Kick-Starting Reform:
Three city-based organizations showing how to transform public education

Indianapolis
New Orleans
Detroit

www.cee-trust.org

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About CEE-Trust

CEE-Trust is a growing network of city-based foundations, non-profits, and mayors’ offices that support education innovation and reform. CEE-Trust is a convener, collaborator, and consultant, helping its members create vibrant ecosystems for education reform across the country. CEE-Trust was founded by The Mind Trust in 2010.

**CEE-Trust’s Members**

- The Arizona Community Foundation
- The Teaching Trust–Dallas
- The Thomas B. Fordham Institute–Dayton
- The Rodel Foundation of Delaware
- Innovative Schools–Delaware
- The Donnell-Kay Foundation–Denver
- The Skillman Foundation–Detroit
- The Mind Trust–Indianapolis
- The Kauffman Foundation–Kansas City
- The Hyde Family Foundations–Memphis
- Tennessee Charter School Incubator–Memphis/Nashville
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- New Schools for New Orleans
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About Public Impact

Public Impact’s mission is to dramatically improve learning outcomes for all children in the United States, with a special focus on students who are not served well. A national education policy and management consulting firm based in Chapel Hill, NC, Public Impact is a team of researchers, thought leaders, tool-builders, and on-the-ground consultants working with leading education reformers. For more on Public Impact, please visit www.publicimpact.com.

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Foreword

City-based organizations are an undertapped resource in the education reform space. Their ties to funding, civic, education, and business communities in their cities make these organizations (from city-focused foundations to education reform non-profits) uniquely positioned to kick-start cross-sector movements for education transformation. City-based organizations can align funding, push for local policy change, attract innovative programs, and work to create an overall ecosystem that supports education reform.

The Mind Trust has engaged in this kind of work in Indianapolis since 2006. We launched the CEE-Trust network in 2010 to connect with other, similarly focused city-based education reform organizations. CEE-Trust is a convener, collaborator, and consultant—helping its 22 members across the country share best practices and develop new strategies for education reform.

As part of our work at CEE-Trust, we’ve had conversations with leaders in different cities interested in the strategies and practices employed by CEE-Trust member organizations. During these conversations we often hear a similar set of concerns and questions:

- We’ve been funding education activities for years, why aren’t we making any real headway?
- How can we attract more talent to the education sector in our city?
- How can we get more great charter schools in our city?
- How can we leverage our resources to drive systemic change?
- What would it take to start a CEE-Trust member organization in our city?

The purpose of this paper is to answer these questions and help leaders in different cities identify the key elements to starting a new city-based education reform organization. We draw from the examples of three nationally noted CEE-Trust member organizations: The Mind Trust in Indianapolis, New Schools for New Orleans, and The Skillman Foundation in Detroit. We tell the stories of these organizations, exploring their organizational models, strategies, and long-term theories of change.

To draft each profile, we interviewed the organizations’ leaders and other stakeholders in each city. We describe each organization’s accomplishments to date, its evolution over time, and how its unique markets shaped its strategies. And we end with very specific recommendations for how leaders in other cities can build new education reform organizations (or strengthen those already in place) informed by lessons learned through CEE-Trust.

Of course, no report can answer every question or lay out the perfect customized strategy for each community. That’s why CEE-Trust is here; if these profiles and recommendations spark an interest or raise some questions, we hope you’ll reach out. We’re eager to share lessons learned, catalyze new ideas, and help communities across the country accelerate the pace of change.

Ethan Gray—Vice President & Director of CEE-Trust, The Mind Trust
Profile:

The Mind Trust

Bringing Talent & Education Entrepreneurship to Indianapolis

For the founders of The Mind Trust, total immersion in Indianapolis education issues was nothing new.

In 2006, Founder and CEO David Harris was working as Indianapolis’ first charter schools director under Mayor Bart Peterson, the first U.S. mayor with the power to authorize charter schools. Harris and Peterson had a long history together. Harris had helped on Peterson’s first campaign and subsequently designed the mayor’s charter initiative, which won Harvard’s Innovations in American Government award in 2006.

The Mind Trust was born out of their realization that, although the mayor had authority to grant charters, the city lacked enough talent to launch high-performing new charter schools or lead dramatic reform in the traditional school system.

Their initial attempt to confront these challenges was a $1.6 million initiative called “Seed and Lead,” which sought to recruit proven national charter-school models to Indianapolis and train strong local leaders to launch those schools. It did not yield what they hoped. Although it brought a few charter management organizations to town and seeded schools with early start-up grants, the “lead” part of the initiative stalled when they couldn’t find enough talented people to launch new schools.

Harris and Peterson used the unspent funding from Seed and Lead to establish The Mind Trust, with the goal of empowering talented people to innovate in public education in Indianapolis. The Mind Trust recruits proven programs to Indianapolis, incubates new schools and education reform initiatives, and develops bold plans for systemic change.

“[We’re] going to transform public education only by recruiting talented people and giving them opportunities and support to innovate,” Harris says. “When you look around the country at the people who are producing great results for kids and reshaping what’s possible in public education, they are invariably education innovators who have the vision for how to do something different and the skill set to execute on that vision. So our task at The Mind Trust was to draw more talent into Indianapolis and empower talented leaders to develop new break-the-mold initiatives in our community.”

Harris and Peterson were painfully aware of their city’s needs. In the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS)—the state’s largest school district—the results were grim: The district failed to graduate 70 percent of its students.
But addressing those needs posed a daunting challenge. Would-be reformers just didn’t have Indianapolis on their radars. Talented and entrepreneurial educators instead flocked to cities such as New Orleans, Denver, Boston, New York City, and Washington, DC, which regularly headed the lists of reform-friendly locales and attracted the lion’s share of attention from national reformers and funders.

But Harris and Peterson looked at their city—with more than 800,000 people, the 12th-largest in the United States—and saw promise. They believed Indianapolis’ “just-right” size meant innovators with solid reform visions and skill sets could fundamentally alter the dynamics of the entire city’s education system. Although it took time to convince people of the opportunities available in the Midwest, Harris and Peterson have built an organization that is attracting entrepreneurs, promising ideas, and established national organizations to the heartland.

**Major Efforts & Results: 2006–09**

- **A Venture Fund** to bring leading national education organizations to Indianapolis, including Teach For America, College Summit, The New Teacher Project (now TNTP), Diploma Plus, and Stand for Children.
- **The Education Entrepreneur Fellowship**, which offers two years of support to talented people who want to launch transformational initiatives to address some of the most pressing problems in K–12 education. Fellows receive a $90,000 full-time salary per year with full benefits (deliberately generous to maximize competitiveness and prevent financial constraints, such as an existing mortgage, from prohibiting participation); a $20,000 start-up stipend; and the professional support and mentoring necessary to turn a promising idea into a large-scale successful initiative. The Mind Trust has awarded seven Fellowships to date.
- **A research and policy initiative** designed to help create a policy environment in Indianapolis and Indiana that better supports education innovation and reform.

**Major Efforts & Results: 2009–12**

- **The Grow What Works Campaign**, a fundraising effort that has raised more than $18 million to help scale up several of the highest-impact programs The Mind Trust has recruited to Indianapolis or helped to incubate in the city.
- **A Charter School Incubator** to launch networks of high-quality public charter schools in Indianapolis, with a goal of launching 15 to 20 schools over the first five years. Talented teams will receive $1 million to start their networks of top-notch schools. The first two winning teams were announced in June 2012.
- **The release of “Creating Opportunity Schools: A Bold Plan to Transform Indianapolis Public Schools.”** This groundbreaking report calls for a fundamental restructuring of IPS. The plan would dramatically shrink the district’s central administration; send schools about $200 million more a year without raising taxes; provide prekindergarten to all 4-year-olds within the district; give teachers and principals more freedom around curriculum, culture, and staffing while holding them accountable for student achievement gains; invest annually in recruiting talented teachers and school leaders and launching great new schools in the district; and empower parents to choose where to send their children to school.
- **CEE-Trust** (The Cities for Education Entrepreneurship Trust), a national network of 23 city-based education reform non-profits, foundations, and mayor’s offices that work together to accelerate the pace of education innovation and reform in their cities. CEE-Trust is a convener, collaborator, and consultant—helping city-based organizations across the country create fertile ecosystems for education reform.
In the Beginning: Focused on Early Wins

“Our goal was to make Indianapolis the Silicon Valley of education,” Harris says. “We wanted to concentrate as much of the best talent here that we possibly could with the expectation that a concentration of that talent could really start to transform the school system.”

Harris and Peterson initially planned to raise $20 million over five years to help ambitious leaders launch new reform initiatives; bring talent to Indianapolis by recruiting some of the nation’s top education-reform organizations; and improve the environment in Indianapolis for education entrepreneurship and innovation.

At first, they found funders unreceptive. “They’d just ask, ‘you want how much money?’ And so we concluded that we needed to start having successes; we needed to go out and do things,” Harris says.

Instead of trying to raise a large amount of money up front, they focused on quick wins that would be visible in the community, directly affect students, and give them a more solid record from which to pursue funding in the future. They began by recruiting College Summit and Teach For America (TFA) to Indianapolis through their Venture Fund.

At the same time, Harris and Peterson believed—as they still do—that education innovators achieve their best results when empowered to pursue their own visions. They launched the Education Entrepreneur Fellowship to support innovators who had the vision and skill-set to deliver transformative change for students. That created a challenge, as Harris was asking for money for the Fellowship, but he couldn’t tell funders whom that money would support or what those people would do.

However, Indianapolis’s civic and funding leaders were compelled by the need to attract talent to the city and rallied behind The Mind Trust’s vision. Harris and his team succeeded in raising the necessary seed funds for the Fellowship, through which they have helped launch seven new reform organizations, including:

- **Teach Plus** (teachplus.org)—a leading national teacher quality organization that works to retain effective teachers in urban schools in their first few years of teaching. It trains these teachers to become policy advocates and helps them push for reform in education policy and teacher contracts.
- **Summer Advantage USA** (summeradvantage.org)—founded by Earl Martin Phalen, Summer Advantage provides high-quality summer learning to K–8 students, helping them achieve five-month net gains in reading and math over five weeks, compared with their peers who don’t pursue summer learning.

Community Connections

Through its early investments, The Mind Trust built a portfolio of some of the nation’s highest-impact, proven, and emerging education-reform organizations. In doing so, it developed a local and national reputation as a leader for education innovation and reform in the Midwest. Its strong ties to business, education, and political leaders were key to its local success. “We are viewed as deeply tied to the community at large,” Harris says. “Our board and our staff are Indianapolis people, and we are viewed as Indianapolis people.”

The reformers who have been most open to support from The Mind Trust have gleaned the most value from the organization’s deep connections, Harris says, pointing to Summer Advantage’s Phalen as an example. “We set up 30 meetings for him [and] connected him in his first visit here with a huge number of key folks for his initiative,” Harris notes. “We have connected him with officials in the education department that have been a big source of his funding; advocated with school districts to engage him. We’ve been able to substantially raise his profile through events that we did and by connecting him with the media. And we did little things—served as fiscal agent for his organization, gave him office space.”
Where The Mind Trust did not have deep ties, it found organizations that did and worked with them. The Mind Trust initially lagged at the grassroots level, but it brought in other groups, such as Stand for Children, to help work with neighborhood-level leadership.

As The Mind Trust began to attract education superstars to Indianapolis, Harris says, “People began to get the sense that we were a city that could be at the cutting edge of education reform. That mindset change had an effect on people’s interest in getting engaged in this work.”

In the early years, he notes, they would not have heard from fellowship applicants or national education leaders what they hear now: Indianapolis has become a draw because it has so much happening in education reform.

While the Indianapolis climate for reform has certainly improved because of The Mind Trust, the climate at the state level has also improved thanks to strong state leadership. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a national education reform think tank based in Washington, DC, recently called Indiana the “Reformiest” state in the nation for 2011, and it lauded the governor and state superintendent of public instruction for overseeing dramatic reforms to charter policy, teacher certification and evaluation, and collective bargaining.

Mayor Peterson points out that The Mind Trust has remained bipartisan or nonpartisan in its approach to policy work. “It would’ve been a showstopper if The Mind Trust had been deemed to be a political organization,” Peterson says. While Harris notes that The Mind Trust has generated its share of critics when it has voiced support for certain policies or launched initiatives that rankle the status quo, the organization has become widely viewed as a nonpartisan expert on education reform in the community.

Staffing The Mind Trust

In the early days of The Mind Trust, having Mayor Bart Peterson as the chairman of the board—a position he continues to hold—made early hiring and support easier. “We had an established reputation in the public charter school arena,” Peterson says. “So we had a ‘calling card’ in that area. We weren’t just people with an idea, we were people with an idea who had done something. And of course, by virtue of being mayor, if you ask for a meeting, people will meet with you—doors open.”

Harris agrees: “Having Mayor Peterson so supportive and involved gave us lots of credibility, helped us raise money, and made us attractive to the organizations we were trying to recruit.”

For early hires, the organization initially tapped talent from the mayor’s office. The assistant public charter schools director and her deputy moved to The Mind Trust shortly after it launched, forming the core staff for the first few years.

Since then, the staff has grown to 12 people, including local, regional, and national recruits. The roles and responsibilities are as follows:

- **Founder & CEO**—provides organizational leadership with focus on strategy and external relationships
- **Executive Assistant to the Founder & CEO**—helps manage calendar and relationships for Founder & CEO
- **Executive Vice President**—helps ensure fidelity to strategy and alignment across initiatives and staff
- **Vice President of Education Initiatives**—leads the Charter School Incubator (CSI) and Education Entrepreneur Fellowship (EEF)
- **Education Initiatives Associate**—provides programmatic and operational support for CSI and EEF
- **Vice President & Director of CEE-Trust**—leads the CEE-Trust network and contributes to policy projects
Growing Pains: Frustrations with a Broken System

Despite its track record attracting top national programs and incubating new reform initiatives, The Mind Trust began to see the limitations of its talent strategy when several of the organizations it supported ran into problems dealing with the IPS central office. It was not uncommon for the district to make commitments to groups such as TFA and TNTP that it could not meet. At one point, because of seniority-driven layoff policies, IPS sent pink slips to 19 TFA teachers, including a nominee for district Teacher of the Year. IPS’ loss was a boon for area public charters, which picked up 18 of the 19 teachers within just a few weeks.

For leaders of The Mind Trust, the lesson was clear: The system was broken. Despite years of interventions and philanthropic investments, student achievement was far below state averages. Even when an outside group like The Mind Trust was willing to invest significant resources in helping, the district couldn’t be counted on to follow through.

The Mind Trust had succeeded in concentrating talent in Indianapolis. But leaders of the organization began to believe that when talented people have to work in or around a broken system it diminishes their ability to deliver great results for kids. They decided they needed to address systemic problems within the district, which in their view was continuing to deprive generations of students the opportunities they needed to be successful.

With the organizations it had brought to Indianapolis or helped incubate in the city, The Mind Trust had the pieces in place to drive systemic reform. What it needed was a specific plan for driving those reforms forward.

The Roadmap to Systemic Reform

In late 2009, The Mind Trust began a project to evaluate the current governance structure of IPS and deliver a set of recommendations for how the district could be restructured to improve student achievement and economic efficiency. At the same time, leaders at the Indiana Department of Education were grappling with the challenge of persistently failing schools across the state. Indiana Public Law 221 gave the state the authority to take over persistently failing schools, and six of the seven schools slated for takeover were part of IPS. Given the implications of having so many failed schools in one district, state leaders asked The Mind Trust to expand the scope of its study to go beyond a governance analysis and draft a vision for a totally redesigned urban district. “The goal was to look at high-performing urban schools across the country, identify the shared conditions that contributed to their success, and design an urban school district that would create those conditions for all schools in the system,” Harris says.
The Mind Trust engaged local and national experts in education, law, policy, finance, and governance, and in December 2011 released “Creating Opportunity Schools: A Bold Plan to Transform Indianapolis Public Schools.” The plan would dramatically shrink the district’s central administration, sending schools about $200 million more a year without raising taxes; provide prekindergarten to all 4-year-olds within the district; give teachers and principals more freedom around curriculum, culture, calendar, and staffing while holding them accountable for student achievement gains; invest annually in recruiting talented teachers and school leaders and launching great new schools in the district; and empower district parents to choose where to send their children to school.

The Opportunity Schools plan is The Mind Trust’s blueprint for transforming public education in Indianapolis. It would create a district that invests in and supports talented people, frees school leaders to innovate, and empowers educators and parents. While there are enormous political hurdles to overcome, The Mind Trust continues to promote the Opportunity Schools plan and is fostering a communitywide conversation about the future of IPS.

In the meantime, The Mind Trust continues to operate its Venture Fund, Fellowship, and Charter School Incubator; raise resources through its Grow What Works Campaign; and network with national thought partners through CEE-Trust.

Looking Ahead

Harris expects that the Opportunity Schools plan and the ongoing community conversation the plan has sparked about the future of IPS will take a lot of The Mind Trust’s focus in the coming year. Simultaneously, the organization is devoting substantial time and resources to its new Charter School Incubator in hopes that it will stimulate the supply of networks of high-performing schools. Whether these become Opportunity Schools in a revamped district or remain independent public charters, the idea is each year to give thousands more students access to great schools.

With its elevated national profile, The Mind Trust has fielded inquiries from people across the country asking about its model and interest in expanding, but Harris has kept his attention squarely on his hometown. “We want to focus on Indianapolis, not just to have pockets of excellence but to have a transformed school system. We needed to continue to have all of our energy focused on what more we can do here.” As The Mind Trust’s profile rises in Indianapolis and nationwide, Harris sees the organization’s efforts beginning to pay off. “To a large degree, I think we now have the pieces in place to drive a lot of change,” he says.
The New Schools for New Orleans

Mission

To deliver on the promise of excellent public schools for every child in New Orleans.

Profile:

From Tragedy, Renewal

For dramatic non-profit start-up stories, the birth of New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) is hard to beat. The story of Hurricane Katrina hitting New Orleans in August 2005, and the impact it had on the city’s schools, still has the power to shock. Katrina destroyed more than three-quarters of the city’s school buildings, forcing all schools to close for more than six months. All public school employees, for a district serving 65,000 students, were laid off. But in the storm’s aftermath, courageous leaders wrote an inspiring new chapter for the city and its school system—through radical change, in a system desperately in need.

Before Katrina, the New Orleans public school system was the lowest-performing district in the state—and Louisiana was one of the lowest-performing states in the country. In the 2004–05 school year, only 26 percent of eighth-graders were proficient in reading, and only 15 percent in math. Sixty-two percent of New Orleans’ public school students attended schools that failed to meet state performance standards. School buildings were in disrepair. The district was nearly bankrupt and mired in federal fraud investigations. It had churned through eight superintendents in eight years.

The statewide Recovery School District (RSD), created in 2003 to confront this educational disaster, managed to take over just five city schools before Katrina. After the storm, state officials expanded the scope of the RSD, which assumed responsibility for approximately three-quarters of all schools in the city.

The seeds for NSNO were planted at the time of the RSD’s creation. NSNO founder Sarah Usdin, then–state board member Leslie Jacobs, and individuals from Council for a Better Louisiana gathered to discuss how best to support the schools that would become part of the RSD. It became clear in these talks that an external non-profit could play a unique and powerful role.

NSNO’s “Three Pillars”

NSNO has focused throughout its history on “three pillars”: (1) school development, (2) investing in talent providers (which it calls the “landing pad”), and (3) strategic leadership for education reform in New Orleans.

After the storm, discussions shifted to the monumental task of rebuilding the entire New Orleans public school system. In this context, in 2006, Usdin, formerly of The New Teacher Project (TNTP) and Teach For America (TFA), founded NSNO with the support of local philanthropists and local foundations. NSNO built on pre-Katrina efforts to unite state and local reformers to support the RSD, and it also worked to channel the support of outstanding educators locally and from across the country for the recovery in New Orleans.
Since its founding, NSNO has sought to influence the rebuilding of the public school system in New Orleans by investing in highly talented teachers and leaders. It has done this in part through an incubation program that offered more than a year of support, training, and freedom to start new schools. Charter school leaders received help applying for the charter, planning the school, and hiring staff—receiving funding as they met milestones—all aimed at NSNO’s end goal of building a system of excellent, autonomous schools for all students in New Orleans.

NSNO has played a significant role in rebuilding a now—markedly improved system. The percentage of students attending a failing school dropped from 78 percent before Katrina to 40 percent in 2011–12. This was due in part to the influx of new talent and the successful proliferation of new public charter schools that NSNO recruited, incubated, and supported. Other successful operators, such as KIPP, came to New Orleans without NSNO’s support, though NSNO is now supporting their expansion. Gains can also be attributed in part to a group of veteran Orleans Parish principals who started turnaround schools after the storm. Overall, New Orleans’ schools shrunk their performance gaps against state averages by more than half from 2005 to 2011. And in 2011, the city’s schools posted their highest student performance scores to date—continuing the city’s top ranking in growth across the state.

**Charter Schools: Fast Growth in New Orleans**
A major piece of the New Orleans reform story has been the dramatic growth and success of charter schools. The number of New Orleans charter schools ballooned from five in the year before Katrina to 31 in the first full school year after the storm, climbing steadily to 65 charter schools—three-quarters of all New Orleans public schools—in 2011–12. But quality matters more than quantity, and here New Orleans can brag: It claims almost three times the national average of effective open-enrollment charter schools. In a widely cited CREDO national charter school study in 2009, 17 percent of charter schools achieved results superior to statewide traditional public schools. In New Orleans, by comparison, nearly half of its charter schools outperformed traditional public schools statewide from 2009 to 2011, and another quarter achieved results on par with traditional schools.1

**Major Efforts & Results: 2006–12**

**School Development**
- Incubated the New Orleans Recovery School District’s (RSD’s) top-performing high school and elementary school, both of which are charter schools.
- **Incubated nine charter schools** at a cost of $200,000 to $500,000 per school; helped charter management organizations (CMOs) expand to launch 10 additional schools, at a cost of $350,000 to $800,000 per school.
- Recently shifted from incubating charter school founders to recruiting and supporting the expansion of high-quality CMOs, by both investing in the expansion of the city’s top charter schools and recruiting proven CMOs from outside the city. NSNO plans to launch another 10 charter schools through this effort, providing one-to-three-year grants totaling between $500,000 and $1 million to launch or expand CMOs.
- **Assisted three CMOs—FirstLine Schools, KIPP, and ReNew Schools—in developing performance-based compensation systems** through a federal Teacher Incentive Fund grant.
- **Supported charter schools to turn around and transform schools** designated as chronically failing schools under federal School Improvement Grant guidelines. All the turnaround schools exited failing status after one year, while two-thirds of the transformation schools were no longer failing after two years.
- **Provided new and some existing schools with financial, legal, and operations support.**
Won, with the RSD, a $28 million federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant in 2010, and raised the required $5.6 million in matching funds to support a five-year “Scaling the New Orleans Charter Restart Model” project. NSNO wants to expand the city’s charter restart model within New Orleans, creating a permanent infrastructure to turn around the bottom 5 percent of the city’s schools, then apply it to other struggling urban districts, as is now being done in Memphis and Nashville, TN.

**Talent Providers**

- Worked with other groups (e.g., teachNOLA, TFA, New Leaders for New Schools, Building Excellent Schools) to recruit and train teachers and school leaders; for example, from 2006 to 2010 NSNO subsidized half of New Leaders for New Schools residents’ salaries for leaders placed in charter schools.
- **Invested $50,000–$70,000 per leader for training** for new school operators.
- Matched and trained board members for schools throughout New Orleans.
- Recently increased investment in educator development organizations (such as the MATCH Teacher Coaching program). NSNO has about $3.5 million dedicated to education development organizations over the next three years, representing approximately 30 percent of its budget.

**Strategic Leadership**

- Influenced local and state-level public policy discussions on equity across the system and on maintaining high standards for charter school authorizing and renewal.
- In March 2012, co-wrote and released *New Orleans-Style Education Reform: A Guide for Cities, Lessons Learned 2004–2010* and advocated for New Orleans-like reforms through presentations to elected officials, funders, and policymakers in Denver, Seattle, and Indianapolis; in a congressional briefing in Washington, DC; and to a convening of mayors from more than 15 cities.
- Contributed to the production after the hurricane of the *New Orleans Parents’ Guide to Public Schools*, which helps parents better understand the complex public school landscape in New Orleans. Funded the New Orleans Parent Organizing Network, a parent advocacy and support organization that has now produced six parent guides.
- Helped fund the Special Education Cooperative, an advocacy and support group that helps charter schools increase special education students’ academic achievement and helps schools stay in compliance with regulations.
- **Worked with Louisiana’s RSD** to support communities to develop visions of school excellence and ultimately build long-term community-charter partnerships.
- Subsidized policy work by the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, and partnered with the association and several charter operators on a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Charter-District Collaboration Compact.
Post-Katrina: Bringing Dramatic Change to a City’s Rebirth

After Hurricane Katrina, the sense of despair among some of those who returned to the city gave way to an openness to a new and dramatically different education system.

Especially at the beginning of the reform movement, funders felt they were investing in the city itself. “Any city-based group is tied to the progress of its city and to the extent funders and others think the city is moving in the right direction,” NSNO’s CEO Neerav Kingsland says. NSNO thrived in part on the opportunity that funders saw in New Orleans, with the RSD serving as a reliable, consistent catalyst for innovation that gave entrepreneurs, including both new and veteran educators, “a path to open schools and do aggressive work.”

Usdin adds that among the local funders who initially supported NSNO, “there was a certain level of commitment to the city and discernment about what drives education quality.” Thus, local funders were willing to support NSNO even though, Usdin admits, “we didn’t know exactly what we were going to do or how we would be able to have influence.”

In fact, Usdin sold the idea of NSNO without a detailed business plan to back her up. The plan came later, after NSNO had raised initial funds and Usdin had hired Kingsland and NSNO’s original CEO, Matt Candler. According to Kingsland, “Very early on, it wasn’t so much selling a strategic vision as selling the notion that something needed to happen,” and relying on funders’ knowledge of Usdin, NSNO’s advisors, and the members of the original steering committee (the precursor to NSNO’s board). Kingsland says that Usdin and her founding board members were able to approach local funders and earn their support by saying, “You know us, you know we’ve been working for years to improve education in New Orleans.”

NSNO’s leadership made a compelling case. “Sarah Usdin is very effective at getting folks invested,” Kingsland says, though Usdin is quick to credit numerous longtime New Orleans educators and civic leaders with coming together to earn funders’ trust. “We were all fast and furiously trying to make sure the city we love was going to rebuild,” she says. Along the way, they were bolstered first by local reformers and later by practitioners and thought leaders from across the country who saw the post-Katrina opportunities for significant reform.

Paving the Way for Talent

NSNO’s first steps included talking with leaders who were reopening city schools to determine where they needed assistance. Originally, Usdin thought NSNO might be called on to provide back-office support, such as ordering supplies and dealing with heating systems and food service. Instead, she quickly realized these services wouldn’t make or break great schools; leaders faced a much more fundamental need: talent—the right people in their classrooms, educating their students.

To bring in great teachers and principals, NSNO raised funds to hire TNTP, formed a partnership with the RSD and TNTP—teachNOLA—and brought New Leaders for New Schools to New Orleans. Beyond financial support for these groups, Usdin says, “we expedited their entry into the city and made their work here more effective over time,” by helping them navigate the local landscape—especially difficult in a decentralized district struggling to find its way. It also helped that TFA already had a strong presence in the city and committed soon after Katrina to dramatically increasing the size of its corps.
NSNO also helped charter school founders put together effective boards. It “used its local networks to recruit mission-aligned board members and then match them with charter founders—which allowed charter founders to begin their work with strong governance in place,” Kingsland says.

In 2007, NSNO began an incubation program that recruited, selected, and trained aspiring charter founders in a yearlong fellowship program. Over the next four years, fellows launched 10 stand-alone charter schools.

Building Partnerships to Expand Reach & Increase Impact

When NSNO started, it faced a split among those concerned about the future of education in the city. Many local groups and some national organizations with long histories in New Orleans, such as TNTP and TFA, were excited about NSNO. Others, including some organizations closely aligned with the previous system, expressed skepticism or labeled NSNO as an organization of “outsiders” because it sought counsel from national leaders and worked with national groups and because some of its leaders had not earned their stripes in the city’s traditional public schools. Funders were similarly split, Kingsland says. “Some felt like we were an unproven new group that was trying to make radical change and didn’t fit with the way education had traditionally been funded” in New Orleans.

From the beginning, NSNO attracted business and philanthropy allies, as well as other reform-minded local and national groups; over time, it has reached out to more traditional and veteran educators and philanthropies in an effort to “widen the tent” of its partners.

Usdin excels at building relationships, Kingsland says, and NSNO has made that more of a formal strategy in recent years. “Our reputation, size, and influence have grown,” he says. “We were advocates before, and now we’re thought partners. … Now we’re at the table five months before decisions get made, which is very different from advocating while decisions are being made or after they have been made.” And while NSNO, as an outside, non-governmental organization, has no direct say over official city, district, or state decisions, the organization has become a respected thought partner to education leaders at every level.

NSNO also increased transparency around its investments. Once it opened conversations with stakeholders across the city to explain where it was investing, and why, it helped others consider NSNO as a potential ally. Since its early days, Kingsland says, NSNO has worked increasingly to cultivate a citywide vision, because it was first viewed as a group that cared about and protected only the schools it incubated. “We weren’t seen as a citywide strategic entity that had a vision about New Orleans,” he says, so the organization made an effort to shift from focusing narrowly on a subset of schools to investing in and advocating on behalf of the city’s schools as a whole.
Staffing NSNO

Starting an organization in the aftermath of a major hurricane required fast work to pull together a strong board and staff. Kingsland joined the staff after meeting Usdin when he came to New Orleans to volunteer after law school, and they soon added another staff member. NSNO formed a board that included members of the initial, loose steering committee, and it obtained temporary help from a Broad Foundation resident and two future charter leaders. Usdin soon decided to bring in Candler as CEO because he had significant charter school experience. Candler had founded and led a charter school and helped launch several others, worked with the successful KIPP schools, and served as founding chief operating officer of a strong charter support organization in New York City. Today, NSNO has a staff of about a dozen people. Kingsland now serves as NSNO’s CEO, with Usdin staying on as founder. NSNO’s roles and responsibilities are as follows:

- **Founder**—thought partner for leadership team, assists staff with fundraising, and serves on board of directors
- **CEO**—provides organizational leadership with focus on strategic planning, fundraising, and external relationships
- **EA & Special Projects Associate**—supports CEO and founder with scheduling, daily operations, and internal and external communications
- **Chief Schools Officer**—manages all charter school development and human capital investments, as well as direct services to schools
- **School Support Director**—conducts quality school reviews of charter schools in investment portfolio
- **School Support Manager**—assists with organizing and conducting quality school reviews
- **Human Capital Director**—manages partnerships with human capital providers and oversees Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant implementation
- **TIF Manager**—supports human capital director in implementing NSNO’s federal TIF grant
- **Human Resources Director**—manages hiring process and professional and organizational development activities—serves as citywide recruiter and connector
- **Chief Operating Officer**—leads operational goal setting, execution performance management, and all internal cross-functional project management
- **Managing Director of Finance & Compliance**—leads accounting, finance, and compliance functions across the enterprise
- **Managing Director of Accounting**—manages accounting functions for all NSNO activities not associated with federal grants
- **Director of Accounting**—manages activities associated with day-to-day accounting maintenance and bookkeeping
- **Director of i3 Implementation**—manages implementation of NSNO’s i3 grant, including operator recruitment, application process, and sub-recipient and vendor grant compliance
- **Grants Accounting Manager**—provides sub-recipient and vendor oversight to ensure federal grant compliance
- **Chief External Relations Officer**—leads all external affairs functions, including communications, development, advocacy, and community engagement
- **Communications Director**—maintains and oversees implementation of NSNO’s communications strategy
- **Development Manager**—assists with fundraising strategy, campaign execution, and grant reporting
Looking Ahead

In securing its second round of funding, Kingsland says, funders have judged NSNO on five factors: the performance of the schools it incubated; the quality of its sub-grantees; the team NSNO built; its new strategy; and the ability to influence the market.

The overall performance of NSNO’s nine incubated schools has been mixed. One school—Sci Academy—has become one of the highest-performing schools in the city, and it is a target for additional NSNO support as the school expands into a network of schools. NSNO has advocated closing two low-performing schools it incubated. The other six schools fall somewhere in the middle.

“School leader selection is both extremely important and extremely difficult,” Kingsland notes. “Seeing a school we launched flounder academically and financially is extremely painful—while closing that school is the right move, the kids who attended that school won’t get a do-over of their high school experience.”

In 2010, the RSD and NSNO were awarded a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant to turn around the city’s persistently low-performing schools through public charter school development. As NSNO moves forward, it will work with the RSD on this grant and will organize initiatives around the three pillars that have framed its actions from the beginning: school development, investing in talent providers, and strategic leadership.

School development. NSNO has recently shifted its focus from incubating stand-alone public charter schools to supporting the expansion of existing high-performing charter schools. Quality is paramount. According to Kingsland, “In a mature market, CMO expansion is less risky than startups. You have a higher chance of going from one excellent school to two than you do of succeeding with a first-time venture.” The city needs—and NSNO plans to develop—CMO leaders who can guide the expansion of the city’s highest-performing schools. NSNO also plans to attract successful operators from outside New Orleans; to incubate a limited number of new operators to continue innovation (leaving the recruitment of these new operators to its partner organizations); and to support community engagement to transform underperforming schools. As New Orleans has become a reform hotspot and its charter sector has grown dramatically, NSNO and its partners have relied less on strategies meant to develop a reform ecosystem and more on defining that ecosystem based on high standards and excellent student learning outcomes.

Investing in talent providers. NSNO also will continue to work with other organizations, such as Building Excellent Schools to recruit and train top-notch school leaders. It will maintain its investments in teachers and principals through its partnership with TFA and its funding for teachNOLA.

Strategic leadership. NSNO built strong relationships with state school board members and other state and city leaders. As a result, “we increasingly came to be viewed as a group that could influence the reform landscape,” Kingsland says. “We do a lot of work with the state and the district on government structures, authorization, accountability, school choice—that’s an important part of what we do. We can push the policy landscape agenda as well.” NSNO makes affecting local education reform a priority because, Kingsland says, “we have pretty strong ideas about what education in New Orleans should look like.” NSNO supports a decentralized system, having local government move from school operations to a purely regulatory role and authorizer oversight of charter schools that allows great schools to grow and requires low-performing schools to close. RSD and state government officials are largely in alignment with each another and with NSNO’s vision, so NSNO is “more like a think tank, helping them develop strategy, working closely with the [RSD] and the state,” according to Kingsland.

In spite of the great strides made in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina, there is much work left to be done. Kingsland reflects, “We know we’re far from perfect—we’ve gone from an ‘F’ to a ‘C,’ but we want to be an ‘A.’”

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From Grant-making to Change-making

In 2004, Detroit was rapidly changing for the worse, losing people and economic vitality in what The New York Times would later dub “An American Catastrophe.” In that dark hour, The Skillman Foundation created its Good Schools and Good Neighborhoods programs, which focused on expanding high-quality education options for all Detroit students and creating the conditions necessary for citywide change. The program put a special spotlight on six high-poverty neighborhoods and the need to mobilize their leaders and dramatically improve education opportunities for the children living there. In the process, the foundation, which gives about $20 million a year, moved from grant-making to change-making.

In a philanthropic sector that often resists ruffling feathers, Skillman demonstrates how a foundation can be a catalyst for bold education reform. The foundation actively works with Detroit’s education leaders—traditional, public charter, and private—to develop and act on a shared vision for the city and its schools. It doesn’t just put money into organizations and strategies it believes in: Skillman staff members invest time and energy to build relationships and maximize the collective impact of the foundation and its partners.

Under CEO and president Carol Goss, Skillman reached a simple but powerful conclusion about education in Detroit: The foundation needed to focus on what works for children and stop focusing on the school system. Detroit lacks a single political leader or central governance system spearheading a citywide reform agenda. Skillman views its role as filling this void, stabilizing and coordinating the reform infrastructure from outside typical district and city leadership and authority structures.

This kind of leadership is necessary given the fragmented reality of the education in the Detroit metro area, where well over half of the city’s students are enrolled in non-traditional schools: either public charters, Detroit Public Schools (DPS) magnet schools, private and parochial schools, or many of the nearby suburban schools that recruit heavily in the city. Plus, the state just created a special district for the lowest-performing schools, most of which are in Detroit. The first 15 such schools will start operating in fall 2012.

The foundation has helped Detroit develop a reform agenda in part by convening the broad Excellent Schools Detroit coalition to create a coordinated citywide education plan aligning the interests of numerous reform-minded organizations and leaders, including DPS, the top public charters, the United Way, the regional Chamber of Commerce, four foundations, and several non-profits and community organizations. In addition to its convening role, the foundation has implemented numerous initiatives under its Good Schools and Good Neighborhoods programs (some of which are discussed further on), which together support Skillman’s basic belief: that children can be safe, healthy, well-educated, and prepared for adulthood when they have an effective system of supports and opportunities in both their schools and neighborhoods and when Detroit overall has in place the necessary systems and policies that create the conditions for youth to thrive.
Major Efforts & Results: 2007–12

School Support

- **Brought Teach For America to Detroit** to build the supply of rigorously selected teachers for classrooms citywide.
- **Supported, through its work with the Michigan Future High School Accelerator, the opening of five new high schools.** The accelerator aims to recruit leaders to open 35 small, project-based, high-quality high schools by 2017 and help them open and run their schools, which may be district, charter, or private. The schools make an “85-percent promise”: to graduate at least 85 percent of their students, enroll at least 85 percent of their students in college, and have at least 85 percent of those students earn a college degree.
- **Seeded the creation of a new portfolio of small, rigorous high schools** through the accelerator and turnaround partners.
- Made grants to help high-performing charter management organizations grow new charter models or find leaders so they can expand. Through the accelerator, Skillman has helped convene the “small-school learning network,” a group of high-performing private and public high school operators, to share and spread successful ideas.
- **Targeted academic technical assistance to schools.**

Parent Support

- **Incubated the Detroit Parent Network (DPN),** which increases parent involvement in education by offering workshops, practical tools, and leadership development to support the network’s public policy agenda. DPN provides hands-on assistance to parents, including providing a peer-to-peer parent initiative designed to ensure students are college ready. DPN also organizes school site visits performed by parents to determine quality, and it staffs parent resource centers inside the schools to ensure parents have adequate access and voice.
- **Created an annual schools report card** for all Detroit schools as well as inner-ring suburb schools to inform parental choice and create more transparency about school performance. Skillman also coordinated tours of high-quality schools outside of the city and parent shopper fairs.

Citywide Planning

- **Convened the broad-based Excellent Schools Detroit coalition** to create and help coordinate implementation of a citywide education plan.
- **Facilitated opportunities for leaders of district, charter, and other school operators** to visit high-performing schools across the country, resulting in the adoption of new educational turnaround models.
- **Helped recruit the Education Trust to Michigan** to open a regional office, work to close achievement gaps in Detroit, and advance a statewide policy agenda.
- **Participated in discussions with the governor’s office** about the creation of a statewide recovery district, which will open its first 15 schools in fall 2012.
- **Joined with The Kresge Foundation to incubate Data Driven Detroit,** a non-profit data center that helps track neighborhood-level social, economic, and environmental indicators for the foundations’ initiatives and provides communities with better access to data and information about themselves.
- **Joined with public charter school authorizers to develop a database of Detroit** showing all school locations and demographic shifts, helping authorizers carefully site schools where not enough high-quality options exist.
In the Beginning: Becoming a “Good Schools” City

The Skillman Foundation was founded in 1960 by Rose Skillman to provide programs for children and needy families in Detroit. The foundation took up education issues in 1985 with the establishment of its Skillman Scholars scholarships, and it found some success with small, innovative reform projects.

But by any measure, Detroit has faced an especially tough environment in which to educate students successfully, as a fast-declining economy and years of school board and district turmoil have led to drastic changes that accelerated in the past decade. In that decade, Detroit’s population, which had long been on the decline, dropped precipitously, with dramatic ripple effects for public schools as enrollment fell.

With the turmoil in the school system, though, came an opportunity to rethink how the city’s schools operate at the most fundamental levels. The foundation’s 2007 creation of its Good Schools and Good Neighborhoods programs marked an intentional shift to confront a systemic crisis and build a bold, comprehensive vision for transformational change. In doing so, it moved away from “tinkering around the edges” through smaller reform projects.2

The Skillman Foundation established the precursor to those programs in its Making the Grade initiative in 2004, awarding up to $100,000 to high-performing schools and smaller amounts to improving schools to reward them and enable them to replicate their success.

Three transformational lessons came through that initiative that have guided the foundation’s strategy and approach since then. The first lesson, says Tonya Allen, Skillman’s chief operating officer and vice president of programs, was that the foundation could shift the education reform conversation in Detroit to focus on quality instead of governance. Because Making the Grade focused on children’s success instead of the structure of the school system, Allen says, “people started talking about quality,” when previously “governance had always been the trump card in Detroit.”

Making the Grade led Skillman to a second lesson: The foundation needed to build grassroots demand for change by educating parents and community members about how dire their schools’ problems were and by exposing them to models that could work. As Allen explains, “Reform can’t just happen in the building.” Making the Grade was meant to fix a problem that the foundation thought existed in Detroit—parents simply needed help identifying the good schools to make their selections. But Making the Grade, it discovered, didn’t address the root of the problem: Many people didn’t understand just how bad the situation actually was in Detroit—and how few good schools actually existed.

Skillman’s staff engaged people in discussions about failing schools and began to mobilize leaders in its communities. Through its well-publicized convenings, Skillman attracted hundreds of people to large and small meetings to discuss the needs of Detroit’s children. Sometimes the foundation used instantly tabulated votes to focus the conversations, which it followed with small, local grants for neighborhood leaders to continue researching their children’s needs. And, although foundation staff members organized and ran many of the convenings themselves, the foundation also gave grants to other organizations to run them, from civil rights and parent groups to Excellent Schools Detroit.

While recognizing that schools are critical anchors for neighborhoods, the foundation pushed for the closure of persistently failing schools, educating parents who might otherwise have fought to keep the school open about higher standards and higher-quality options.
Skillman’s message about the reality of Detroit’s public schools often angered people, but over time the foundation built credibility by engaging the community and adhering to its focus on quality. As Kristen McDonald, Skillman’s education program director, explains, “we are always respectful, but we don’t back down because it’s the politically expedient thing to do.” Staff members provide shocking statistics about student performance in Detroit public schools, and they share anecdotes that stick with people and often trump hard data in some community members’ minds. But mainly, they listen, making good on their promises that the community will be intimately involved in major school reform efforts.

Finally, foundation staff members learned a third lesson: that Detroit lacked a sufficient number of talented educators to implement promising reform strategies. The foundation had seeded strategies—including turnaround and new-school creation for high schools—designed to improve student outcomes, but it realized it needed more partners and additional capacity to carry out these strategies. This realization led the foundation to work on high school turnarounds with the United Way, on small high schools with the Michigan Future High School Accelerator, and on leadership development with Excellent Schools Detroit and Teach For America. While Skillman continues to provide significant leadership and financial support for initiatives such as these, other local finders also are stepping up, including the Kellogg, Kresge, the GM foundations and a small family foundation, the McGregor Fund.

These lessons—the need to change underlying conditions, the value of community engagement, and the importance of external partners—have continued to shape Skillman’s strategy since Making the Grade.

Tackling Controversy through Collaboration & Community Engagement

Skillman worked to build public understanding about the state of Detroit’s schools through conversations, many convenings, and its schools report card, and it worked to build the momentum for change through a strong public relations campaign and grassroots work. As a result, it found itself increasingly under attack, especially by teachers’ unions. However, Skillman built credibility by sticking to a consistent message and keeping conversations going. The foundation kept trying to work with those who attacked it, including the media and traditional African American civil rights organizations, partly by funding them to convene community conversations about education that would represent the full spectrum of opinion.

In this way, the foundation’s Good Schools program intersected well with its Good Neighborhoods program. Staff members explained that when doing high school turnaround work, for example, they always started with community meetings—showing community members the data on their schools and asking whether they wanted to accept the status quo or push for change. In this way, they involved parents in the design process of their schools and reform efforts. They created space for parents to invest themselves in improving schools to which they were already committed.

When Skillman takes on something controversial, “we say to communities, we’re coming to you, we’re going to tell you what we believe, and we might disagree—but you’ll be able to tell us why you disagree,” Allen says. “We try to push to have as many conversations because we think that’s where we get to an understanding. Even if we don’t change each other’s positions, we collectively get smarter.”
Developing a Comprehensive Plan through Citywide Coalitions

Skillman’s focus on conversation and partnerships gave it the extensive relationships needed to build a citywide coalition that aims to create the conditions for great schools to thrive in Detroit.

By setting a broad table to bring all the education players together under one vision for the city, Skillman convened the Excellent Schools Detroit (ESD) coalition. In 2010, after more than a year of research and community engagement, ESD announced a $200 million proposal to open 70 new school programs by 2020, graduate 90 percent of high school students, and disband the Detroit Board of Education and put the mayor in charge. ESD publishes school report cards, ranking all the public schools in Detroit (including public charters), some private schools, and schools in the inner-ring suburbs. ESD is now focused on strategies to increase standards and accountability, attract talent, develop quality new schools, boost early childhood programming, and build public will for bold changes. It has set an ambitious target: to make Detroit the first major U.S. city with 90 percent high school graduation, 90 percent of graduates enrolled in college or quality postsecondary training programs, and 90 percent of enrollees prepared to succeed without remediation.

Skillman played a catalytic role in the formation of ESD and the development of the coalition’s plan, but it understood that the coalition itself would need to “own” the plan. Partly that involved coalition members engaging in extensive community outreach. They went to every neighborhood and held community conversations with residents, knowing their plan was going to be controversial and that there would be many in the community who disagreed with them.

In spite of the inevitable resistance, Skillman and others in the ESD coalition knew that to sustain their efforts, they could not simply devise a plan and expect everyone to get on board. Instead, they developed their plan over time with the input of many. While Skillman staff members had ideas of what the plan ought to be, they realized they would have to be open, not only to hearing opposing opinions but also to actually taking the difficult step of changing course based on what they heard.

As Skillman’s partners continued to work on a citywide plan, they also found themselves having an impact on state-level policy discussions, which have become especially important in light of the state’s decision to create a Louisiana-like special school district to operate the worst schools, most of them in Detroit. There was a time when local constituencies outside the teachers’ union were not well represented in education discussions at the state level. But now, thanks in no small part to the foundation’s investments and partnerships, when key decisions are made in the state capital that affect the city, Detroit has a stronger voice.
Small Staff, Big Accomplishments

Skillman has a small staff dedicated to its education reform work. Vice president of programs Tonya Allen works closely with the foundation’s president, Carol Goss; education program director Kristen McDonald; and program officer Henry McClendon.

The deep community engagement that Skillman prefers requires much of its staff’s time and extensive work with partner organizations. For example, Skillman has researched turnaround models to inform the United Way’s turnaround work; the foundation helped raise the first $17 million for the Michigan Future High School Accelerator, and Allen remains chairwoman of its governing council. Goss chairs the Excellent School’s Detroit (ESD) coalition board, and when the departure of ESD’s director left a staffing gap, McDonald stepped in as interim leader.

Skillman staff members bring complementary skills, and success depends on the entire team. As McDonald explains, it is “a culture of leadership within the organization.” McClendon adds that along with visionary leadership at the top, leaders must surround themselves with a great team. At Skillman, the team adheres to Allen’s mantra that “none of us is as smart as all of us.”

Of course, the top leaders still matter greatly. Goss has been described both within and outside the foundation as “regal,” “influential,” “charismatic,” and a “rock star of philanthropy.” Allen earns credit for tenacity, guiding the organization’s strategy and helping create and drive change. McDonald takes note of the important combination of Goss and Allen: “The two of them together create this charismatic vision that you will just follow … because they’re so authentic in the way they present it.”

For everyone at Skillman, staff members say, the work depends on a willingness to take risks and be confrontational; an ability to establish personal, trusting relationships with people within the foundation and in the community; authenticity; political awareness; community organizing experience; and above all, a passion for the work and a willingness to learn and adjust constantly in the face of changing circumstances.

Dan Varner, CEO of the ESD citywide coalition, describes Skillman’s impact this way: “They do a great job of getting other people to make investments that are aligned with theirs. [They have] an inordinate amount of influence given their level of resource.” While some foundations operate in relative isolation, Varner sees Skillman staff members working closely with other funders and local partner organizations. In addition, “in terms of local philanthropy, nobody knows the city better than Skillman.” In Varner’s view, Skillman’s impact is a testament to its smart hiring of a team of sharp leaders with complementary skills, strong local ties, and a deep knowledge of the city and its public schools.
Looking Ahead

By 2011, Skillman staff had come to believe that successful and sustainable education reforms in Detroit ultimately depend on whether the conditions for reform exist, and it has identified 15 conditions needed to complete the big picture. With much of the infrastructure in place—including the ESD coalition, High School Accelerator, United Way Venture Fund, a resource center run by Michigan State University, the Detroit Parent Network, Teach For America, and Data Driven Detroit—Skillman is now focusing on better aligning its Good Neighborhoods work with its Good Schools work. It plans to focus much more intensively in six neighborhoods, making sure that the 50,000 children there (almost a third of the city’s total) have quality choices. A top priority is to connect youth development, community supports, and community mobilization initiatives more strategically with school improvement. It intends to protect and support the handful of current high-performing schools, while nurturing the development and success of newer, high-promise schools.

In addition to working with other organizations, staff members will continue to be deeply involved in community collaboration. As the foundation takes on more controversial issues, its previous efforts pay dividends. “Because we have a history of being collaborative and standing for quality education, we can keep the door open to bring folks continuously to the table,” McDonald says.

In the immediate future, the talent question in Detroit will also demand more work, according to foundation staff. The problem is, even if Skillman was to attract large numbers of talented individuals, it does not have enough high-quality or promising schools where that talent would be nurtured and deployed effectively. Because of this, Skillman is looking carefully at locating the right “landing pads” for new talent—including growing more high-quality schools and identifying other education reform organizations in search of top talent.

All of Skillman’s efforts remain fueled by an urgent need for change and the scale of the efforts needed to reach its long-term goal for Good Schools: to have children attend high-quality schools, graduate from high school, and attend college prepared to succeed so they can lead self-sufficient and prosperous lives. Skillman has provided the means—financial and otherwise—to spark a movement, and its staff remains committed to putting together all the pieces to keep that movement going.
Lessons Learned

The profiles of The Mind Trust, New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO), and The Skillman Foundation illuminate several important lessons for leaders in other cities. In this section we’ve identified those core lessons and turned them into a comprehensive set of specific recommendations that we hope can shape efforts to launch new city-based education reform organizations across the country.

One important note: These recommendations fit together to represent a cohesive approach to city-based change. Taken individually, some may seem too obvious while others too limited to drive transformational change. The value in this project, we hope, is in helping community leaders see how all the parts come together; as such, we encourage you to read these lessons learned and recommendations as a single product.

1. Find the right leader or leadership team.

The education reform landscape is complex, politicized, and shifting; to navigate the myriad challenges of building an education reform movement, city-based organizations need high-caliber, widely respected leadership. The support and political connections of Mayor Bart Peterson as board chairman combined with the leadership of David Harris gave The Mind Trust instant credibility as it got off the ground. Sarah Usdin’s deep connections to the funding and civic communities in New Orleans meant leaders trusted her when she and her founding board members and supporters asked for money for NSNO without a detailed business plan. The widespread community respect engendered by Carol Goss and Tonya Allen has allowed The Skillman Foundation to launch broad, ambitious neighborhood and schools programs, bringing together a diverse coalition to form Excellent Schools Detroit in support of Skillman’s efforts and other major reforms.

While each organization’s leadership demonstrates different core strengths, it is important to note that they come from very different backgrounds. Harris is a lawyer by training who got his start in education reform through his work with Mayor Peterson. Usdin is a former teacher who has worked with Teach For America and TNTP. Before working at a number of foundations, Allen earned degrees in social work and public health; she also used to run the Detroit Parent Network.

These leaders came to their work from very different backgrounds, but they also share a core set of traits that new organizations might seek in their leadership teams:

- **Community ties**—They have deep connections to the civic, funding, business, and education communities in their cities. Leaders across sectors will meet to discuss their work, show up at events, donate time and/or money, and champion their initiatives. Where leaders lack connections, they’ve built capacity by recruiting all-star boards.
- **Sector knowledge**—They understand the leverage points in the education reform world. As leaders of organizations that operate outside the education system, they are all strategic in how they make investments, design new programs, advocate for policy change, and build “grasstops” and grassroots support. Deep understanding of the sector enables organization leaders to identify a coherent theory of change to guide their work.
- **National relationships**—Especially as their organizations mature and find their footing, the leaders aim to plug into the national discourse in education reform, drawing attention and resources to support their local efforts. For example, The Mind Trust has helped put Indianapolis on the radar of such national foundations as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Walton Foundation, and The Broad Foundation. And NSNO has drawn more than $27 million in federal innovation funds and attracted wide national media attention.
• **Vision for change**—Leaders at each of these organizations have all succeeded in articulating a compelling vision of the future for their cities’ schools. They do not tinker at the margins of impact; these leaders have the ambition to fundamentally transform the education system. And because of their other attributes, they are able to articulate and sell those visions to local and national stakeholders. While it may take time to develop this kind of a vision for broad system change, starting with ambitious but achievable goals can help new organizations develop the track record they need to become credible agenda-setters in their communities.

• **Ability to raise money**—Transformational change is expensive. Each of the three organizations we profile has raised, aggregated, and invested tens of millions of dollars in reform initiatives. While the ability to raise this money is, in part, a function of the specific programs each organization has developed, it is also—especially early on—a function of leadership. Sarah Usdin and David Harris each had strong ties to her and his communities and built powerful boards that helped raise money early on. Skillman leverages its widely respected leadership to attract investment in its initiatives from other funders in Detroit. As new organizations are getting off the ground, it’s important to remember that funders usually invest in people first, ideas second.

• **Humility**—Across our interviews with stakeholders in each of the three profiled cities, humility in leadership was a constant refrain. Harris, Goss, Allen, and Usdin know when and how to ask for help from other community leaders, and they are careful to credit others when their organizations make progress.

*Lesson learned:* Find a leader or leadership team with deep community ties, strong sector knowledge, connection to the national reform movement, the ability to raise money, and the drive to push for fundamental change.

2. *Embrace strategies and theories of change that reflect local markets.*

City-focused organizations have demonstrated that concentrating talent and resources in one community can deliver transformational change; it’s easier to align resources, talent, stakeholders, and strategies when you are focused on just one place. In establishing an organization to make the most of that power, it’s important to understand a city’s needs and markets to craft the most compelling strategies and theories of change.

• Hurricane Katrina shaped NSNO’s early strategy by creating an urgent need to open a lot of new schools almost overnight. Now that market realities have changed and charter schools have proliferated, NSNO has shifted its strategy to focus on expanding the best single schools into networks.

• The Skillman Foundation’s theory of change in its Good Schools Program and Excellent Schools Detroit work was shaped in part by frustration after years of failed reforms in Detroit Public Schools and the legacy of Detroit’s talent exodus. Skillman’s current focus on creating more high-quality schools across neighborhoods reflects the foundation’s understanding of the local market’s demand for alternatives to the current school landscape.

• The Mind Trust’s mission is to create opportunities for talented people to innovate. By attracting more innovators and entrepreneurs to Indianapolis, The Mind Trust sought to get the pieces in place to transform the education system. Its Opportunity Schools plan was developed only after its leaders focused on that mission for five years; getting pieces in place (policies, partner organizations, and innovation pipelines) laid the groundwork for the development of the Opportunity Schools vision.

While each organization was acutely aware of its local market when shaping its strategies, they also made an effort to learn from what had been tried in other cities around the country. Some communities have a parochial culture that makes it less likely they will import strategies from other places. While paying attention to your local market is key, so too is learning from the example other city-based organizations have set.

*Lesson learned:* Evaluate the market in your city to develop your theory of change and strategic plan, but don’t reinvent the wheel when you can borrow lessons-learned from other cities.
3. Develop a bold, comprehensive plan for reform.

There is power in a plan.

The Mind Trust, NSNO, and The Skillman Foundation each developed major plans to transform the school systems in their communities. In each case, these plans challenged the status quo and offered a bold new vision of the future, deriving their power in part from being custom built for each particular city based on a deep knowledge of that city’s whole educational, community, and political landscapes.

Their visions didn’t come overnight; they needed years of experimentation, investment in innovation and new schools, and engagement with their communities. But with a plan in hand, each organization now sees its role as aligning stakeholders, resources, and political capital behind a comprehensive vision for systemic transformation.

For new city-based organizations, although you might start out focused on a single initiative or a small set of initiatives, brand yourself based on a grander design (as NSNO realized it should in shifting from protecting a set of “its schools” to investing in schools in the city as a whole). An aspiration to arrive at a citywide strategy for reform will give you a clear goal to achieve and a compelling message to use when building support for your organization. It may take a while to get all the pieces in place and get a plan on paper, but ultimately, the power of a citybased organization is in its ability to bring all the different programs, reform efforts, stakeholders, and funders together to achieve transformational results for kids.

Lesson learned: Develop a bold, citywide plan for transformation that is tailored to fit your market and organization’s theory of change.


Talented people who are given the chance to lead and innovate are the fuel of the education reform movement. Each of the three organizations we profile has made threshold investments in organizations like TFA, TNTP, or principal leadership programs. The talented people who come through these programs are great for the schools in which they initially work, but they also enhance the cities in which they live because they are highly educated, ambitious, and destined to become the future foot-soldiers and leaders in the education reform movement. The Mind Trust didn’t invest in TFA just to recruit great teachers to Indianapolis; its strategy was to invest in TFA as a source of Indianapolis’s future school leaders, public charter founders, school board members, state DOE leaders, and education entrepreneurs.

Sometimes creating opportunity is all it takes for a city to become a talent magnet. NSNO’s efforts to incubate new school leaders attracted national talent to New Orleans. The Mind Trust’s Education Entrepreneur Fellowship has put Indianapolis on the map for innovators across the country and the world. The Skillman Foundation’s support of the Michigan High School Accelerator has put Detroit on the radar of new school designers nationally. The leaders who come through these programs are powering the reform movement in each city.

Lesson learned: Invest in or build talent pipelines to fuel the reform movement.
5. **Support a strong, high-quality charter sector.**

The Mind Trust, NSNO, and Skillman all work closely with districts. It should be a given that any new city-based education reform organization has to cultivate strong ties to its local districts. But the organizations we profile have also been key leaders in the effort to recruit top charter providers and incubate excellent new schools. The Skillman Foundation has perhaps the deepest historical ties to a district. But after years of investing in district initiatives that failed to vastly improve education, the foundation stepped back and developed a broader focus on creating more high-quality options, be they in district, charter, or private schools. Key to this shift in strategy is creating the conditions through which great school operators will set up shop in Detroit. The Mind Trust and NSNO have a similar focus on creating strong conditions for charters in their cities.

Even if a city has talent pipeline programs in place and strong ties to districts, a vibrant charter sector is critical to ensuring there is enough space for those talented educators to flourish and grow in their careers. Many charter founders in Indianapolis, Detroit, and New Orleans have TFA backgrounds. And some of the top-performing schools in each city are charter schools. Simply put, charters are often where top talent is drawn because of the freedoms those schools enjoy. Until districts give school leaders charter-like freedom to innovate and build mission-aligned teams, charters will continue to be a primary strategy for ensuring top teaching talent has sufficient opportunities to thrive in a community.

To build an ecosystem that supports a top-notch charter sector, effective city-based reform organizations implement a variety of strategies:

- Recruit and invest in proven models
- Incubate carefully selected new school leaders and provide them with support and local connections as they build new schools
- Advocate for stronger charter laws (such as eliminating charter caps, improving access to start-up dollars, or improving authorizer accountability and closing failing charter schools)
- Shine a spotlight on success by broadcasting the results of good schools to the broader city community
- Develop community resources such as school performance reports, school enrollment events, or other public relations materials that increase the community’s understanding of great schools

**Lesson learned:** Support a strong charter sector to build a broader city ecosystem that supports innovation and reform and that provides fertile ground for talented educators to grow in their careers.

6. **Invest in innovation.**

The Mind Trust, NSNO, and The Skillman Foundation have elevated their community’s profiles as great destinations for innovators. They’ve fully embraced the notion that cities need a culture of innovation to remain open to change and new ideas. The Skillman Foundation’s support of the Michigan High School Accelerator is creating opportunities for innovative school leaders to design and build groundbreaking new schools in Detroit. Without formal investment in pipelines such as The Mind Trust’s Education Entrepreneur Fellowship, Indianapolis would not have helped launch national organizations like Teach Plus or Summer Advantage USA. NSNO’s investments in talent programs and charter school incubation have helped transform New Orleans into what is now being called the “Silicon Bayou.”

Through CEE-Trust’s work with civic leaders and funders in cities across the country, it has become clear that the term “innovation” means different things to different people. Many communities focus not on creating new programs or schools but on replicating models that have track records of success. However, there are only so many proven programs and school models, and they can grow only so fast. As a result, there is a strong need for break-the-mold innovation in communities across the country. Investing in replication and investing in innovation are separate—though complementary—strategies.
Although leaders in Indianapolis, Detroit, and New Orleans have remained open to replicating what works, they have also done the harder work of creating community support for new innovations—and they are reaping the benefits.

**Lesson learned:** Create opportunities for talented people to innovate through fellowships, incubators, or other investment streams.

7. **Engage stakeholders in the community to accelerate reform.**

The Skillman Foundation, The Mind Trust, and NSNO have each increased momentum for their initiatives and citywide reform plans by engaging partners and building support in their local communities.

- **Help community members understand the problem; then enable them to actively engage in solving it**—Skillman Foundation staff members attend most of the meetings about education reform in their target neighborhoods, ensuring those conversations included discussions of the data and the merits of various reform proposals. Their work has shown that communitywide strategies benefit from broad-based buy-in, but it can be a long and laborious process first to help people understand a problem and then to keep them on board as partners in solving it. The Mind Trust hosts and participates in events to spotlight the work of its partner organizations and to involve community leaders in discussions of innovation and reform. The launch of its Grow What Works campaign attracted more than 700 Indianapolis civic leaders and featured key-notes by Governor Mitch Daniels and New York Times columnist David Brooks. In addition, part of helping the public understand the problem may mean engaging in strategic messaging campaigns to translate the esoteric day-to-day work of reform into stories the public can appreciate. Each of the three organizations we profile has engaged in sophisticated messaging campaigns, often with the support of outside communications experts, to help build support for its various reform efforts.

- **Connect key players**—City-based organizations can accelerate the pace of change by connecting key players, funders, and decision makers and serving as conduits for groups of partners. For example, The Mind Trust connected a program it supported (Summer Advantage USA) with a district that needed support with summer learning (Decatur Township) and the funding needed to launch the program (through the Indiana Department of Education). The Skillman Foundation convened the Excellent Schools Detroit coalition, engaging many of the key players in the city, including the mayor and all the major local funders and civic groups.

- **Build & maintain nonpartisan support**—Although education reform is a political endeavor, it’s important for city-based reform organizations to work across partisan divides. NSNO, Skillman, and The Mind Trust have developed close relationships with groups along the political spectrum, including community groups and market-based reform proponents. Each organization has been accused of political bias because of individual projects, but they are still generally viewed as credible, nonpartisan, expert voices on education reform in their communities. At the same time, they all engage in a variety of advocacy-related activities and they don’t pull punches when it comes to their core convictions. NSNO is a national thought leader in the push to develop all charter districts in other cities. The Mind Trust maintains an active profile in state policy conversations and uses a monthly column in the Indianapolis Business Journal to further push the organization’s views. And The Skillman Foundation has been a public critical friend to the district, especially in its Excellent Schools Detroit work.

**Lesson learned:** Create a big tent, get the right people in it, but push hard for what you really value.
(Endnotes)


