

Closing Gaps, Sustaining Change



The *Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative*:
Exploring the Impact of More Than a Decade of Collaboration

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About The NEA Foundation's Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative

The NEA Foundation *Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative* is an effort to accelerate the achievement rate for students from under-achieving schools via targeted philanthropy. Since 2005, seven union-district-community partnerships were selected to participate in the NEA Foundation's \$13.7 million *Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative*. The program has empowered educators to improve learning for more than 200,000 students. Although each district faced different challenges and developed different solutions, one factor was consistent: successful union-district-community collaboration resulted in improved student learning, teacher satisfaction, and parent engagement.

About The NEA Foundation Reports and Issue Briefs

Occasional reports issued by the NEA Foundation provide in-depth coverage and analysis of innovations designed to increase teaching effectiveness and student achievement. Selected innovations are drawn mainly from the NEA Foundation program sites. Issue Briefs provide an engaging snapshot of impactful features of NEA Foundation's collaborative partnerships.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Addressing the persistent achievement gaps that low-income and minority students and their peers still face in schools across the country will take more than well-intentioned strategies and a desire to change. It will require changing culture—both within schools and in the community at large. Change of this magnitude requires collaboration.

For more than a decade, this belief has guided the work of the NEA Foundation, which through a wide range of philanthropic efforts has encouraged collaborative partnerships among local education associations, school districts, and community organizations as a means to improve student learning and drive systemic reform. In 2004, the NEA Foundation launched the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* initiative, which ultimately fostered deep collaborative partnerships in seven sites. The total investment exceeded \$13.7 million nationwide.

The Theory of Action

The theory of action driving the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* initiative was simple at its core: achievement gaps and other issues of teaching and learning can only be addressed at scale when all stakeholders play a role—and when teachers are viewed as the change agents with the greatest potential to change those students' outcomes—and ultimately, their lives.

Rather than prescribe a specific reform or program for local implementation, the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* initiative encouraged participating sites to focus on issues of teaching and learning using three broad strategies:

- **District and local union collaboration.** Developing closer relationships can contribute to shared understanding of greatest challenges, and ultimately a mutually agreed-upon—and designed—set of strategies to address them. To that end, efforts were made to build the capacity of these very different kinds of organizations—districts and unions—to work together, establishing norms for working relationships that would allow them to transcend the

often-confrontational mindset of traditional collective bargaining and shift towards a shared emphasis on teaching and learning.

- **Family and community partnerships.** Schools—and school systems and the teachers who work within them—do not operate in a vacuum. Fostering support from businesses, nonprofits, foundations, civic authorities, and parents are critical to building support for—and sustaining over time—these kinds of systemic changes.

- **District and school capacity and coherence.** A common understanding of the challenge must pervade the central office and union headquarters—and the individual schools, teachers, and building leaders involved in addressing it. At the district level, transformational efforts must be supported by aligned curriculum, assessments, and resources. Within individual schools, these efforts must also be understood and supported by teachers and building leaders in order to be successful.

Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative Sites

- HAMILTON COUNTY, TENN. (2005)
- SEATTLE, WASH. (2006)
- MILWAUKEE, WIS. (2006)
- SPRINGFIELD, MASS. (2010)
- COLUMBUS, OHIO (2010)
- OMAHA, NEB. (2011)
- LEE COUNTY, FLA (2011)

Together, these three components were an attempt to help ensure that the efforts of participating school districts, unions, and community organizations had the best chance of attaining scale and sustainability. To our thinking, scale involves not only a common understanding of the challenge and strategy across all stakeholders horizontally, but also vertically so individual teachers and schools had meaningful input into their design and execution. And sustainability means not only ensuring that initiatives could continue to be supported after the grant funding ended, but also that support from a broader range of stakeholders could help address issues of leadership transition and other challenges.

The Gaps Grants

Grants were awarded to teams including leaders from the school district, the local teacher’s union, and at least one community organization. Districts were selected following a process and set of criteria that included student population and demographics; local associations affiliated with the National Education Association; regional diversity; and stable association and district leadership. Initial planning grants were issued by invitation to allow the partners to develop an implementation plan.

Together, these groups jointly identified strategies to address achievement gaps, typically developing initiatives targeted at the students or schools with the greatest needs in their community. Most grants emphasized building teachers’ capacity to deliver high quality instruction at the school level, largely through development of professional learning communities, coaching and mentoring, as well as a wide array of professional development opportunities. Many also fostered stronger parent and community relationships through home visits and other activities.

Now, more than a decade after the first *Closing the Achievement Gaps* grant was awarded to Hamilton County, Tennessee, the final grants in the last two sites—Lee County, Florida, and Omaha, Nebraska—are coming to a close. Measurable success was reported across all seven sites, including:

- Significant improvements in student learning and narrowed achievement gaps in the schools most directly impacted by the initiatives

- Improvements in learning environments, as measured by teachers’ increased satisfaction with professional development, opportunities to collaborate, and decision-making ability.
- Higher levels of parental engagement, in the form of home visits and other communications and activities from teachers and their schools.

More importantly, as the funding for the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* grants draws to a close, efforts to sustain collaborative efforts are continuing in all seven sites—even the ones in which funding ended more than five years ago. In some, key elements of initiatives, such as professional learning communities and instructional coaches, have been expanded beyond the pilot schools or enshrined in budgets or teaching contracts. In others, relationships between union and district leaders that were strengthened through the partnership have helped them continue to work together as they face new challenges.

This report briefly outlines the accomplishments of the collaborative efforts in each of the seven cities. It also shares what we’ve learned about making collaborative efforts work—and how to sustain them over time after grant funding expires and leadership changes. The leaders of participating unions, districts, and community organizations offered frank assessments of what it takes to build these kinds of efforts, and it is our hope that their lessons will be taken to heart by school districts, unions, and community organizations across the country who make the decision to focus as a united front on what matters most—teaching, learning, and the children at the heart of all our communities.



What We've Learned:

- **Vision matters.** Breaking through the sometimes contentious nature of traditional district-union relationships and attracting new community partners into partnerships requires a focus on what matters most—students. It's also critical to ensure that this common vision focuses on—and is created with the input of—the change agents who can move education at scale: teachers.
- **Partnerships matter.** The senior leadership of unions and districts set the tone for collaboration, but these efforts must be supported by norms and structures that encourage regular communication, effective decision-making, and the ongoing use of data to monitor progress and make needed course corrections. Distributed leadership is critical both within the partnership and at the individual schools which are putting initiatives in place. And a commitment to ongoing support provided in environments conducive to collaboration and professional growth is a necessity to improve outcomes over time.
- **Community matters.** Reaching out to partners beyond the schools is vital to ensure that collaborative partnerships reflect community needs—and have the right kinds of expertise and resources to support them. Equally important, community partnerships can foster new confidence in and support for public schools. It also can help sustain efforts in the event of leadership turnover, which happens all too frequently in districts and unions.
- **Sustainability matters.** Funding ends. Projects end. New priorities arise. But in the seven *Closing the Achievement Gaps* sites, these collaborative efforts have resulted in lasting changes in schools and districts. The trust that is a byproduct of collaborative work also has strengthened relationships that have helped district and union leaders face common challenges as a unified front.

“When you have the leaders of all the institutions determined to make this work and putting money and staff behind it to make it happen, it’s amazing what can be accomplished,” says Christine Anderson of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association, who served as Executive Director of the Milwaukee Partnership Academy and Principal Investigator during the life of the grant.

Developing the Vision

Working together begins with a shared vision. Bringing stakeholders with varied interests to the table requires a focus on what matters most. District and union leaders must put aside disagreements on bargaining issues and find common ground in what directly impacts students and the ability of teachers to educate them. A common focus also builds credibility among outside stakeholders, including the community organizations that are crucial to collaboration in the long-run.

Frank discussions about current conditions can help build the vision for change. In Springfield, the initial conversations between union and district leaders focused on student data. Doing so fostered a common understanding of shared challenges that has remained strong years later. To this day, “our strongest relationships are with administrators who were in those conversations,” says Nancy DeProse, who served as project manager for the *Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative* for the Springfield Education Association. “If you have a common vision of what you want to accomplish, and you have an eye on that vision, you can start moving forward collaboratively.”

Without a common vision, moving forward is difficult regardless of the level of financial support. In Milwaukee, for example, the union, district, and a broad coalition of existing partners had already prioritized addressing achievement gaps in the city’s schools—and sought the grant for that reason. “We had decided not to run around for money just to have money,” says Anderson. At the same time, however, grant money can be seen as an opportunity for unions to take more of a stake and decision-making ability in issues affecting teaching and learning. “Being able to put money on the table and help the district with goals made a difference,” says Rhonda Johnson, former president of the Columbus Education Association. “It gave us an opportunity to decide how we were going to help teachers, students, and families.”

HAMILTON COUNTY, TENN. (2005)

A ‘New Society’ In the Middle

Focus:	Middle school reform
Partners:	Hamilton County Department of Education (HCDE), Hamilton County Education Association (HCEA), the Public Education Foundation (PEF), the Lyndhurst Foundation
Demographics:	Total enrollment 41,748, student poverty 60.3%
Impact:	Scale and sustainability

The pilot site for the *Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative* had an ambitious, almost audacious goal in mind—nothing less than revamping the middle school experience at all 21 of the Tennessee district’s middle schools. With the support of two exceptionally strong community foundations, this goal became a reality—and has largely been sustained for a half-decade since the NEA Foundation grant ended.

Called Middle Schools for a New Society, the initiative placed a full-time instructional coach in a set of 5 pilot schools. The locally based Public Education Foundation provided data analysis and professional development for teachers and school leaders, including planning retreats, instructional coaching, and networking across schools. Students at participating schools saw significant results on state assessments, and achievement gaps narrowed significantly over the life of the NEA Foundation grant.

To sustain the efforts beyond the five-year *Closing the Achievement Gaps* grant, the Lyndhurst Foundation provided its own \$6 million, four-year grant that expanded coaching beyond the initial grant schools. When external financial support ended in 2012, the district agreed to continue funding the instructional coaches, which are now in place at all of its middle schools.

From Vision to Action

A key challenge to the collaborative work is developing a vision broad enough to galvanize stakeholders that can also be addressed in realistic ways. Not even a multi-million dollar grant can, by itself, bring change at scale across an entire district, so *Closing the Achievement Gaps* partners quickly identified ways in which to match high aspirations with realistic goals, such as piloting efforts at schools with high numbers of minority or high-poverty students for the maximum impact.

In Milwaukee, for example, the goal was “to have all children on grade level in reading, writing, and math,” says Anderson, and to begin the partners identified the 20 schools with the highest poverty rates and high percentages of male unemployment in the neighborhoods that surrounded them. In Lee County, Florida, partners focused on spreading a behavioral model that had made a significant impact at one of the district’s schools to others through teacher training that gradually expanded from a handful of schools to 30 over the life of the grant. Several teams targeted specific feeder patterns of K-12 schools to concentrate efforts across a greater number of years for specific students.

Teachers as Change Agents

To scale efforts and ensure they would last beyond the limited window of the grant, sites largely focused on the common denominator across schools and settings—the classroom teacher. Strategies were developed that fit the local context of each district, but the overall emphasis was on creating school-based teams such as professional learning communities or instructional leadership teams that helped plan professional development targeted to the school’s needs and allowed teachers to collaborate and play a greater role in the instructional direction of their school. In many cases, additional family outreach strategies such as home visits also were intended to help teachers get a better understanding of the hopes and dreams families held for their children, the strengths of students to help them differentiate instruction and teach “the whole child,” and how best to partner with families for student success.

“It’s about having good, challenging rigorous instruction that pays attention to the needs of students,” says Dan Challener, president of the Public Education Foundation in Hamilton County, Tennessee. “You can have instruction that makes a classroom and a school a humane place where you engage with people in a humane way.”

SEATTLE (2006) Helping Students Take Flight

Focus:	<i>Aligned K-12 curriculum and instruction, professional learning communities, home visits to build family and community engagement</i>
Partners:	<i>Seattle Public Schools, Seattle Education Association</i>
Demographics:	<i>Total enrollment 48,496, student poverty 40.5%</i>
Impact:	<i>Improved student achievement, school climate, and community connections</i>

Called “flights,” feeder patterns in Seattle’s schools follow students from kindergarten through high school. The Closing the Achievement Gaps initiative focused on building academic connections among the schools in each neighborhood cluster and strategies to engage families and community members.

The partners focused on aligning curriculum and instruction across elementary, middle, and high schools in two clusters, work that was driven in large part by teams of teachers working together in school-based professional learning communities (PLCs). Student achievement rates surpassed state averages in reading and math. Home visits and family nights helped foster tighter connections with families, and teachers reported gaining greater perspective into students’ personalities, learning styles, and ability to teach “the whole child.”

Collaborative efforts helped enshrine PLCs as a districtwide strategy in a 2010 collective bargaining agreement, and the union and district have since collaborated on the implementation and revision of the district’s professional growth and evaluation system and are currently partnering to address disproportionate discipline.



Commitments to Culture

A key part of empowering teachers as change agents involves providing an environment in which they can collaborate with each other. “It’s about giving people the skills to build trusting relationships within these buildings,” says Tim Collins, president of the Springfield Education Association in Massachusetts.

That vision, in turn, must drive how district and union leaders build and maintain trusting relationships with one another as they commit to collaborative work, as is discussed in the section that follows. Doing so can

be challenging, particularly in places with a history of contentious union-district relationships, but it’s critical if lasting change is to take place where it matters the most—in the classroom.

“Shame, blame, and punish has a tendency to permeate everything,” Collins says. “We have to think about how we behave with one another [impacts] how teachers work with kids.”

THE DISTRICT-UNION RELATIONSHIP: Changing for Collaboration

Collaboration begins at the top. For sustainable change to take place, the district and union must agree to work together on issues that impact teaching and learning, and that commitment begins with senior leaders.

In districts where collaboration has taken root, it often has been the superintendent and union president who took the important first step. In Springfield, for example, during a period of turmoil in the years before the grant, the then-superintendent and union president committed to meet informally. In places with a long history of union-district collaboration, the relationship may already be established—in Lee County, Florida, for example, the current superintendent used to be the district’s chief negotiator—and was supported by the union because of the positive working relationship that developed over the years. However, nowhere should it be taken for granted.

“The relationship between the superintendent and union president is tenuous at best,” cautions Rhonda Johnson, former president of the Columbus Education Association. “You really have to work at the relationship.”

To that end, superintendents and union presidents typically agree to meet regularly to discuss issues as they arise. Leaders often find other ways to support each other. In Columbus, current CEA President Tracey Johnson gives Superintendent Dan Good the opportunity to speak to teachers at union events and ensures that even areas of disagreement don’t become personal attacks. “I can always judge the relationship by how safe I feel,” Good says. “I feel we have an obligation to really model healthy relationships and work towards resolution as a model. That’s an obligation that’s bigger than these two organizations.”

Expanding the Circle

A key part of the role of senior leaders is to help expand the culture of collaboration into both district and union leadership. Doing so is necessary to ensure that decision-making and responsibility for the specific area of collaboration is distributed beyond the two senior leaders—for example, in Milwaukee, one central office administrator was assigned the task of focusing on curriculum during the life of the grant. However, doing so also helps set a tone that can change culture among other leaders in both organizations. “They won’t have good working relationships if we don’t model good working relationships,” says CEA’s Tracey Johnson.

For union leaders, one key is communicating an emphasis on student outcomes—both to district counterparts and internally within the union. “When we make learning conditions for the kids better, we make our own working conditions better,” SEA’s Collins says.

Both district and union leaders need to be intentional about their efforts to build a lasting relationship conducive to collaboration. And while contracts and other contentious issues won’t disappear, “you’re investing in a long-term relationship, so it’s not a win or loss on an item by item situation,” advises Daniel Warwick, superintendent of Springfield City Schools. “It takes investing a lot of time into the relationship and the structures we put into place.”

MILWAUKEE (2006)

School-Based Leadership at Scale

Focus: School-based strategies focused on professional development

Partners: Milwaukee Partnership Academy, comprised of Milwaukee City Schools, Milwaukee Education Association, business leaders, and higher education

Demographics: Total enrollment 82,000; student poverty 81%

Impact: Learning teams in place in all district schools

Milwaukee's schools have long benefitted from a collaborative partnership with deep community roots. The Milwaukee Partnership Academy, which first brought district and union leaders together in the early 2000s, was founded by then-University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Chancellor Nancy Zimpher and attracted a broad coalition of business and higher education interests with the goal of improving educational and economic outcomes in the region.

But the partnership's work with the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* initiative represented the first time the coalition had focused specifically on improving student outcomes in Milwaukee City Schools in measurable ways. The partnership targeted 20 of the district's low-performing schools and focused on improving teacher capacity and leadership. University partners helped with data analysis and identifying high-leverage strategies proven to improve student achievement. Each school created a "learning team," comprised of the principal, the literacy coach, the math teacher leader, and classroom teachers, which analyzed data and developed school-focused action plans that focused on targeted professional development.

Test scores at those 20 schools increased, and teachers gained greater ownership over their schools' action plans and professional learning. Staff turnover declined dramatically, and the district has since implemented key elements of the plan throughout the city. "If you look at Milwaukee Public Schools now, literacy coaches, math teacher leaders, and learning teams are in every single school," says Christine Anderson of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association, who served as co-director of the Milwaukee Partnership Academy during the life of the grant.

Structures for Collaboration

Once district and union leaders agree to deepen their collaboration through a long-term project such as those created through the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* initiative, they must agree to certain norms. Communication is key, and regular meetings should be stipulated in memorandums of understanding. Along with providing an open channel of communication on the specific area of focus, regular meetings "shed light on the fact that there's a lot we agree on," SEA's Collins says. It's also important to keep other stakeholders, such as school board members, apprised of collaborative efforts on an ongoing basis.

A process for determining how decisions will be made also needs to be put into place—and learning how to make decisions within the narrow area of focus of the formal collaboration can help union and district leaders address other, more contentious issues. "When you've developed a lot of trust, you can cross those barriers differently, as opposed to the give and take of traditional bargaining," says Warwick.

Outside facilitators can help in contentious periods. In Springfield, for example, the district and union leadership came to loggerheads over how student surveys would be used in evaluations, but after meeting with a facilitator for just three hours, leaders came up with an equitable compromise—only teachers would access the survey results. "We would have probably ended up in arbitration because we were seeing it from different perspectives," SEA's DeProse says.

School-Level Support

As collaborative projects are planned, it's critical that the people impacted the most—the teachers and building leaders in individual schools—are supported and listened to.

"Teachers and administrators in buildings cannot get the job done without the support of the downtown administration really listening to and supporting the people doing the work in the buildings," Springfield's Collins says.

SPRINGFIELD, MASS. (2010)

A Unified Front for Student Learning

Focus: Home visits, PLCs, collaboration, expanded learning

Partners: Springfield Education Association, Springfield Public Schools, and multiple community partners, including the United Way of Pioneer Valley, the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation, the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County, and the Springfield Housing Authority

Demographics: Total enrollment 25,729, student poverty 87%, student diversity 86.5% (61% Hispanic, 20% Black, 5.5% Other)

Impact: Lasting change in union-district relationship

The Springfield Collaboration for Change (SCC) brought significant improvements in teaching and learning in five of the city's elementary schools with the greatest needs. But the working relationships strengthened through the grants has since helped the district and union navigate significant challenges as a united front.

At the five elementary schools targeted by the grant, improved teacher collaboration and professional learning opportunities were supported by home visits with families and other services from community partners. Students in the grant-supported schools saw gains in the number of students scoring proficient in state

tests, as well as reduced absenteeism and discipline issues. Teachers reported higher quality professional learning opportunities and a greater role in determining them. Home visits and other community outreach were greater in participating schools than the district as a whole.

The trust between the union and district that was strengthened during the grant period played a key role in helping the two organizations avert a state takeover of three of the district's middle schools. Instead, the district and union rapidly negotiated a contract that gave leadership teams of teachers in those schools decision-making powers over curriculum, staffing, schedule and working conditions. Since then, the district and union have focused on collaborative development of new teacher evaluation system that gives teachers a significant role in setting goals and collecting evidence. Collaboration as a strategy to improve student outcomes is now enshrined in the union contract, and district and union leaders meet monthly, resulting in fewer grievances and opportunities to work together in new ways.

"We still have our disagreements, there's no doubt about that," says Tim Collins, SEA president. "But we can come together on things we agree on and present a united front."

Conversely, for implementation to be successful, it's critical that building leaders buy into the project and are willing to support it. In Lee County, Florida, for example, principals were invited to apply for a rapidly expanding in-school training program which ultimately took root in one-third of the district's schools. "We wanted a coalition of the willing," says Cindy McClung, the district's project coordinator and lead trainer.

To build support at the building level, Collins argues it takes two things: principals who are willing to empower teachers and "a critical mass of people who think it's a good idea."

"That increases the chances of things being implemented with fidelity exponentially," he says.

Communication also is critical. In Milwaukee, for example, the partnership focused on getting all schools to standardize the timing of their curriculum. "We got big pushback," says Anderson. "We had to go to 20 different schools... [and] once we explained the 'why,' people did it."

As is the case at the district level, distributed leadership is vital to ensuring new efforts work within schools. In Milwaukee, school-level learning teams were composed of a cross-section of instructional leaders with defined roles, including literacy coaches and math teacher-leaders who took the lead in analyzing data. The role of principal in supporting teacher leadership cannot be understated, and in several sites principals attended the same professional development as their teachers.

Ensuring that teachers would receive ongoing support through such school-based structures as professional learning communities or instructional coaches was a key element of programs at all sites. In Hamilton County, for example, coaches and principals received extensive ongoing support—participating middle school principals, for example, met eight times a year to discuss how the program was going in their respective buildings. “We created a culture of support,” says PEF’s Challenger. “The money starts the work, but culture sustains it.”

Evaluation

Across the sites, data was an emphasis of professional development and capacity-building at the school level. It also should be a function of how collaborative teams work together—with regular reviews on an ongoing basis so data analysis avoids becoming a postmortem instead of a tool to drive continuing change.

A key part of that evaluation should involve reaching out to stakeholders—and no stakeholders are more important than families. One element of family visits in Seattle, Springfield, Columbus, and elsewhere was the opportunity to understand more deeply how collaborative efforts impact students’ lives. “You really don’t know what kids face every day if all you see is what’s in the classroom,” Columbus’ Rhonda Johnson says.

Teacher surveys also were used as a measure of the effectiveness of professional learning communities and other school-based efforts in several sites. In some places, collaborative teams ensured that another key stakeholder—the student—was heard through surveys and other events. In Hamilton County, for example, an annual event included a roundtable conversation of middle school students talking about what was working.

In Lee County, teachers learned a specific questioning process which helped them identify what is most important to their students, in order to help them teach students to plan for success. “If we don’t stop and talk with the kids, you don’t get to see what really matters,” Lee County Public Schools’ McClung says.



ADDITIONAL PARTNERSHIPS:

Broadening the Vision

A guiding premise of the Gaps Initiative was that involving additional partners in district-union collaboration would provide additional supports for students and schools and help ensure stability. In practice, these third parties served a variety of crucial roles, and in many places were essential to the sustainability of the programs.

“Just like we need to take a holistic approach in dealing with the challenges our children face, we need to do that with each other in the community,” says Collins. “You can’t do this work without having strong allies in different places.”

From One, Many

In most sites, a single community partner served as a strong third voice in the partnership. “There’s value in a third party that has the same goal but different responsibilities,” says PEF’s Challenger.

In some sites, a coalition of partners helped bring together a broader group of stakeholders. The Milwaukee Partnership Academy predated the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* initiative by several years. Driven by former University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Chancellor Nancy Zimpher, who made support of the region’s economic development and education a key priority of the higher education institution, the partnership helped stop finger-pointing about the performance of the city’s schools among stakeholders, according to Anderson. In similar fashion, the host of outside partners that made up the Springfield Collaboration for Change created new relationships for union and district leaders, including the regional housing authority, which provided services in several of the pilot schools.

This kind of growth appears organic, but it must be deliberate. As with the union-district relationship, the Milwaukee Partnership Academy began with a core group of leaders who reached out to others. “The more they met, the more other leaders wanted to be at the table,” Anderson says.

It’s important for the core leadership team to identify a point person to coordinate with community partners. “Without that point person, it doesn’t work,” Anderson says.

Leveraging Expertise

Outside partners also bring with them specific areas of expertise. In Hamilton County, the locally based, education-focused Public Education Foundation had a full-time staffer whose efforts were dedicated to supporting the middle schools project, in particular convening and helping participating principals understand and make use of information in new ways. In Wisconsin, the broader Milwaukee Partnership Academy was initially driven by higher education partners. When efforts focused on school-based strategies, the university partners helped identify and provide training on high-leverage strategies proven to improve student achievement and train teachers on data collection and analysis.

“Everybody has a strength to bring to the table,” Anderson says. “All of those strengths have to be honored by everyone else. Otherwise it’s a hodgepodge.”

New Roles

Working with additional partners also provides an opportunity for the union to be seen as advocates in wider circles. “It’s important for the community to understand that the union stands for teacher quality, student success, and social justice for families,” Columbus’ Rhonda Johnson says.

A higher profile among the kinds of community groups that schools don’t traditionally partner with can be particularly valuable. In Springfield, for instance, the collaboration became involved with the Pioneer Valley Project, which brought together unions, congregations, and social service agencies. These new relationships

reaped dividends when the city's school committee considered cutting funding for home visits—one of the cornerstones of Springfield's collaborative efforts. More than 350 people attended the district's open budget hearing, ultimately convincing the committee to continue the visits.

COLUMBUS (2010) The 100% Project

Focus: Improved family relationships and instructional quality

Partners: Columbus Education Association, Columbus City Schools, United Way of Central Ohio

Demographics: Total enrollment 50,630, student poverty 80%, diversity 70% (Black: 57.8%, Hispanic: 6.8%), teacher retention 94%

Impact: Teacher supports expanded district-wide

Former Columbus Education Association President Rhonda Johnson calls collaboration the “Columbus way.”

The *Closing the Achievement Gaps* grant allowed the district and union to move forward on two areas of ongoing importance to leaders of both organizations—better relationships between schools and families and improved transitions between grade levels. Targeting 14 schools in two feeder patterns, the effort, known as the 100% Project, focused on improving instructional quality through peer assistance and review (PAR) mentoring and evaluation. After being piloted in the grant schools, the PAR program ultimately was expanded throughout the district as part of the state certification process for new teachers. Teachers, parent liaisons, and instructional assistants also participated in more than 1,100 home visits and other community outreach during the grant period.

As part of the grant's focus on instructional quality, more than 45 teachers have applied for National Board Certification, and more than 90 percent of the district's teachers were rated as skilled or accomplished during annual performance reviews. Just as importantly, the collaborative work helped maintain the focus on students and schools during leadership transitions, says Johnson, who now works in the mayor's office. “We're all here for the sake of the children in the district,” she says.

“It was only successful because the vast majority of people in the audience were not teachers—they were people we had built relationships with who became the advocates for keeping this program alive,” SEA's Collins says.

Maintaining Focus

Outside partners also can help maintain the focus on collaboration, in part by holding union and district leaders to their word. It's also no secret that districts (and to a lesser extent union locals) often face considerable leadership turnover. Lee County saw five different superintendents in five years, but each leader remained focused on the collaborative *Closing the Gaps through Choosing Excellence* project, supported by the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* initiative in large part because of the local foundation's support—and the personal support of its CEO, Marshall Bower. “He personally made it clear it was a priority,” McClung says.

In Hamilton County, a second local foundation—the Lyndhurst Foundation—stepped in to provide continued funding after the NEA Foundation grant expired. The additional time allowed for deeper implementation and more evidence that the coaching and other supports were worth funding by the district itself.

Parents and the Public: An Area of Opportunity

Despite home visits and other community outreach efforts, it will be vital to engage the community—and not just community organizations—more deeply in collaborative efforts for them to be sustained over time.

Parents, in particular, can be strong advocates for collaborative efforts, according to Challenger. “Make sure you're not using them as funders or spokespeople, but engage them in the work,” he says. “Then they'll be your best advocates.”

To engage the broader community, developing a comprehensive communications strategy is critical in order to ensure the school's efforts are supported. Social media can be a particularly powerful tool if used to engage with the local community.

“Public schools today need public support,” Challenger says. “Take every opportunity to bring the community in to see what's going on in schools. That's critical to building a public for the public schools.”

Sustainability

Collaborative efforts can outlast the timeframe and scope of the grant. In most of the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* sites, grant funding came to a close at least several years ago. In some cases, the initial area of focus was sustained. In others, discrete elements of the initiative were preserved or even expanded beyond pilot sites. The capsule summaries of all seven sites that are included throughout this report focus on the lasting impact of the grants, but the benefits of collaboration also have been much broader.

Across all sites, collaboration around a relatively narrow area of teaching and learning often had a long-lasting positive impact on overall relationships between the district and the union. In Springfield, for example, the expanded collaboration allowed the district and union to work together to avert a stake takeover of several middle schools by negotiating a new contract in 30 days. “There was no way we could have done that without the ability to trust our superintendent,” says SEA’s DeProse. In other districts, a focus on collaboration has helped maintain relationships through leadership transitions.

Planning for Sustainability

Sustainability isn’t just a matter of happenstance, but intentional planning. Strategies can be put into place to increase the likelihood that collaborative efforts will continue over time, including:

- **Integrating goals.** Collaborative efforts always should be placed in the context of the district’s broader objectives. For example, the Omaha partnership worked to review the goals of the grant to ensure they were aligned with the district’s overall strategic plan. “This was important to show that the grant is not ‘one more thing’ to do for schools,” the partners wrote in their final report.
- **Consider the impact of change at the building level.** No matter their potential benefit, new initiatives handed down from the central office always translate into challenges for teachers. “When it filters down to schools, teachers get inundated with change that doesn’t make any sense to them, and there’s no continuity,” Milwaukee’s Anderson says. Communication is critical to ensure that teachers see the context and benefit of collaborative efforts.

OMAHA, NEB (2011) Collaborating for Equity

Focus:	School-level leadership teams, emphasis on family and community
Partners:	Omaha Education Association (OEA), Omaha Public Schools (OPS), and The Empowerment Network
Demographics:	Total enrollment 51,928, student poverty 73%, diversity 70% (Black: 26%, Hispanic: 33%), teacher retention 92%
Impact:	School-level instructional leadership team model to be replicated throughout district

The Omaha Collaborating for Equity project worked with nine schools to create instructional leadership teams (ILTs) to guide professional development and encourage collaboration among teachers in each building. The school-based teams were supported by a Teacher Summer Institute, which brought together 80 principals and teachers from participating schools to focus on strengthening teacher leadership capacity.

Outside evaluators reported improved teaching strategies at participating schools, as well as an emphasis on a greater focus on families and communities. As the project draws to a close and the union leadership changes, the emphasis is on continuity. The OEA’s new president was involved in the work and plans to continue to support it after funding ends. Just as importantly, the ILT structure that was developed in the grant schools is now in place in every Omaha school—a stipulation added to the teacher contract as a result of the project. As a result, the ILT teams in the nine participating schools will continue their work and may be tapped to train the new teams in the districts other schools.

“It is hoped their expertise will be utilized in the future,” the partners wrote in their final report.

• **Distributed leadership.** Principal turnover can be just as challenging to the health of ongoing initiatives as leadership change at the top of the district. Ensuring that collaborative efforts are “owned” by a broad team within each school helps mitigate the impact of leadership turnover. In Milwaukee, for example, the important roles that literacy coaches and math teacher leaders play in the school-level learning teams has provided continuity in the face of principal change.

• **Building support at the school level.** In Hamilton County, instructional coaches proved so popular in their buildings that principals and staff urged school board members to approve funding to maintain the program once private grant money expired. “It wasn’t the head of the teachers’ association or the superintendent going to the board begging,” says Challenger. “It was the people in the buildings who said this is a ‘got-to have.’”

• **Careful planning for expansion.** Moving beyond pilot schools is critical for an initiative’s long-term sustainability, but a roadmap should include costs and funding sources for doing so. In Lee County, training expanded from 10 schools to 30 over the life of the grant without significant changes in funding. “Don’t outrun your resources,” says McClung.

In Hamilton County, the partners focused from the start on sustainability, with the district agreeing to pay for more of the costs of instructional coaching if it was proven to have an impact on student learning—which it did, prompting the district to ultimately support and expand the coaches to all middle schools. “One of the things we did really well was think about the end game,” says the PEF’s Challenger. “When the private money goes away, you don’t want things to go back to the way they were before.”

• **Evolving based on changing needs.** In Columbus, home visits are continuing beyond the life of the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* grant—but with a different context. Because Ohio’s new third grade reading guarantee prevented some students from advancing, administrators, teachers, and classified employees are now making home visits to share how they’re supporting these students and making sure that they’re successful. “It may not look exactly the same, but the work is continuing,” says Tracey Johnson.

• **Succession planning.** Leadership changes can’t always be anticipated, but expanding the collaborative team to represent a cross-section of district and union leadership can help ensure that common goals remain a priority. In Columbus, for example, a new union president and superintendent are continuing to seek opportunities to build on the work of the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* grant. “Our predecessors were able to start and we were able to finish this work,” says CEA’s Tracey Johnson.

LEE COUNTY, FLA. (2011) Scaling a Successful School Model

Focus:	Professional development and school-level collaboration
Partners:	Lee County Public Schools, Teachers Association of Lee County, The Foundation for Lee County Public Schools
Demographics:	Total enrollment 91,222, student poverty 70%, diversity 52% (Black 15%, Hispanic: 35%), teacher retention 93%
Impact:	Expanded professional development and coaching to one-third of district schools

Largely through the efforts of one principal and his staff, Lee County had seen achievement gaps narrow, then vanish, at one of its Title 1 elementary schools. The *Closing the Achievement Gaps* grant helped the district and union work together and with community partners to spread that model, known as the “*Choosing Excellence Initiative*,” throughout the district. “In a district of 100 schools, it’s hard to get the message out,” says Cindy McClung, the district coordinator who led training for the grant.

The NEA Foundation grant helped expand training to additional Lee County schools on the Glasser Quality School model and Choice Theory, which focuses on student behavior and responsibility, including self-evaluation and goal-setting. Additional training helped deepen the district’s focus on the Sterling Quality Model. Elementary, middle, and high schools in each of the district’s three zones were selected to ensure consistency across grade levels.

Students in participating schools said they were aware of how to set and monitor personal goals and reported positive attitudes about their school. Achievement gaps among subgroups in participating schools were significantly narrowed, especially among those that had received training for three or more years. Ultimately, teachers in 30 schools received extensive initial training on “purposeful student engagement,” followed by ongoing modeling, coaching, and feedback by coaches and release-time teachers in each school. What began in one school has now shifted instruction in one-third of the district.

Conclusion

Collaboration works. Few initiatives in the education space have been sustained over as long a time as the NEA Foundation’s decade-long investment in the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* initiative. The time, thinking, and financial resources invested in collaborative reform resulted in specific initiatives that, with the active participation of educators in their design and execution, have made a meaningful impact in the lives of students in schools across the country.

“Too often people wonder if private investment can make a long-term difference,” says Challenger. “The fact that we’re talking in 2016 about something that started in 2004 is proof that it can—if it’s done right.”

Equally importantly, the emphasis on collaboration has been felt far beyond the narrow goals of these collaborative partnerships. “Trust helped us in a lot of ways not associated with the grant,” says Springfield Superintendent Daniel Warwick. “It has helped us overall.”

In different ways, each of the participating sites that participated in the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* initiative is continuing to emphasize collaboration among districts, unions, and community partners. In Columbus, leaders consider the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* grant funding “seed money to develop new partners and infrastructure,” says Superintendent Good. With the grant at an end, the collaborative team now is focused on fostering relationships with new partners, including ones providing after-school activities in one of the district’s feeder patterns.

“For too long, we’ve focused on the student as the unit of change, when [their challenges] are symptomatic of all of the other things that are going on in the community,” says Good. “These partnerships make sense because all these entities have some influence on students and their homes. That’s the value of it.”

As the initiative draws to a close, the question turns to how best to support other unions, districts, and other organizations as they work together for the common good of their communities’ children moving forward. One possibility is to highlight the partnerships that have seen results from their efforts, as this report attempts to do. Another would be for teams beginning the challenging work of working better together to seek out mentor districts that can show the way. However, it is clear to us that these kinds of collaborative partnerships should—and must, for the sake of our students and the challenges they still face—continue.

Public schools, the teachers that work in them, and the communities they serve, all face vast challenges in the years to come. Finding areas of common ground will be critical, as will be preparing leaders and educators to identify opportunities to collaborate.

“Sometimes the focus is very narrow and we get lost in the weeds,” says CEA’s Tracey Johnson. “This work has taken me out of the weeds.”





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