

## BALL FOUNDATION FORMS NEW PARTNERSHIPS TO IMPROVE LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT

*Rex Babiera*

The Ball Foundation is pleased to announce two new partnerships with Allentown (Pennsylvania) School District (ASD) and Rowland (California) Unified School District (RUSD). Both districts were chosen in a selective process from a pool of 180 mid-sized urban school districts throughout the country. This process started last summer and proceeded through multiple stages, each of which revealed a deeper level of understanding about the district candidates. All foundation staff members who participated agree that the partnership search was an incredible learning experience about partnership itself: what it means to the foundation’s work and what the foundation expects in a partner (see p. 2).

Dr. Robert Hill, executive director of the Ball Foundation, said, “The districts we selected are already doing great work in teaching reading, writing, and oral language. Our partnership will build on those strengths to reach the goal of increased literacy achievement for all

Demographics of New Partnership Districts		
District	Allentown	Rowland Unified
Total enrollment (approx)	18,000	18,000
Hispanic and African-American students	74%	64%
Students eligible for free or reduced lunch	67%	59%
English language learners	17%	34%

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# FOUNDATION DESIGNS A COMPREHENSIVE PROCESS TO IDENTIFY NEW DISTRICT PARTNERS

Rex Babiera

Because of deeply held beliefs about partnership (see below), the foundation designed and implemented a comprehensive process to identify its next school district partners. This nine-month process was recently completed (see p. 1). The process forced the foundation to become clearer about its work — what the foundation has to offer as a partner, as well as the characteristics to look for in a partner. Ultimately, it reinforced the foundation’s belief in the importance of partnership in the difficult work of transforming schools.

## Beliefs about partnership

- Partnership is an active, mutually beneficial relationship in which the foundation and its school district partner create an adaptive process for transformation.
- The foundation and its partners identify shared goals, work together to realize them, and use continuous feedback and collective learning to inform and improve the work on an ongoing basis.
- The foundation and its partners collaborate to maintain coherence between the partnership work and a district’s overall mission.

The following phases describe the process that ultimately led to the selection of Allentown School District and Rowland Unified School District as the newest foundation partnerships. The clarity that this process brought to the foundation’s work and the spirit of inquiry underlying the process helped start powerful learning relationships between the foundation and each school district. These relationships are critical to the success of the new partnerships.

**Table 1: Demographics of Potential Partner Districts**

Total enrollment	10,000 to 60,000 students
Students eligible for free or reduced lunch	At least 45%
Any combination of African-American, Native American, Hispanic-American, or English-language learners	At least 45%

## Phase 1: Defining the strategic universe

Since 1999, the foundation has focused on partnerships with mid-sized urban school districts as the most strategic place to realize its vision: a high-performance education system in which all children learn at high levels regardless of race, national origin, socioeconomic status, native language or culture. Thus, the first step in the partnership search was to identify all the mid-sized urban school districts in the country, using a set of demographic filters (see Table 1). In keeping with the vision, the foundation looked for districts that had significant populations of students in poverty, African-American, Native American or Hispanic-American

## The Ball Foundation

The Ball Foundation is a 30-year-old non-profit operating foundation that conducts programs in two areas, Career Vision and Education Initiatives. The foundation also undertakes research to ensure the continuous improvement of its programs and practices. The foundation's mission is to help individuals recognize and develop their potential.

### Board Members

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students, and English-language learners.

Approximately 180 school districts met all these demographic criteria. Each was sent information about the foundation and an invitation to explore a possible partnership. Each interested district was asked to submit a two-page letter of interest describing its mission, strategic vision of the future, and its identity as a district. They were also asked for a summary of their latest elementary state standardized test scores in reading and/or language arts.

***Phase 2: Searching for compatible values and beliefs***

Out of the pool of 180 mid-sized urban districts, 30 responded to the invitation. At this stage, the priority was to determine which districts were philosophically coherent with the foundation. Given the relatively short time frame for partnerships (four or five years), it was important to find districts

<b>Table 2: Guiding Questions for Gauging District Compatibility</b>
How congruent are the district's mission, vision, and beliefs with our mission, vision, and beliefs?
How does the district describe its goals (student achievement and others)? What are they? Are they congruent with our goals? For example, are student achievement goals described in terms of meeting external mandates or in terms of excellence and equity?
Does the district have a literacy focus? How does the district describe its literacy focus?
What is the district's attitude toward organizational, adult, and student learning?

whose core beliefs and guiding principles were most compatible with the foundation's. There would simply not be enough time to spend several years convincing a district of

the foundation's theory of change for school transformation.

To narrow the number of districts to move into the next round of inquiry, a set of guiding questions was used to assess the letters of interest received from the districts (see Table 2).

Ultimately, 15 out of the 30 districts were selected to participate in the next round of the partnership search.

<b>Table 3: District Organizational Profile Document List</b>
Summary district budget for 2005-2006
Job descriptions (superintendent, principal, teacher)
Blank evaluation form/documents (superintendent, principal, teacher)
District organizational chart
District strategic plan
District improvement plan
School improvement plan (for one school of district's choice)
Teacher professional development plan (for the district as well as for one school of district's choice)

***Phase 3: Determining a readiness for partnership***

At this stage of the process, a district organizational profile was designed to help determine how ready each district was for a partnership with the Ball Foundation. The profile included a questionnaire intended to create a picture of the current reality of each of the remaining 15 districts and a list of documents for review (see Table 3).

## IDENTIFYING NEW DISTRICT PARTNERS

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In the questionnaire, each district was asked to identify its top two areas of strength and top two greatest challenges in improving student literacy performance. The questionnaire also asked about the process for development and use of the district strategic plan, the district improvement plan, and school improvement plans. This helped determine the extent to which literacy improvement was a priority and a focus for the district.

Other questions covered how principals are prepared, selected and inducted in the district and what mentoring or coaching for professional staff exists. These questions, and the teacher professional development plans, helped gauge the extent to which adult learning was a priority and a focus for the district.

Most of the inquiry was aimed at determining the fit of the foundation's work with the district's strategic plan (identified mission, vision, goals, strategies, and tactics). Close coherence in this area would be a strong indicator of readiness. Other questions helped determine the level of stability and continuity of the district's leadership, governance, and finances — signs of a solid infrastructure of support for a partnership, another important indicator of readiness.

After reviewing the 15 districts' organizational profiles, the foundation staff narrowed the number of potential district partners down to five. The final step in the selection process was a two-day site visit to each of the remaining five districts.

### *Phase 4: Exploring the possibilities*

Each of the five finalists had already submitted a great deal of information that revealed

many of the districts' strengths. The site visits gave the foundation the opportunity to meet with a broad cross-section of stakeholders in the district, begin building trust and relationships, and explore with them what would be possible in a partnership. To determine which of the districts would be the best fit for the foundation, it was necessary to take as holistic a view as possible within the confines of a two-day site visit.

Each site visit was planned by a design team made up of foundation staff and district leaders. This modeled how the foundation and the district would work together in a partnership. The foundation wanted to demonstrate its belief that a partnership is built upon a spirit of learning together and co-creation. Thus, the visits were designed to create opportunities for conversation and dialogue between the visiting team and a broad representation of stakeholder groups in the district (superintendent, cabinet, principals, teachers, instructional leaders at the district level, parents, community members, board of education members, union representatives).

Another purpose was to get an on-the-ground view of the district's current reality, which heretofore had only been described in writing. Appropriately, each site visit included visits to two or three schools where there were opportunities to observe teacher teams and literacy coaches in their authentic work.

At the end of each site visit, foundation staff members facilitated a debrief using the questions: What showed up during the site visit? What did we learn (about ourselves and each other)? What squares with our beliefs? What questions are still running around in our

**Table 4: Reflection Guide for Partnership Selection**

Category	Probing Question (examples)
Organizational Learning	What learning practices did you observe at the school and district level? How are the adult learners engaged in planning and delivering their learning opportunities?
Organizational Capacity-Building	How are they building capacity in the schools and at the district?
Leaderful Behavior	To what extent did you observe a shared commitment and shared responsibility for the success of all students?
Vision and Mission	Are the vision and mission driven by compliance or by principles and values? Who owns the vision and mission? Who acts on them?
Systems View	Where did we see evidence of connections and disconnections in the system? How did these show up in the work?
Literacy Practices and Data Use	To what extent do schools use a common district literacy framework? To what extent do teachers meet in grade-level and cross-grade level meetings, plan together, and/or look at student work together?
Relationships	What potential do you see for building positive working relationships with the people we met? Is the district open to our roles as coaches, consultants, and critical friends?
Individuals and Groups	What is the quality of superintendent leadership? How does the board of education exhibit leadership at the policy level? How strong is the principal corps, especially in terms of instructional leadership? Do the employee unions lead in ways that promote the district's mission?
Equity	What are the awareness levels of staff, parents, students, and the community regarding issues of equity in and throughout the district?
Communities of Practice	What evidence did we see of the existence and action of communities of practice?
Family Engagement	What parent assets did we observe that could be utilized in a partnership? To what degree are parent voices heard and honored in the district?
Resources and Assets	How comprehensive was the human resource base in the district? How available to the district and schools is the asset base of the community?

head? Finally, after all site visits were completed, the foundation held a follow-up conference call with each district to address questions still remaining, to find out what had happened in the district since the visit, and to explore further each district’s vision of what the partnership work would be.

***Phase 5: Making the final selection***

Before making the final decision, a list of about 60 probing questions in 12 categories was developed that allowed the foundation to reflect on each of the districts and what was learned about them through the entire process. Table 4 lists the categories and representative questions from each.

Finally, the process returned to a question

with which it had begun: What is the foundation’s end goal for new partnerships? Reaching a new clarity and commitment to answering this question led to a list of desired characteristics (see below):

- Opportunity to employ core competencies and strategies together in one place where there is an identified need for all of them
- Sufficient readiness for partnering: ability to be adaptive, willingness to enter into learning relationships, ability to listen, openness to new possibilities, risk-taking organization
- District capacity to be flexible and fluid
- Ability to see foundation as an equal partner with the district, where the foundation would be a significant driver of

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## IDENTIFYING NEW DISTRICT PARTNERS

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- transformation
- Willingness to embrace foundation's process competencies as well as content strategies
- Evidence that transformation is probable
- Fit of district into a potential array of partners that would explore all the foundation's content strategies
- Success would provide an entry point into a national conversation about transforming school districts

The two districts that the foundation selected, Allentown School District and Rowland Unified School District, ultimately showed the strongest evidence of these characteristics.

As preparations begin for designing each partnership, the foundation is confident that the process used to identify these two districts has led to a greater level of clarity about the work as well as a shared commitment to inquiry and learning with the new partners. The Ball Foundation encourages all external organizations that work with school districts, and all school districts seeking external support, to consider cultivating stronger and deeper partnerships as a way to generate the sustainable transformation necessary for all students to achieve to their highest potential. ■

### NORTHVIEW'S DATA DIGGERS

The data diggers team – Northview's latest process for using data to drive instruction – came together informally a few months ago to help teachers gather, analyze and draw conclusions from data. "One of the great strengths of the process," says Todd Visser, a teacher from Highlands Middle School, "is the realization that a small group of committed people can lead the district towards big changes instead of trying to get everybody to do everything."

The data diggers see themselves as a natural next step in Northview's data evolution. As evidence of their success, the data diggers point to the increased occurrence of what they call "breakthrough conversations" in school level teams, where everyone realizes that things have to be done differently.

With time, the data diggers would like to see themselves acquiring a larger, more formal role in the district. They see their work tying in with the other critical district initiatives around literacy and professional learning communities – eventually becoming what they refer to as the "core of the school improvement process."

# NORTHVIEW LEARNS LESSONS ABOUT USING DATA TO DRIVE INSTRUCTION

Jackie Brayman and Srik Gopalakrishnan

When the Northview partnership began in 2001, both district and foundation staff felt that the system's ability to gather, analyze, and disseminate data at every level would be the partnership's destination. Neither realized that continuous access to accurate data was actually the beginning of a powerful learning journey, not the final outcome of this tremendously successful partnership.

As Northview created the organizational structures and supportive relationships to provide just-in-time data to all staff, they realized that their student demographics were shifting; the newly enrolling students were more ethnically and socio-economically diverse than past Northview students. "Once we realized this," said Superintendent Mike Stearns, "we knew that we had to change our instructional practices to meet the differing needs of our new students while maintaining our commitment to academic excellence for all students." Teachers, principals, and central support staff came together, studied the data, and agreed that adopting a system wide focus on literacy was the most effective course of action to honor the goals of academic excellence and equity for all students.

## Data-Driven Literacy Instruction: A Systems Perspective

To support their system-wide literacy focus, Northview decided to use the lens of culture, competencies and conditions to design, monitor, assess and redesign their literacy plans and practices. "We were influenced by Wagner and Kegan's work on change leadership," said Stearns.

### *Culture*

Over the life of the partnership, the North-

view staff had developed a deeply ingrained belief that data is critical to inform instructional decisions. It is standard practice for the staff to use data at and across grade levels and departments within buildings as well as across buildings.

The effective use of data has become the springboard for determining or creating what works in literacy instruction system-wide.

### *Competencies*

Northview teachers and administrators not only use their data to determine what students need, but also how they need to modify or add to their own professional repertoire to get the best results for students.

### *Conditions*

In designing their systemic literacy initiative, Northview is attending to a major factor that is often overlooked in systems transformation, the alignment of structures, policies and resources to support and sustain the initiative. Northview has committed to ensuring that Board policy supports literacy; to developing structures that enable the adults to learn collaboratively around literacy; and to intentionally aligning expenditures with their literacy effort.

As Northview continues to address challenges in data and literacy to meet the needs of a more diverse student population, various teams such as the data diggers (see p. 6) and the literacy microcosm team work to continuously assess the learning needs of the district and plan for short and long term interventions. Using data as the catalyst for change, the district hopes to achieve its vision of providing the very best instruction, every day for every student. ■

The Ball Foundation  
800 Roosevelt Road, E-200  
Glen Ellyn, IL 60137

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students. We believe that working with educators in a district to improve their professional practices will have a positive impact on their students' learning."

Speaking about what she expects the foundation partnership to be, Dr. Maria Ott, Superintendent of RUSD, said, "I think we will have very meaningful outcome-driven conversations about teaching and learning and what constitutes the kind of teaching that's going to move our population that is so diverse."

Dr. Karen Angello, Superintendent of ASD, added, "I hope that we will develop and increase a community of learners among our staff, building on the conversation and collegiality that was apparent when we met with Ball Foundation staff. We could improve student achievement, and we could improve instruction through the collaboration that the foundation would facilitate for us."

Planning for the first year of these partnerships starts this spring. ■