



How Foundations Can Leverage Change

Paul Grogan was in the Twin Cities February 22, 2008 to speak to George Latimer's 'Mayors Forum' about the efforts of the Boston Foundation, which he heads. His message was timely for the efforts here to deal with the challenge of inner-city public education.

Early, Grogan worked for two mayors of Boston. He ran the national office of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation in New York; then worked on external relations for Harvard University. He came to the Boston Foundation in 2001.

What follows merges his comments to the Forum and what he said in a private discussion earlier with Education Evolving.

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[We had asked Paul to begin with the story of the Pilot Schools in Boston, since this model is currently under consideration in Minneapolis as a part of its strategic planning. The schools remain Boston city/district schools; teachers remain city/district employees and union members in its bargaining unit. There is a private-sector 'counterpart' organization, the Center for Collaborative Education, that supports the program from the outside.]

Grogan: This program was created in advance of Tom Payzant's arriving as superintendent. It was actually a competitive response in Boston, generated by the Boston Teachers Union, to Massachusetts' passage in 1993 of charter legislation that did not make chartering available to the city schools. They were "our in-district charter schools", as Bob Pearlman from the BTU put it at the time: receiving much the same autonomy while the teachers remained in district employment.

When I came we began to play a different role. Public institutions are very resistant to change. The private community can help. Money is important. But so is influence. It is important for the private community to be willing to use its influence. You can push for change even while continuing to help the district. This new attitude did shake up people.

At the start all Pilot Schools were new schools. There was then no structure inside the district to support them; not a single person assigned to the program. Tim Knowles (now in Chicago) suggested using the process available -- but un-used -- to create Pilot Schools through conversion. We offered planning grants to any school interested in converting to Pilot School status; then a grant to any school securing the two-thirds vote of the school's teachers needed to implement the change. We called a meeting to explain this. Forty schools showed up. This blew the situation open; revealed the hidden interest among teachers. The union asked members to hold off pending a study. When that 'white paper' appeared it was actually quite supportive. So the moratorium was lifted, and we did get 13 planning grants out, and later nine positive responses and seven schools with the necessary votes.

The new union president, Richard Stutsman, then tried to stop the whole process. In the 'steering committee' he blocked further conversions. This created a firestorm. The outcome was an agreement to do a few more conversions while capping the program as a whole. Then

the BTU went out and undermined the effort in the interested schools to secure the needed faculty vote.

We decided to tell the mayor we were going public saying 'conversion' was dead. While this was all happening a report appeared showing the Pilot Schools were outperforming the district-run schools on every measure of behavioral and academic performance. Then Carol Johnson arrived (from Minneapolis by way of Memphis) as the new superintendent. She has made the Pilot Schools central now to her strategy; has underlined their popularity. A quarter of Pilot School students come from outside the Boston city system, so she sees this as a magnet for her organization, which had been losing enrollment. The mayor, the superintendent and students had a big public meeting. The foundation reopened its planning grants. Yesterday we got 19 applications for conversions.

The union cannot now afford to cripple this. Its leadership is ambivalent. They have fought for rules that limit teachers' work, and the Pilot School teachers throw the work-rules out. The BTU does not like me. The union fears all schools will become Pilot Schools. Today about 11 per cent of the enrollment is in Pilots; could double. But clearly the superintendent has struck a chord here. And actually at the time of the agreement to do seven more conversions. Adam Urbanski, president of the teachers union in Rochester NY, appeared at a press conference here and called Pilot Schools the most important reform in the nation today.

Without the Boston Foundation refusing to let go of the issue this would never have happened. We have tremendous credibility. We were willing to embarrass the mayor if necessary. A reporter from the Herald went to Mayor Menino and asked what he'd do if the union continued to block Pilot Schools. And the mayor said: I'd push for more charters. We suggested he be seen visiting some charter schools, but he didn't quite need to do that.

Q: Do you have partners in this? **Grogan:** This work is very popular with our donors (persons with 'advised funds' at the community foundation). The largest private foundation in Boston is supportive. We want to go back to creating some new schools: Change is easier when you're starting new. We will shortly do a 'report card' on education in Boston. The whole atmosphere is just so different now. The state is picking up the Pilot School model for the schools elsewhere that it needs to turn around.

There are 18 charter schools in Boston and 20 Pilot Schools. Every one of these has moved to an all-day program. Nobody told them to do this. They just know that kids from poverty backgrounds need more time. So when they sat down with their money and a blank sheet of paper to plan their program and their schedule, they moved to an all-day program. The other schools in Boston let kids out around 1 p.m.

Data has been critically important; especially to help people understand how bad things really are. For a while everyone believed things must be OK. The old school committee was basically gone; the mayor was now in charge; Tom Payzant was here for a decade as superintendent. But now the numbers show us the dropout rate is still 50 per cent. They show us that fewer than 10 per cent of the students entering ninth grade in Boston will ultimately get a four-year college degree. In Hartford CT it's two per cent. This just rocks people.

The level of failure with city kids is a disgrace; a scandal. But the effort to deal with the problem is more than altruism. It's pragmatism. In its own interest the community cannot afford to go on wasting its human resources. The economic imperative is increasingly obvious. Boston, like many areas of the country, is seeing a change in population similar to that in Western Europe: Traditionally well-off populations are diminishing, while newcomers are growing rapidly. This is an opportunity, but at the moment the young people -- immigrants, of color -- who will be gaining an increasing share of the population are

seriously absent from higher education. They hardly make it through high school. It used to be that the United States had a labor surplus. We could fail a large proportion of youth and still maintain a high quality of living. This is no longer the case.

So we're now seeing a new round of business activity on education. Boston had big support early: the Boston Compact. But in time a lot of our headquarters companies moved away, and the leadership changed. More nonprofit organizations became prominent. Now there's a new generation of business firms; not Fortune 500 companies. Two new groups are forming; interested in standards and charters and Pilot Schools; not interested in more excuses. Also, the four big charities in Boston are getting serious in a new way. These are the Boston Foundation, the United Way, Jewish Philanthropies and Catholic Charities. So we now have this "Boston Opportunity Agenda". We want to raise \$100 million for its work. We want Boston to become *the* city in America where there is the best chance for upward mobility. We found programs in the city that were getting good results. So we have set up a number of 'portfolios' for early-childhood, for English-language training, for college-preparation, after-school programs, etc.

There's a sense of excitement about what's possible. That's a lot better than fatalism; a lot better than helping just existing programs. But you do have to be tough-minded about what's working and about what it takes for public systems to change.

At the Forum lunch there were these questions:

A former foundation staffer: How could you ever get these big charities to move; to work together? **Grogan:** There'd been a sense building that our nonprofit sector did not have its act together, either on the philanthropy side or on the service side. There were some individuals on the boards of these charities, a few serving on several of them, who saw this and began pushing for collaboration. It will be essential to demonstrate that all are benefiting from the effort. But there is a lot of money available.

Latimer: Say a little more about the teacher union response, and about how you get good teachers. **Grogan:** The Pilot Schools idea originally came from the BTU; a competitive response to the chartering law. The union attitude was basically that these schools were OK as long as there weren't many of them. But as the number grew it became a battle. At one point an influential columnist for the Globe asked, "Why shouldn't all schools be Pilot Schools?" It has been a breakthrough for Carol Johnson to embrace this idea. Labor just has this dilemma. The younger teachers love the Pilot Schools model. They take a lump sum and redesign the program. As to quality, we know that is important. We don't know what produces teacher-quality. We are now supporting a new center to support new teachers.

(Unk): Who can bring the elements of the community together? **Grogan:** For one, the governor. Massachusetts recently gave the governor greater authority over the whole system. Also, there is now this new kind of business leadership. This outside leadership is critical, to keep the issues from being dominated by the parties-at-interest.

Mayor Rybak: With students so mobile how can you decentralize authority to schools? How could you get a common program? **Grogan:** One legacy from Boston's busing wars was the disappearance of neighborhood schools. We do a tremendous amount of busing. The Pilot Schools have established a strong sense of community at the school. I told a reporter once that I do think Pilot Schools are for everyone, because in that model each school can tailor its program to whatever the students at that school need. Parents are stressed. But they get to make important decisions in their schools.

(Someone commented how different this approach is) **Grogan:** We are absolutely not going to fund business as usual. Money alone is not going to do it. I told George last night that real spending per pupil has tripled in this country over recent decades. Boston's private sector is not going to do that. Lots of our city school systems truly are broken. The teachers feel blamed, but they are the victims as much as anything. The Pilot Schools are very popular; "overchosen", is the term in use. Carol Johnson understands, says, "We have to compete". Why should anyone resist their expansion? They have not had support from a lot of traditional organizations . . . the civil rights community is nowhere to be found . . . but new organizations are appearing; black parents, advocating choice. Our foundation supports, finances, advocacy organizations.

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