



## Reaffirming the Dream: The Case for Civic Investment

RICHARD W. RILEY AND LINDA DARLING-HAMMOND

*By adopting and implementing high standards of accountability, public education funds can help galvanize public will to achieve equity and excellence in the nation's schools.*

Americans have long committed themselves to civic investment in education, recognizing that equal educational opportunity is a bedrock of democratic society. Indeed, one of the earliest laws enacted by the federal government – the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which predated the ratification of the U.S. Constitution

– required that land in new territories be set aside for schools and stated: “Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

Today, however, that civic commitment to equal educational opportunity is in peril. Schools face two significant challenges. On the one hand, the population of students that schools have traditionally underserved is growing rapidly. At the same time,

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there is greater and greater pressure for improving outcomes for all students, so that all young people will be equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the twenty-first century. Thus, schools must do better than they ever did before, with a student population made up of a large proportion of students who have a wide range of needs and have often been ill served by schools in the past.

Meeting these challenges will require a redoubling of the civic investment in education. Yet in too many places the bonds of civic commitment to education appear to be fraying. Our public schools increasingly resemble sports stadiums, in which more advantaged patrons sit in skyboxes and enjoy well-appointed accommodations – in the case of schools, state-of-the-art facilities, access to high-level coursework and out-of-school support, and well-qualified teachers, among other benefits. Meanwhile, students from less-advantaged backgrounds sit in the equivalent of the bleachers, lacking basic amenities and straining to see the field.

The good news is that community members in a number of places, such as Bridgeport, Connecticut, and Mobile, Alabama, have been able to mobilize civic support through local education funds. They have built public will for policies and the resources necessary for equitable educational opportunities and have held political leaders and school officials at all levels accountable for ensuring equal opportunity and outcomes for all public school children. And they have achieved dramatic improvements in outcomes for youths.

The National Commission on Civic Investment in Education, which we had the privilege of co-chairing, was formed by Public Education Network (PEN) to spark similar efforts throughout the country and intensify the nation's civic investment in education. We were charged with making the case for

renewed civic investment in education, highlighting the work of the thousands of organizations that are currently building and channeling civic investment, and developing standards that will allow these organizations to hold themselves accountable to their communities.

The Commission's report, issued in May 2011, is a clarion call (National Commission on Civic Investment in Public Education 2011). Our work convinced us that the need for civic investment is more urgent than ever. But it also filled us with hope: we are confident that Americans can summon the political and civic will to make equal educational opportunity not just an ideal, but a reality.

## THE CHALLENGES

Throughout our history, Americans have maintained a strong belief in schools as “engines of opportunity,” as Horace Mann put it. In contrast to other, closed societies, Americans have clung to the faith that children, through education and effort, can advance as far as they can aspire to go.

To be sure, the reality has failed to live up to this ideal. Most corrosively, the effects of segregation and its legacy denied educational opportunities to millions of African Americans – and gaps in opportunities and outcomes between White and more-advantaged students, on the one hand, and low-income students and students of color, on the other, have been persistent.

Nevertheless, there is a growing consensus that these gaps are unacceptable and that all children, regardless of background, deserve a high-quality education. The adoption by forty-five states and the District of Columbia of standards aimed at college and career readiness for all students is evidence of that consensus.

However, the nation faces two serious challenges in reaching that ideal. The first is internal: the student population is growing and changing. Currently, more than fifty million children attend U.S. public elementary and secondary schools, the highest total in history. And this total includes record numbers of children with significant needs, those whom the education system has historically ill served. One in five children under age eighteen was in poverty in 2009, the highest proportion in more than a decade. The number of students who speak a language other than English at home has tripled over the past three decades, to nearly 11 million, and the number of students with disabilities has doubled over that period, to 6.6 million. All of these children – those in poverty, those who speak other languages, and those with disabilities – need support and resources, particularly because the U.S., unlike other industrialized nations, provides relatively few supports to individuals in need.

The student population is also growing more diverse racially and ethnically. Diversity is enormously beneficial, but it poses challenges for schools. Many teachers and administrators are ill equipped to deal effectively with students from different backgrounds.

At the same time that schools face the challenge of the changing student population, they also face a challenge coming at them from society. Simply put, schools are under increasing pressure to educate all students to a higher level than ever before. The changing global labor market demands that students have a high level of knowledge and skills, and an increasingly complex society requires voters and citizens who can comprehend difficult issues, from climate change to HIV/AIDS to the recent financial collapse. The goal of college and career readiness for all students is a worthy one. But it is one that few education systems, including that of the United States, have ever reached.

Thus schools are now in a situation where they must perform better than they ever have, with a student population increasingly made up of children whom schools have served inadequately in the past. As one of us (Linda Darling-Hammond 2010) put it in a recent book, this is a “Catch-22” situation, in which schools have under-invested in students who need to succeed more than ever. Schools cannot resolve this on their own. They need the active support of community members who can muster the political will to provide schools with the resources to succeed.

## CIVIC INVESTMENT

Despite rhetoric about “failing schools,” there is a strong wellspring of support for public schools that can serve as a foundation for a renewed civic investment. Public opinion surveys consistently show that Americans strongly support public education, even if they are not fully satisfied with the current results.

With good reason. Many Americans, though not all, look fondly on public schools as the places that gave them and their parents and grandparents a start in the world. And most parents are pleased with the public schools their children attend. Furthermore, the public schools are, or should be, the *public’s* schools – the places where community values are taught to the next generation.

In true American fashion, community members have formed organizations to channel their support for public schools, as they do in many other realms. A report prepared for our commission by the Urban Institute identified more than 19,000 organizations devoted to supporting public education (education support organizations, or ESOs) that collectively spent \$4.3 billion for schools in 2007 (de Leon et al. 2010). Most of these organizations are quite small, but the

report identified 2,147 ESOs classified as public education funds (PEFs) – twice the number from a decade before – that provided \$1.2 billion in funds to support public schools in 2007; more than 20 million children are in schools served by PEFs.<sup>1</sup> These PEFs include seventy-seven members of PEN, referred to as *local education funds* (LEFs), that channel resources to schools and augment public engagement, and another more than 1,000 that belong to the National School Foundation Association, which typically generate private dollars to augment school funds.

LEFs and other PEFs can be prime vehicles for civic investment in public education. They have a substantial track record in bringing to bear community resources and support to improve outcomes for young people. For example:

- In Bridgeport, Connecticut, one of the nation’s poorest cities, the Bridgeport Public Education Fund (BPEF) annually engages more than 250 volunteers to support public school improvement. Among other things, the Fund sponsors a “First Day” reading initiative, in which volunteers hand out books to incoming first-graders to help them start personal libraries. BPEF also sponsors the Mentoring for Academic Achievement and College Success program, which pairs high school students with mentors from local colleges and universities to reduce dropout rates and encourage the transition to college. Since its inception in 1988,

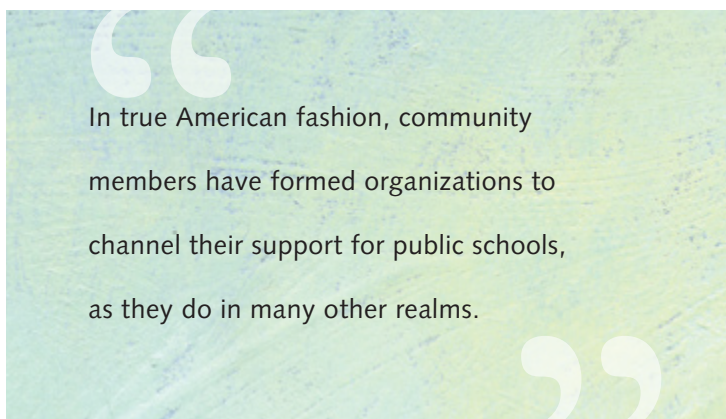
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1 The Urban Institute report defines ESOs as tax-exempt nonprofits that are set up to support public education, and PEFs as those ESOs that primarily assist schools and districts. LEFs are those PEFs that are members of Public Education Network. See the sidebar on nomenclature in Wendy Puriefoy’s article in this issue of *VUE* for a more detailed definition of ESOs, PEFs, and LEFs.

MAACS has mentored more than 3,800 students and employed more than 800 college students.<sup>2</sup>

- In Mobile, Alabama, the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF) designed and managed the “Yes We Can” initiative to build an informed coalition of citizens who would demand higher standards for and greater accountability from the public schools. Through that process, the community developed a “Yes We Can Community Agreement,” which was translated into the district’s plan, known as “Passport to Success.”<sup>3</sup>

Research shows that efforts like these to mobilize community resources on behalf of public schools can improve educational opportunities and outcomes. The good news is that efforts like these are proliferating throughout the country. For example, community members and educators have created more than 5,000 charter schools to develop innovative programs to support students (Campbell 2010). However, these efforts are limited and do not always address the students with the greatest needs. The goal for civic investment must be to improve opportunities and outcomes for *all* students,



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2 For more about BPEF, see the sidebar by Margaret Hiller in Erwin de Leon’s article in this issue of *VUE*.  
 3 For more on MAEF, see Akers 2005.



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especially students who have traditionally been ill served by public schools.

In many communities, PEFs are the main vehicles for civic investment. They offer ways for community members to channel their resources and energy in ways that support schools, and they represent communities; their boards are often composed of community leaders.

In addition to providing direct support for schools, PEFs also serve as advocates. They help build public will for change and hold school boards and districts accountable for improvement. Simply providing funds is not enough; reform is often necessary to ensure that funds are spent effectively.

## ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

PEFs can only function effectively, however, if they meet high standards for efficiency, effectiveness, and ethics. Just as they hold public agencies accountable, so they must be accountable to the community. The standards by which they operate must be clear, and their practices and results must be fully transparent.

Independent Sector, the nation's pre-eminent nonpartisan voice on behalf of the nonprofit sector as a force for building private initiative

for the common good, set standards for nonprofit organizations. As that organization put the case for creating standards:

Public trust is the most important asset of the nonprofit and philanthropic community. The rights and responsibilities that the independent sector enjoys are a result of the trust afforded to the organizations in this sector. Donors give to and volunteers get involved with charitable organizations because they trust them to carry out their missions, to be good stewards of their resources, and to act according to the highest ethical standards. Most fundamentally, voluntary and philanthropic organizations must abide by the highest ethical standards because it is the right thing to do. (Independent Sector 2002)

Standards make clear what a PEF intends to do and make it possible for members of the community to hold them accountable for meeting their goals. They also help those within the organizations understand their objectives. Just as standards for student performance highlight what schools need to do to improve performance, standards for PEFs can help those organizations improve. In 2009, the National Commission on Civic Investment in Education created a set of standards specifically for PEFs (which will also be adapted further for those PEFs that are PEN members, or LEFs), based on the standards set by Independent Sector. The standards are in five areas:

- **Mission and Programs.** The mission of PEFs is to provide external support to the schools and/or districts where they work. The mission of LEFs is to support whole-school and whole-system reform and engage the public. All of the organization's

programs derive from and support its mission, and resources are allocated for purposes consistent with the mission.

- **Evaluation and Transparency.** PEFs are committed to ensuring that they are serving the schools and communities with which they work as effectively as possible. Good practices to support this standard include financial reviews, program evaluations, financial disclosure, and clear external communications.
- **Responsible Stewardship.** Each organization has an active governing body that is responsible for setting its mission and strategic direction. The board is accountable for and actively exercises oversight of the finances, operations, policies, and programs of the organization. It represents a diverse array of experience, perspectives, and communities.
- **Legal Compliance.** Each organization's stewards comply with all applicable laws and regulations.

- **Personal and Professional Integrity.** Organizations promote a working environment that values respect, fairness, and integrity.

(See the sidebar on page 17 “Ensuring Public Trust” for a summarized version of these standards. For the full standards, see National Commission on Civic Investment in Education 2011.)

Of course, as with student standards, simply adopting standards is not enough. The standards must be implemented so that they become standard operating procedure for PEFs. To that end, the Commission recommends that the organizations conduct and report to their stakeholders the results of “ethics audits” and take advantage of seminars on best practices that PEN and NSFA plan to hold. In addition, PEFs should be as transparent as they can be about the extent to which they are meeting these standards.

## CIVIC INVESTMENT: BEYOND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

“Civic investment” includes – but goes beyond – providing funding for the community's public schools. There are three main avenues for community members to participate in civic investment that go beyond financial support, and PEFs can facilitate their involvement.

- **Taking an informed interest.** By taking time to find out about what public schools are doing and the challenges they face, community members build an understanding of the most pressing issues and make informed choices at the voting booth. A vast amount of information on schools is now available on school district and newspaper websites.
- **Putting in time.** By tutoring or mentoring, volunteering at a school, or lending expertise to help a school or district, community members make a tangible investment in public education. At the same time, such efforts help inform community members about schools' successes and challenges.
- **Getting political.** Some community members take an extra step and work for candidates and ballot measures that support education, or run for office themselves. Not everyone can take this step, but for those who do, the investment is substantial.

## GETTING PRIORITIES STRAIGHT

We are confident that Americans will affirm their commitment to a public education system that works for all young people. Both for reasons of justice and self-interest, Americans will pursue equal educational opportunity for all as a critical step for building a more secure future for current and future generations. The alternative is perfectly predictable: if Americans do not pull together, what is now a near-term crisis in our system of public education will have immense negative consequences for generations.

At this time of financial crisis in nearly all states, public officials must make some difficult choices. The road they choose will show clearly their priorities. Unfortunately, there is some evidence that the priorities in many states are misguided: a 2009 study found that spending on corrections was the fastest-growing segment of state budgets, outpacing spending on education, and that over the past

two decades spending on corrections has grown faster than any other state expenditure except Medicaid (Pew Center on the States 2009).

Setting policymakers' priorities straight will take public will. Policymakers must see that their constituents demand equity and excellence in education opportunities and outcomes. PEFs can lead the advocacy efforts necessary to make that demand clear to elected and appointed officials. But these organizations can only do so effectively if they have the strong support of the public they represent and who work as part of these organizations. Such support can only build if PEFs demonstrate their commitment to the principles Americans share. The standards our Commission is now promulgating can stand as a statement of this commitment. By announcing their adherence to the standards, and by living up to them year after year, PEFs can lead the way toward equity and excellence in American education.

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## ENSURING PUBLIC TRUST: STANDARDS FOR LOCAL EDUCATION FUNDS AND PUBLIC EDUCATION FUNDS

These standards for local education funds and other public education funds are adapted and significantly condensed with permission from “Section B: The Standards” of *An Appeal to All Americans*, a report of the National Commission on Civic Investment in Education (Washington, DC: Public Education Network [PEN], 2011), convened by PEN in 2009. The full report and complete standards are available for download on the PEN website at: [www.publiceducation.org/pubs\\_20110526\\_report.asp](http://www.publiceducation.org/pubs_20110526_report.asp).

The standards are based on those developed for nonprofit organizations by Independent Sector.<sup>4</sup> While education support organizations have a wide diversity of purposes and circumstances, these standards are intended to apply to all such organizations, and Public Education Network and National School Foundation Association aim to gain active acceptance of them by their members.

### Mission

Public education funds (PEFs) provide external support to the school(s) and/or district(s) with which they work. Those PEFs that are PEN local education funds (LEFs) support whole-school and system reform on a single or multi-district basis, and engage the public, in districts with a high proportion of children from low-income families.

#### *Good Practices*

Each PEF has a clearly stated mission that is approved by its board of directors and is responsive to its constituencies and the communities it serves.

### Programs

All of the organization’s programs derive from and support its mission, and all who work for or on behalf of the organization understand and subscribe to its mission and purpose.

#### *Good Practices*

A PEF ensures that its programs are aligned with the mission of the organization, the needs of the community it serves, and the full set of standards to which the organization agrees. Programs are guided by priorities set by board and staff every three to five years through visioning and strategic planning. The organization seeks to produce measurable metrics of systemic impact, and the board regularly monitors the organization’s strategic plans. To the extent feasible, programs are carried forward in clearly defined partnerships or collaborations that clearly state goals and operating and financial responsibilities.

### Allocation of Gifts

The organization’s gifts or grants to schools or districts are consistent with its mission. All decisions about use of resources raised by the organization are made by the organization’s board and staff and, to the extent feasible, in consultation with the organization’s own funders and representatives of the district, school, and other major constituencies.

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Independent Sector 2004 and other reputable standard-bearers, recommended for all 501(c)(3) organizations.



### *Good Practices*

The organization has constructive relations with gift-seekers and beneficiaries, based on mutual respect, shared goals, fairness, and clear, timely communication. It seeks to understand and respect the organizational capacity, needs, and mission of organizations seeking support and respects their expertise in their fields. It selects and awards student scholarships through a transparent and fair process.

### **Evaluation and Transparency**

PEFs ensure that they serve the schools and communities with which they work as effectively as possible. All information about the organization fully and honestly reflects its policies and practices.

### *Good Practices*

#### EXTERNAL ORGANIZATION REVIEW

Each organization periodically conducts an external organization review to receive input from constituents and partners about the performance of the organization as to whether it effectively addresses the needs of the schools and communities with which it works.

#### PROGRAM EVALUATION

The organization regularly reviews program effectiveness; has mechanisms to incorporate lessons learned into future programs; is responsive to changes in its field of activity and to the needs of its constituencies; and ensures that its programs demonstrate alignment with the organizational mission, achieve results that are appropriate and measurable in relation to the funding supplied, and produce evidence of sustainable outcomes. For example, LEFs report annually on the impact of their work on student achievement (including college and career readiness metrics) and on the public's commitment to ensuring a quality public education is available to every child in the district(s).

#### FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

The board and staff of the PEF manage the organization's funds responsibly and prudently to ensure that resources spent are having the desired impact consistent with the mission of the organization. The board authorizes an external annual financial audit or review and ensures that all financial reports are accurate and complete.

#### INVESTMENTS

The board and staff of the organization invest in ways that not only increase the organization's assets, but also protect their donors' investments and preserve the endowment, taking economic factors into consideration.

#### FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

Data about the organization such as audited financial statements are made available to the public, and all financial, organizational, and program reports are complete and accurate. Annual reports are distributed to all stakeholders. All solicitation materials truthfully represent the PEF's policies and practices and reflect the dignity of program beneficiaries. The organization respects the privacy of donors, expends funds consistent with donor intent, and is prepared to disclose to any potential donor the costs of fundraising in comparison to the amount of funds raised. The organization reports to the public information about significant contributions to the community using the charity's funds and programs and strongly evidences commitment to ethical behavior.

#### INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Board members, staff, and school personnel use frequent and clear communications to attract and retain donors and establish public consciousness about its needs and values of the organization. The organization ensures the confidentiality of its donors, board, and staff in its website, email communications, and associated IT information.

#### GOVERNANCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE DISCLOSURE

A PEF annually assesses and reports on the extent to which it has followed these ethical and effective governance and organizational practices.

### Responsible Stewardship

The organization has an active governing body that sets its mission and strategic direction. The board is accountable for and actively exercises oversight of the finances, operations, policies, and programs of the organization. It represents a diverse array of experience, perspectives, and communities; maintains independence from the school districts with which it interacts; and ensures that its perspectives on equity draw from, as well as contribute to, the communities they serve.

#### *Good Practices*

##### THE GOVERNING BODY

The governing body sets the mission, strategic direction, and policy for the organization, and ensures that programs align with them. It ensures that the organization acts with integrity, honesty, respect, fairness, and openness in all its dealings; that the organization has the capacity to carry out its programs effectively; and that resources are responsibly and prudently managed. It ensures that the board membership, staff, volunteers, and its own composition reflect the diversity in the community, and that the board understands the issues the community is trying to address and has the skills, experience, and knowledge to address them. It selects and evaluates the chief executive officer. It ensures that minutes of board meetings are detailed and broadly disseminated and that "executive sessions" are used only for a limited number of sensitive matters.

##### THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER (CEO)

The CEO carries out the policies, procedures, and strategic plan adopted by the governing body; is effective in the use of the organization's assets, human resources, and program delivery; helps the governing body set high organizational goals; and assures compliance with legal, financial, accounting, and ethical requirements.

### Legal Compliance

The organization complies with all laws, regulations, and applicable conventions, including IRS rules governing tax exempt status and state department of education guidelines for education foundations. Where applicable, the organization has a mission-justified Memo of Understanding with the school(s) or district(s) it serves.

### Personal and Professional Integrity

All staff, board members, and volunteers of the PEF act with honesty, integrity, fairness, and openness with each other and in all their dealings as representatives of the organization.



## TOWARD A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY EDUCATION SYSTEM

**S. Paul Reville**

*S. Paul Reville is Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.*

Two decades of standards-based reform have taught Americans one powerful and painful lesson: improving schools alone will not ensure that all students succeed. The record of the past twenty years shows some improvement, but even the most passionate advocate of standards-based reform will have to admit that at the current pace, even in the highest-performing states, it will take centuries before all students graduate prepared for success after high school.

Clearly, the job of improving learning and development for all young people, particularly those who come from challenging backgrounds, is too big for schools to tackle on their own. The narrow silo called school, which young people attend for six hours a day, 180 days a year, beginning at age six, simply does not provide all the support young people need. Indeed, school time accounts for less than 20 percent of a child's waking hours during their school years. In order to achieve our ambitious school reform goal of a successful education for each child, other partners need to be mobilized to extend learning opportunities and provide children with additional service and support. Health and human service providers and the community at large need to be at the center of these efforts – schools alone, in their current format, cannot achieve our educational goals without help. All agencies and organizations need to support young people in a concerted way so that they can become productive adults and active citizens.

School improvement is essential, of course. But the challenge needs to be reframed: cities and states must ensure that each child has a healthy platform on which to come to school and take advantage of an optimized learning environment.

The issue is one of equity. Middle-class and advantaged youths have always had access to high-quality health care, preschool, and learning and enrichment opportunities after school and in the summers. For students who lack those advantages, though, the need for a coordinated opportunity and support system is great.

Public education funds (PEFs) are well situated to lead the effort to develop and sustain a partnership between schools, civic agencies, and community organizations. First, they have a historic commitment to equity and see their mission as ensuring that all young people, particularly those who have been ill served by the education system, succeed.

Second, PEFs are already established as community organizations with close relationships with school systems. They have proven that they can bring to bear community resources in support of children's education and development. To take just one example, New Visions for Public Schools in New York City, through its New Century Schools initiative,

created 133 new high schools by linking schools with community partners who could provide additional resources and support to the schools and their students.

Third, PEFs have a well-established track record of mobilizing community support for education. Perhaps the best-known example is the Mobile Area Education Foundation, which led a massive community engagement effort that resulted in a community-wide strategic plan for the county school system (Akers 2005).

What would it take for PEFs to lead the creation of a school-community partnership that provides opportunities for all young people? The first step would be to organize a community-wide effort to craft an imaginative vision of education reform. This vision would outline a truly twenty-first-century system of education: one that delivers the services, supports, and additional learning opportunities that will enable all students to achieve proficiency and be prepared for success. For example, in Massachusetts, a new state law, the Achievement Gap Act of 2010, calls on chronically underperforming schools to institute planning processes that include community partners and pay serious attention to the health and human service needs of the students.

PEFs can help change the culture in communities to see the health, well-being, and education of each and every one of our students as vital to our national prosperity and part of our moral obligation to the next generation. It is hard for parents and citizens to envision an education system that is much broader, deeper, and more differentiated, one that meets every child and gives him or her what they need, one that is not bounded by the increasingly irrelevant parameters of time and space, one that harnesses technology while deepening learning relationships between children and a wide variety of masterful adults.

Once the vision is crafted, PEFs would then mobilize the community resources to achieve that vision. These resources would include civic agencies, health and social-service providers, community-based organizations, and businesses, as well as schools, who would work in concert to create a system that supports students effectively and efficiently. Once again, Massachusetts is attempting to lead the way by providing Race to the Top seed funding for several communities to establish wraparound service zones that are designed to enable health and human service providers to connect more effectively with schools. The goal is to ensure that all students are able to attend school regularly and supply attentive, motivated effort when they get to schools, as well as to provide students with learning opportunities outside of school that engage them and enrich their in-class experiences.

This is what it will take to make every child a winner. Schools can't do it alone. PEFs are the tried and true instruments for organizing widespread civic participation in the development and education of all of our children. They can lead and energize this movement, providing a sense of urgency and framework for the development of a truly twenty-first-century education system.

# VUE

This article is from *Voices in Urban Education* 32 (Winter 2012), “Civic Investment in Public Education,” produced collaboratively by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and Public Education Network (PEN) and based on the work of PEN’s National Commission on Civic Investment in Public Education and on its 2011 report *An Appeal to All Americans*. VUE 32 is available online at <http://annenberginstitute.org/VUE> and [www.publiceducation.org/national\\_commission](http://www.publiceducation.org/national_commission). *An Appeal to All Americans* is available online at [www.publiceducation.org/pubs\\_20110526\\_report.asp](http://www.publiceducation.org/pubs_20110526_report.asp).