



CHILDREN'S EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE New Orleans

A large Louisiana foundation committed its resources and influence to help rebuild the school system of New Orleans, post-Katrina. In July 2006, the foundation launched an initiative to support the establishment and sustainability of a network of charter schools in Algiers, a section of the city that was among those least impacted by Katrina.

As part of this initiative, supplemental funding was provided to five of the foundation's high-performing grantees in the education arena. Their collective charge was to work in partnership to support the youth, families, and communities served by these schools.

SEED was invited to serve as the external evaluator for this unique partnership. A primary purpose for the evaluation was to determine how well this ad hoc collaborative framework was working. In the spirit of formative evaluation and with the encouragement of the foundation, one key role played by SEED was to provide ongoing feedback and suggestions regarding how the work of individual partners, pairs of partners, or the entire collaborative might be strengthened.

The SEED Diagnostic was applied in two ways. First, it was used to assess the impacts and interactions of the collaborative as a whole. Second, the work of each of the five partners beyond that of the collaborative was separately assessed; the intent being to determine what additional areas of talent and expertise they might bring to the collaboration.

Among the immediate findings:

- The partners had been encouraged by the foundation to be innovative with new services and service delivery models, but had not yet had adequate access to schools and target populations over extended periods to allow the full value of what they might offer to be realized.
- Much of the work had been 'episodic' and short-lived. Given that the partners needed to figure out how best to fit into school communities that were still in the rebuilding stage on virtually all fronts, this finding was not surprising. There was so much that these school communities had to do to achieve normalcy, and first priority had rightly been given to stabilizing the academic elements.
- The good news was that considerable "unmet synergy potential" was evident and waiting to be tapped. The potential for more ambitious partnering relationships, initially at the program design level but ultimately at the program execution level, existed through pair-wise partnering and also in ventures involving all five partners.
- The five partners felt they were doing a fair-to-good job overall in adopting traits needed to achieve extraordinary results. They are particularly strong as a group in accepting the task of making small successes happen in spite of challenging local conditions. There was also shared understanding regarding what the various stakeholders expected in the way of ultimate success.

SEED continued to work with the partnership throughout the year, attending management meetings, guiding discussions, and promoting new or extended projects. All the partners remained committed to continue working together, supporting after-school programs and building on community school concepts. Replacement funds were found for continuing work with the network of charter schools, particularly with regard to after-school programming. The partners each developed strategic contacts and momentum for moving forward with their organizational missions. One partner was prompted to develop a new after-school curriculum and discovered a new model for delivering its program via service learning.

SEED concluded: Sustained creative partnering across organizations is rarely easy and infrequently leads to bold success. Incentives to partner must be sufficient to overcome the pulls to operate as usual for the good of the home organization. The timing of the collaborative, the minimal overlap across individual partner missions, and the relatively modest financial incentives for some of the partners all worked against the possibility for dramatic innovation. Still, the collaborative left a legacy that should continue to impact the targeted community and greater New Orleans for the better.

