



PhilanthropyRoundtable
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Education Innovation Spotlights in National Gathering of K-12 Philanthropists

Chicago's Emerging K-12 Hub on Display for the ...



Chicago took center stage as donors, philanthropists, and expert practitioners gathered in the Windy City for an event co-hosted by The Philanthropy Roundtable and Donors Forum on entrepreneurship and innovation in K-12 education.

“Chicago boasts emerging innovators in so many areas of education,” said Adam Meyerson, president of The Philanthropy Roundtable. “Philanthropy represents about one percent of the \$600 billion in K-12 spending; but it is a crucial one percent as it’s been driving education reform and is especially important in the subject being discussed at this conference.”

Firsthand Experience

Attendees visited a number of schools implementing personalized and blended learning models in the Chicago area. Among the schools visited was CICS West Belden, a K-8 charter school in Chicago's Belmont-Cragin neighborhood that currently has 502 students, 98 percent of whom are Hispanic. The school has excelled by leveraging technology to facilitate personalized learning.

“I think it’s awesome when [donors] come and do the site visits. It inspires us to know there are people out there supporting us and are willing to help us make this change for kids in our schools,” said Scott Frauenheim, director of CICS West Belden.

In addition to CICS, attendees had the option to visit Chavez Multicultural Academic Center, a Chicago public school led by Barton Dassinger, a data-driven principal who has revolutionized Chavez with the smart use of technology and outside-the-box thinking. Participants had the opportunity to observe classrooms and

hear firsthand from the students who attend this school located in Chicago's notorious 'Back-of-the-Yards' neighborhood.

Everyone then converged upon Intrinsic Schools, which is housed in a carefully-planned, state-of-the-art facility that was created to help the school better achieve personalized learning mission. Opening in 2014 at a fraction of the cost of most district-school buildings, administrators credit the building design as a significant factor in bucking the traditional patterns of education. Instead of classrooms, the school is made up of "pods" in which as many as 60 students are in the same room receiving instruction from three teachers. Students gather in different areas of the pod depending on their coursework and competency level.

"We wanted to build a model that could then give back to the world. The more people that can actually come and see what we are doing and can understand it in a greater detail, they can take the pieces of it that work for them and take it back to their cities or their schools," said Melissa Zaikos, principal, CEO, and founder of Intrinsic Schools.

"I think the site visits are so important," said Amy Allred of the William E. Simon Foundation. "The reason why any of us are here is to help kids. If we don't get to see kids and don't get to see people putting things into practice, then we miss the point."

As part of the pre-event programming, the The Philanthropy Roundtable hosted a series of discussions on how donors can make meaningful investments in early childhood education and in effective programs that educate high-ability, low-income students.

"While worrying about lifting the floor, we have paid no attention to the ceiling. We have paid no attention to kids who are already above the proficient line," said Chester E. Finn Jr., president emeritus at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the discussion's moderator.

The lack of incentives for school officials to identify and support high-ability, low-income students has led to severe neglect, causing many high-achievers to never reach their full potential. This neglect disproportionately affects low-income students, who often lack resources or support systems to become college-ready.

Bridgespan Group's Kat Kaufmann and Diana Rauner, president of the Chicago-based Ounce of Prevention Fund and Illinois' first lady, led a discussion on a recently released report by the Pritzker Children's Initiative outlining 13 new and entrepreneurial approaches for early childhood investments. While facilitator Stephanie Banchemo from the Joyce Foundation correctly pointed out that some K-12 donors have viewed the early childhood field as somewhat inaccessible or convoluted, both Rauner and Kaufmann explained how ensuring kids are truly ready for kindergarten can accelerate long-term K-12 investments.

Spurring Innovation

During the event's opening conversations, leading investors and entrepreneurs highlighted the critical role that donors play in bolstering education startups. Building on that theme, attendees then had the opportunity to visit 1871 and LEAP Innovations, Chicago's nationally-recognized incubator that helps educators and entrepreneurs reimagine learning and develop next-generation school models. While at 1871, which was named for the innovative, can-do spirit that characterized Chicago after the historic fire of 1871, representatives from five education startup organizations pitched their ideas and received rapid-fire feedback from attendees.

"We believe that by innovating, not reforming, we can create a new paradigm in education that tailors learning around that child instead of forcing them into an antiquated one-size-fits-all system," remarked Phyllis Lockett, CEO of LEAP Innovations, and the event's emcee.

The ideas pitched included:

- Overgrad—a web-based platform to guide students towards college eligibility
- Opportunity—a platform created within KIPP that provides information to parents in rural areas using an SMS-based platform
- The Graide Network—matches teachers with qualified assistants to bolster efficiency
- Parish.Academy—a new provider of low-cost, faith-based “micro” schools
- Edovo—a tablet-based education platform for prison inmates

High-Profile Speakers and Controversial Issues

One highlight was a lively conversation with Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner. The philanthropist-turned-state executive offered his insight on the successes and setbacks he has experienced in education reform during his time in office. He offered candid advice on how the philanthropic sector can become more active in education policy.

Donors also engaged in a timely conversation on a controversial K-12 investment: litigation. Former NBC and CNN journalist Campbell Brown, founder of the Partnership for Educational Justice and editor-in-chief of The Seventy Four, discussed her strategic media campaign to rally support around reversing harmful teacher employment provisions via the judicial system.

“The exciting thing is that this is an incredible opportunity. With this moment in media, the old rules don’t apply. If you dive in...you can really have impact,” said Brown, who co-founded The Seventy Four to place education issues in the national spotlight.

Jim Blew, CEO of StudentsFirst, also detailed a California lawsuit aimed at allowing teachers to remain in their union without funding political activity through membership dues.

“Investing in litigation as a way to advocate for reform is a tricky area. Campbell and I both have some scars from doing it and I think you can learn from our lessons,” Blew said.

Peer-to-Peer, Interactive Learning

In-depth discussions also focused on new Catholic school innovation, getting underserved students to and through college, and how to reverse the trend of high-caliber principals leaving the field. Attendees also spent time in interactive workshops focused on how to create effective advocacy strategies, develop talent within philanthropic portfolios, new thinking on parochial school investing, and how to make teacher professional development meaningful again.

“I thought the discussion today about Catholic school giving was really great. There were healthy tensions and the discussion leader did an incredible job getting a variety of views and perspectives shared,” said Katie Everett of the Lynch Foundation.

“From my perspective, every session that I went to, the topic was apropos in some way to the work that our foundation does,” remarked Jim Parsons of the Brinson Foundation. “The content selection was very good.”