

The Hard Work of Innovation

■ A philanthropy called NewSchools Venture Fund has its fingerprints on some of the leading education reform efforts.

By Eliza Krigman

Over the next several years, approximately \$1 billion will be spent on innovation in education through federal grant programs, nonprofits, and community organizations. Helping to spearhead this effort in the nonprofit sector is the NewSchools Venture Fund, a philanthropy dedicated to improving public education by ensuring that all children, particularly those in underserved communities, have the opportunity to succeed.

“The idea of innovation in education has captured the attention of parents, educators, and the general public,” Ted Mitchell, president and CEO of NewSchools, said. “And at the same time, it’s become a federal education priority.”

Since it launched in 1998, NewSchools has become a household name in the education community with a track record of supporting successful schools and programs, including Green Dot Public Schools and the Academy for Urban School Leadership. Not to mention that NewSchools alumni Joanne Weiss and Jim Shelton now hold prestigious posts in the Education Department: chief of staff to Secretary Arne Duncan and assistant deputy secretary for innovation and improvement, respectively.

Mitchell’s group will focus its efforts on raising \$100 million for an Innovation Fund to support, and help define, the next frontier in education. Big names in philanthropy, including the Walton Family Foundation and the Gates Foundation, have already signed up to support the initiative. Fueling the innovation movement is a desire to break through the old ways of educating children.

Some ventures, such as the Denver School of Science and Technology, which was founded in 2004, have already received money through the fund. A finalist in a nationwide competition for President Obama to come and deliver a commencement speech, the Denver school is a charter school for grades six through 12 where every student uses a wireless-networked laptop and must pass precalculus before graduation. The majority of the students are minorities, and half are the first in their families to be college-bound. Four-year colleges accepted 100 percent of the first senior class.

The Innovation Fund has identified three keys to success—schools, tools, and human capital. “Pulling hard on any one of those levers without integrating the others won’t lead to the desired outcome,” said Mitchell, who emphasized that the whole needs to be greater than the sum of its parts.

Innovation is about execution, rather than any specific practice, and having a “sweat-the-small-stuff mentality” said Scott Given, who led the Excel Academy from 2005 to 2008 and helped the middle school become one of the highest-performing schools in Massachusetts. Given, who served as an entrepreneur-in-residence at NewSchools, is gearing up to take over a low-performing Boston public school next year under the management of his new organization, Unlocking Potential.

Unlike at many charter schools, Unlocking Potential will use a building provided by the Boston school district and will serve the same population of students that attended the chronically underperforming public

school. Given plans to use some of the detail-oriented strategies that worked at Excel.

During his time at Excel, students were not allowed to sharpen pencils during instruction hours. Instead, a child with a broken pencil raised his or her hand, and the teacher brought over a bucket of freshly sharpened pencils. After the school day ended, one student would do the sharpening to replenish the bucket. Otherwise, pupils faced losing valuable learning time.

Tracking homework assignments was equally meticulous: By 11:30 a.m., teachers reviewed work to determine whether anything was missing or incomplete. Not circling answers on math homework or turning in wrinkled paper counted as infractions. By midday, the front office processed all of the homework-status information and notified the parents of children who had not met 100 percent of expectations. Students who didn’t complete assignments attended homework club (study hall) at the end of the day. Upon arrival, they received a sheet explaining why they were there.

“If the students know you care enough about them to track that level of detail, they are going to rise to expectations,” Given said.

Advances in technology, more than ever before, are challenging the traditional methods of teaching, leaders in education say, as well as creating new ways to solve problems and improve feedback.

Using the Internet to overcome geographic boundaries is one strategy to improve education. Begun last fall, Presence

TeleCare provides speech language pathology to children across the country through Web-enabled video conferencing. Its primary mission is to connect “challenged learners with specialized expertise that is often lacking in lots of school districts,” co-founder Clay Whitehead says.

The problem is acute. In a 2008 survey of schools administered by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 71 percent of respondents indicated that their school district had a shortage of qualified speech language pathologists. That figure was up from 68 percent in the association’s 2006 survey and 62 percent in 2004.

Through the Small Business and Innovation Research Program, the government awarded Presence TeleCare a \$100,000 phase-one grant, and the group is eligible to receive a \$900,000 phase-two grant next year.

This fall, Whitehead and his partner, Jack Lynch, will begin using a new tool to help improve the tracking of speech language therapy in an effort to find the best practices and pinpoint trouble spots. Data-driven decision-making, made possible through real-time technology, is a big component of the innovation trend in education.

But finding the right people, in addition to having the right tools, is a must, NewSchools maintains, and that can be challenging. During his time at Excel, Given says he interviewed 500 people a year to fill approximately five positions. A big part of the Innovation Fund’s strategy will be to invest in organizations that train and prepare educators to meet 21st-century demands.

NewSchools, which hopes to finish raising money for the Innovation Fund by early 2011, views itself as working in tandem with federal initiatives such as the Social Innovation Fund and the Investing in Innovation (i3) competition. “We’re not identical organizations,” Mitchell said, but in essence “we come from the same gene pool.”

Last week, 11 organizations—four of which will support work in education—were awarded a portion of a \$50 million pot distributed through the Social Innovation Fund. Created by the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, the innovation fund aims to leverage federal dollars through public-private partnership to boost economic opportunity, youth development, and school support. Philanthropists have already committed \$74 million to match Social Innovation Fund dollars.

Unlike other federal programs where regulators define accountability by how money is spent, the Social Innovation Fund will judge grantees by “whether they deploy money in a way that makes progress measured against the goals articulated in the proposal,” Social Innovation Fund Director Paul Carttar says.

The inaugural class of Social Innovation Fund grantees will serve as intermediaries and will ultimately distribute the money to sub-grantees. In the education field, sub-grantees already identified include College Summit, KIPP DC, and iMentor.

The innovation fund is “a piece of the Obama’s administration’s portfolio of innovation funds,” said Carttar, who communicates regularly with Jim Shelton and Joanne Weiss. Until recently, Weiss led Race to the Top, the administration’s signature education initiative.

Shelton oversees the Investing in Innovation Fund (i3), a federal grant competition for \$650 million in stimulus money available to districts, schools, and nonprofits. Applicants had to submit their proposals in May and are now eagerly waiting to find out who will get to partake in the bounty. As with the Social Innovation Fund, the competition emphasizes leveraging federal funds by building public-private partnerships. Potential grantees will have to obtain matching funds, or in-kind donations, from the private sector equal to at least 20 percent of the grant award.

Mitchell, Carttar, and Shelton want to ensure that their current work contributes

to an information marketplace where the best ideas in education are highlighted. The goal, they say, is to make it easier to match capital with promising organizations and replicate success.

“In the past, innovations came and went because you couldn’t tell which ones worked,” Mitchell said. “In the future, I believe we’ll have a culture that relentlessly measures what works—and mechanisms for sharing that knowledge far and wide.”

Not everyone is starry-eyed about the prospects of the innovation grants, however. “I’ve looked at what’s been submitted” for the i3 competition, said LaRuth Gray, a scholar at New York University’s Metropolitan Center for Urban Education. “What I see, basically, is the opportunity to get more money—that will probably do good things, but nothing that helps move the environment around teaching and learning to meet global demands.”

Others argue that competitive grant funding is not the right approach for distributing federal dollars. A new civil-rights coalition, composed of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the National Urban League, and the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, among others, released a framework for education reform on Monday calling for a shift of focus away from competitive grant programs. “The limited reach of ... market-based frames for federal education funding” puts in peril the United States’ goal of having the highest portion of college graduates worldwide by 2020, the group posits.

David Sciarra, executive director of the Education Law Center, also notes that “it’s hard to sustain any of the reforms made through grant programs,” because the majority of education funding comes from states and districts. ■

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