers, effective school leadership, strong family-community ties and trust. While not an exact match, there was significant overlap between those publicly announced priority areas and those of the EdFunders.

Staff and representatives from EdFunders also had discussions with DoE leaders in December 2014. The DoE leaders reported that the sessions had been very helpful and the feedback from practitioners had provided important insights.

After the completion of the three planned Listening Sessions in January 2015, the EdFunders group came together once again to discuss next steps. Many of the group of funders associated with the initiative remain connected and interested in continuing to work together on projects that focus on the Six Priorities. These discussions are ongoing, though as this case study goes to press, no decision has been made about a next set of programmatic activities. If there are additional stages for the EdFunders, the underlying vision will continue to be one of consensus-building, evidence-based analysis and constructive dialogue.

For updates, go to [EdFundersResearch.org](http://EdFundersResearch.org).

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## APPENDIX A: SIX PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT MAYOR AND CHANCELLOR

**LITERACY:** Take action to dramatically improve literacy in the early grades, so more students are prepared for high school. This should include intensive interventions for struggling readers, as well as expanded early education, full-day pre-kindergarten and targeted investments in community-based supports for low-income families and black and Latino students, who have the lowest rates of academic success and reading proficiency.

**COMMON CORE:** Use the newly adopted Common Core standards to promote college readiness, by investing greater attention and resources into the teaching of reading, writing, research, analysis, problem solving and other academic behaviors, as well as social and emotional skills to prepare students for rigorous coursework before they graduate.

**COLLEGE AND CAREER PLANNING:** Concentrate more resources, either directly or through partnerships with community-based organizations, in early and ongoing support for college and career guidance especially

for the majority of young people who don't have this support in their own families.

**ACCOUNTABILITY:** Ensure a strong accountability system that uses a wider range of performance measures, making it more informative for and responsive to the needs of school leaders, school staff and families.

**SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:** Retain principals' important ability to control hiring, budgets and curriculum, but establish a clear chain of command that provides supervision and also appropriate support by superintendents and/or network leaders.

**SYSTEMIC SUPPORT:** Strengthen traditional zoned neighborhood schools and develop structures to connect all schools—neighborhood, magnet and charters alike—within given geographic areas or networks.

## APPENDIX B: SUPPORTERS AND ADVISORS TO THE EDUCATION FUNDERS RESEARCH INITIATIVE

### SUPPORTERS:

Altman Foundation  
Brooklyn Community Foundation  
Booth Ferris Foundation  
The Carroll and Milton Petrie Foundation  
Charles Hayden Foundation  
Charles T. Harris III  
Donors Education Collaborative  
Edward W. Hazen Foundation  
Ford Foundation  
Fordham Street Foundation  
JPMorgan Chase Foundation  
Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust  
The Pinkerton Foundation  
Trinity Wall Street  
United Way of New York City

### ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

Claire E. Sylvan, Ed.D., Internationals Network for Public Schools  
Dr. David M. Steiner, School of Education, Hunter College, CUNY  
and CUNY Institute for Education Policy  
James Kemple, Research Alliance for New York City Schools  
James Merriman, New York City Charter Schools Center  
Jeff Henig, Teachers College at Columbia University  
Jennifer O'Day, American Institutes for Research  
John Rogers, UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information  
Studies  
Joseph P. Viteritti, Hunter College, CUNY  
Kim Sweet, Advocates for Children  
Lori Chajet, CUNY Graduate Center  
Sister Paulette LoMonaco, Good Shepherd Services  
Pedro A. Noguera, Ph.D., Steinhardt School of Culture, Education  
and Development and Metropolitan Center for Urban Education  
Richard D. Kahlenberg, The Century Foundation  
Robert Balfanz, Johns Hopkins University  
Robert Hughes, New Visions for Public Schools  
Simone D'Souza, NYC Department of Education  
Stacy Ehrlich, Ph.D., University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago  
School Research  
Warren Simmons, Annenberg Institute for School Reform



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