



## **MODEL PARTNERSHIPS FOR IMPACT**

# The Wallace Foundation and Prince George's County Public Schools

2016

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County Public Schools

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### About Independent Sector

Independent Sector is the leadership network for nonprofits, foundations, and corporations committed to advancing the common good. Our nonpartisan coalition's networks collectively represent tens of thousands of organizations and individuals locally, nationally, and globally.

### Our Vision & Purpose

We envision a world of engaged individuals, robust institutions, and vibrant communities working together to improve lives and the natural world, and strengthen democratic societies. To help create this future, we lead and catalyze the charitable community, partnering with government, business, and individuals to advance the common good.

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Independent Sector (IS) works to enhance grantee and funder organizations to ensure both are effectively helping society's most vulnerable populations. From Independent Sector's cornerstone Building Value Together Initiative, which outlined practices to help foundations and nonprofits achieve successful outcomes, to Charting Impact to Threads, IS has addressed how nonprofits and foundations can have healthier relationships with one another and best fulfill their organizational missions to strengthen the communities they serve.

IS is committed to being responsive to the sector and the knowledge gleaned during our 15 cross-country Threads conversations with 80 partner organizations. In every city IS visited, one consistent impediment to meeting mission was raised: the strained relationships between grantees and funders. IS seeks to respond to what we heard by building upon previous work by IS and others, and adding to the depth of knowledge needed to move grantee/funder 'power dynamics' in a more productive direction.

Our first contribution to this conversation is a series of eight case studies, featuring grantee and funder pairs, who exemplify healthy relationships and illuminate the practices and behaviors that contribute to a positive power dynamic.



# Commitment to learning can drive systemic change

In the five years since The Wallace Foundation began funding Prince George's County Public Schools to develop and train a pipeline of effective principals, there have been three superintendents running the school system. To say the results of their work are impressive, given this turnover, is an understatement. In fact, an external third-party evaluation by the research firm PSA, "Building a Stronger Principalship, Vol. 5 The Principal Pipeline Initiative in Action" found that among all six districts in the effort, "to a striking extent, these districts carried out the kinds of policies and practices that the Principal Pipeline Initiative called for."

The Wallace Foundation traces its roots to the personal philanthropy of DeWitt and Lila Acheson Wallace, the founders of The Reader's Digest

Association, now Trusted Media Brands.<sup>1, 2</sup> Organized in its current form about 15 years ago, the foundation has assets of about \$1.5 billion (in 2015). It aims to better the lives of disadvantaged children in America's urban areas and foster the vitality of the arts for all. Wallace has roughly 186 grantees in its entire portfolio. It seeks to help find solutions to important public problems by advancing collective understanding of what works and what does not work in the main fields it supports: school

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1. "About Wallace: A Brief History." The Wallace Foundation. Accessed July 6, 2016. <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/about-wallace/Pages/History.aspx>.

2. "In Historic Move, The Reader's Digest Association, Inc. Changes Name to 'Trusted Media Brands, Inc' PR Newswire. Accessed July 25, 2016. <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/in-historic-move-the-readers-digest-association-inc-changes-name-to-trusted-media-brands-inc-300149254.html>

leadership, after school, summer, and expanded learning, arts education, and building audiences for the arts.<sup>3</sup> Because of this learning-focused approach, Wallace's average grant size is \$550,000, and grants typically last at least 2-3 years, with annual renewals. For the Principal Pipeline Initiative, the grant to Prince George's County was \$12.5 million over 5 years. Although this represents only a small fraction of the district's budget, since most district funds are restricted in purpose or cover fixed costs, grants like these for discretionary spending are disproportionately valuable to the district.

Back in 2011, the questions Wallace was wanted to answer were: first, is it feasible for an urban district serving high-needs students to put in place a system to train and support effective principals, based on evidence of what works; and, secondly, does doing this result in higher student achievement? Wallace vetted 93 urban school districts, inviting 25 to apply for grants. They were seeking six districts that were fairly far along in what they defined as the building of a 'Principal Pipeline' consisting of four main elements: evidence-based leader standards; programs for aspiring leaders; more selective hiring and support; and formative evaluation during the early years on the job. From the 25, six were selected to participate in a learning cohort. While the expectation was that all six districts would be funded for the entire five-year life of the initiative, grants were renewable each year contingent on adequate progress.

**“We encourage our grantees to ‘fail forward’ and try to reflect that in our grants management. We also recruit partners to help us all learn. The least important aspect of the relationship [to us] is the money,” says Jody Spiro, director of education leadership for The Wallace Foundation (Wallace).**

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3. "Wallace Annual Report 2014: Minding the Knowledge Gap." The Wallace Foundation. Accessed July 6, 2016. <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/about-wallace/annual-reports/Annual%20Reports/Wallace-Annual-Report-2014-Minding-the-Knowledge-Gap.pdf>

Grants were accompanied by technical support, peer learning communities, and an evaluation, paid for separately by Wallace, to better inform the practice of all six districts and the field, in general.

Prince George's County Schools (PGCPS) serves approximately 127,576 students (enrolled for the 2014-2015 school year)<sup>4</sup> in 208 schools. It has an annual budget of \$1.8 billion<sup>5</sup>. Doug Anthony, associate superintendent and PGCPS educator for the past 25 years, has seen quite a few changes. "Thanks in part to our work with The Wallace Foundation and the vision of our current superintendent, Dr. Kevin Maxwell, we went from a well-intended but fragmented approach to leadership development to a very coherent and aligned one. Dr. Maxwell allowed me to focus specifically on our strategic leadership efforts, which enabled me and my team to be innovative utilizing the resources, research, and expertise available to us."

In the Request for Proposal (RFP) process, Wallace asked each school district to spell out its vision of success to ensure the design of the proposed initiative was authentically aligned with the vision and strategic priorities of the district. PGCPS was a top contender for the cohort, given its clear and shared commitment with Wallace to ensure success for high-need students. However, before they were officially awarded the money, Wallace voiced concerns about their proposal. Wallace felt that all the required elements were present, and the district showed promise; however, the components of this work were fragmented, leading to a concern about the district's ability to prioritize this work. Wallace worked collaboratively with PGCPS to refine its approach and they were inducted into the cohort.

Like all districts, PGCPS had twice-monthly conference calls with Wallace staff, two progress and financial reports per year, and ongoing participation in a professional learning community with the other five districts, culminating in an "Annual Day at Wallace" meeting of the entire

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4. "About PGCPS". Prince George's County Public Schools. Retrieved 27 March 2015. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince\\_George%27s\\_County\\_Public\\_Schools](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_George%27s_County_Public_Schools)

5. "Prince George's County Public Schools, Maryland." Prince George's County Public Schools, Maryland. Accessed July 6, 2016. <http://www1.pgcps.org/>

leadership team of PGCPs and Wallace staff. The purpose of this active engagement with the foundation and the other five districts was to ensure the project stayed on track by allowing for PGCPs-specific adaptations and course corrections within the overall Principal Pipeline framework.

## The Work of the Relationship

“When a huge foundation gives you money, you feel responsible and want to do everything 100% correctly. You are cautious about sharing challenges because you want to please them. Wallace was clear from the beginning they were here to help, but it was still really hard to trust that.” says Anthony.

Anthony continued,

“In year 1, we were more cautious about sharing mistakes; in years 2 and 3, we became more comfortable sharing struggles. Over time, it became apparent they weren’t grilling us for things that we didn’t completely succeed at. They wanted us to learn, adjust if needed, and succeed. They asked good questions, made recommendations for resources, and were open to shifting money to move the work forward.”

The foundation’s approach, including its willingness to reallocate funds, helped to build trust in the partnership. “We really appreciated this, and it’s been their perspective since the beginning. As a grantee you have to build trust with the foundation to get to a more honest place,” says Anthony.

“After the first year, we didn’t think PGCPs made a lot of progress and we were really clear about our concerns,” says Wallace’s Spiro. “Throughout those difficult conversations we were clear the grant would be renewed so we could talk openly about what could be done to improve the work.” The second year, there was some progress, but Wallace remained concerned. During the Annual Day at Wallace meeting, PGCPs shared that universities

didn’t want to work with them. This was a serious concern because university partnerships are a key component of the pipeline, and an important way its progress would be sustained after the grant. The importance of the Annual Day at Wallace was a key learning for Wallace and Prince George’s County.

“We had a great discussion about how we could find out more about the barriers to effective partnerships between universities and PGCPs. We allowed funding to be reallocated for a marketing consultant that could help understand and develop a strategy to change universities’ perceptions of the school district,” says Spiro. “What the consultant found was a perception PGCPs was too bureaucratic and lacked a single point of contact for the work. In year three of the grant, PGCPs addressed each complaint raised. Now they have more university partners than anyone else in the cohort. They very smartly now use the resources of the universities to advance the work.”

Wallace leveraged other resources to support PGCPs in additional areas, beyond grant funding. “We leveraged Wallace’s communication department and local firms when PGCPs had decreased internal communications capacity. Wallace supported market research, technical assistance, and put us in contact with people who would provide support with no strings attached. It was a big help,” says Anthony.

According to Anthony, that additional support played a key role in PGCPs’s growth and development over the past few years. “We were able to grow from one to 17 university partners. We now speak at universities and nationwide convenings about building partnerships. We have helped build two doctoral programs. All of this stems from Wallace thinking beyond money and focusing on how learning can move the field forward,” says Anthony.

Aside from marketing and communications support, Anthony, who has been leading the work with Wallace given the superintendent turnover, was grateful for the ability to have honest conversations about the capacity challenges and understanding the complexity of staff transition within the district. “Wallace stuck with what they believed we could do when they chose us, even throughout leadership transitions. I didn’t need to advocate for the work or my position [with Wallace], they just wanted us to learn and succeed. That type of advocacy is not always apparent with other grants or funders,” says Anthony.

In fact, it was heart to heart conversations with all six Principal Pipeline districts about the challenges that led to the insight that strengthening the role of principal supervisors could help enable success of the pipeline – or inhibit it, if the role remained focused on compliance. That insight led Wallace to begin to develop an initiative around a new question: Could districts change the role of those who supervise principals from monitoring and compliance to supporting principals in leading teaching and learning and, if so, would this strengthen the principalship? This led to an additional round of grants for all six Principal Pipeline districts and new grants to eight additional districts to pursue this line of work. In fact, the “leadership center” at Prince George’s County has received a grant to provide technical assistance to these new districts participating in Wallace’s Principal Supervisor Initiative.

## The Impact of the Relationship

The demonstrable impact of this partnership extends beyond the improvements in the district. PGCPS is now seen as a leader in strengthening leadership in large urban high-needs districts. It has been featured in a Washington Post article and in a special 2015 supplement of Education Week “Shaping Strong School Leaders,” which included an article on how Maryland grooms assistant principals, highlighting Prince George’s County. That is in addition to the findings captured in the PSA evaluation.

Anthony considers the district’s learning around hiring and support systems key to the sustainable success of the work. “We have changed our hiring process for administrators and that now is replicated across all employee groups. We are more explicit about practice, we have started to see culture change internally about breaking down silos, and now we provide technical assistance to other districts. This highlights the growth that we’ve had since starting our work with Wallace.”

## The Future of the Relationship

As their relationship continued with a focus on learning, it became clear to both Wallace and PGCPS that the evaluation of their work, and the need to secure sustainability for the school district, will take longer than anticipated. Since not all grant funds had been expended in the timeframe of the original grant, Wallace extended the grant period for three more years (without additional funding) to allow districts to pursue a sustainability strategy tailored to its own context. PGCPS will continue to have calls with their program officers, have access to technical assistance, participate in the learning community, and discuss the interim evaluation results rollout.

“In 10 years,” says Anthony, “I hope the Wallace Foundation continues to be a thought partner for us. The Wallace Foundation has been very good at organizing convenings on the subject of leadership and PGCPS wants to continue to participate in those national conversations. I hope we can serve as a model given our past experiences, failures, and successes.” Spiro also agrees, “We are about to launch a new initiative specifically on the topic of university principal preparation program redesign that will involve more than 18 school districts. I see PGCPS as a valuable advisor to other districts. They will absolutely be a partner moving forward.”



# SECTOR LEARNING

This is one of a series of case studies that grounds IS' larger post-Threads power dynamic work by providing the cornerstone for a set of prototype tools to help aid the transfer of healthy behaviors, practices, and conditions from one relationship to another. This case study reflects a number of transferable behaviors, practices, and conditions, including but not limited to:

- **Focusing on learning and modeling new practices created new underlying conditions.** Applying the knowledge gained through its work with Wallace led PGCPs to incorporate new technical systems (i.e. recruitment, hiring, onboarding, etc.) to support this work. The technical assistance was scaled across all employee groups. Because all employee groups now are recruited and onboarded in a similar manner, it has changed the underlying conditions of how they work together.
- **Building an evidence base which moves a field, rather than just a project.** Wallace, PGCPs, and the five other cohort members partnered to build an evidence base, captured in PSA's evaluation available as a free download from wallacefoundation.org, around a particular question which influences the practice of educational institutions far beyond those directly involved with the work.
- **Influencing one another's practice.** PGCPs's candor led Wallace to a deeper understanding of some of the systemic issues intertwined with principalship and spurred Wallace to fund new question around those who supervise principals in order to move the field forward. PGCPs emulated Wallace's approach to applied learning to reconsider how staff was recruited, onboarded, etc., which was beyond the initial scope of the grant.
- **Retaining a nonprofits' right to be responsive to issues in the communities in which they are working.** The Annual Day at Wallace, accompanying a grant with technical support, peer learning communities, in-person team-to-team meetings, and an evaluation paid for separately by Wallace, allowed a knowledge base to grow and enabled PGCPs to be more responsive to the needs of their community.
- **The grantee and funder engaged in continuous conversations about refinement.** Throughout their partnership, Wallace asked good questions, made recommendations, allocated support for resources, and shifted money to move the work forward and facilitate building trust to ensure the initiative evolved as was appropriate for PGCPs.
- **Clear and mutual articulation of vision of success at onset of project to ensure alignment.** Before inducting PGCPs into the cohort, there was two-way dialogue to ensure alignment of the partners.
- **Clarity of commitment to ongoing funding so discussions could openly focus on how to improve the work.** Regardless of the annual renewal, both PGCPs and Wallace acknowledged their commitment to funding the initiative was consistent, which allowed for trust to grow and learning to be realized by both partners.



# METHODOLOGY

Through a variety of sources, including, but not limited to IS' Power Dynamic Advisory Group recommendations and IS member suggestions, we identified a universe of 112 potential examples of healthy grantee/funder relationships. From this initial universe, 40 nonprofits and foundations, constituting 20 pairs who believed they had healthy relationships, were interviewed via phone for 45 minutes each between May 20 and June 15, 2016. Grantee and funder interviews were conducted separately so alignment between pairs could be better assessed.

All case studies were evaluated against the following set of criteria developed in partnership with IS' Power Dynamic Advisory Group. For the purpose of this work, a healthy relationship was defined as:

1. Alignment between the grantee/funder responses.
2. Embodying a relationship that is authentic/honest, representing the opportunities and challenges which come with partnership.
3. Discussing, at all or with some frequency, both productive and unproductive aspects to partnership.
4. Having jointly developed terms of the relationship/what the future looks like.
5. Illustrating demonstrative impact in their communities as a result of their work together.

Other factors which may have been considered in the determination of the final case studies, but did not rise to the level of required criteria were: (1) IS membership status, and (2) availability of the Center for Effective Philanthropy Grantee Perception Report (*GPR - the GPR provides funders with comparative, actionable feedback from their grantees based on responses to a customizable online survey*).

Each case study selected represents the experience of the specific individuals who participated in that particular grantee/funder pair. It is only meant to represent that individual relationship. The collection of case studies was selected to represent the diversity of the sector. This diversity includes but is not limited to: size of the organization's scale of investments, geography, and focus of organization. In showcasing a range of relationships within the sector, it illustrates the differences which make our sector fundamental to providing a vital voice to our most vulnerable populations.

*The views expressed in this case study reflect the experience of those interviewed and not the views of IS. Each case study was chosen based on a series of criteria and evaluated by a panel of nonprofit and philanthropic sector professionals.*



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