

## RESULTS

# Developing Foundation-University-Grantee Collaboratives as a Model for High-Impact Philanthropy

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## Key Points

- This article reports on results from the Weingart Foundation's Urban School Districts Reform Initiative. The goal of the initiative was to improve urban education, and ultimately raise student achievement, by supporting sustainable reforms in school districts educating high numbers of low-income students.
- The Weingart Foundation determined the scale and scope of the effort, and set forth specific goals and timelines; the districts were invited to propose projects that were organic and integrated into their own strategic plans.
- Based on research conducted by an intermediary, potential grantees were identified; six grantees were interviewed about their strategic plan priorities and four were ultimately chosen to receive grants.
- The foundation worked closely with these districts over a three-year period.
- Based on this experience, three key design elements were identified: 1) *Confine the initiative to a content area or target population*, 2) *Pay attention to geography*, and 3) *Encourage boundary-spanning*.

## Introduction

Many foundations find themselves in a kind of purgatory when it comes to leveraging grants to produce the highest level of social impact. They don't have the desire to be as prescriptive as venture philanthropists, but they are looking for strategies that allow for more involvement and learning with grantees than traditional responsive grantmaking supports.

One Los Angeles foundation, the Weingart Foundation, has had some success in navigating a middle ground. In recent years, it has experimented with an initiative model of grantmaking that brings multiple grantees together with an intermediary and the foundation's own staff to create a collaborative learning community dedicated to supporting the success of each individual stakeholder. The Weingart Foundation has sponsored initiatives in the areas of education, health, and human services. This article reports on results from the Urban School Districts Reform Initiative of which both authors participated as members of the university team, which served as the intermediary. The initiative's objective was to support targeted reform efforts within urban school districts with effective plans for change. Accordingly, the goal of the initiative was to improve urban education, and ultimately raise student achievement, by supporting sustainable reforms in school districts educating high numbers of low-income students. The foundation looked to increase the impact of individual grants to school districts by creating the initiative so that grantees could collaborate, trouble-shoot, share knowledge, and access the expertise of foundation and university researchers more readily than if each were working in isolation.

## Structuring the Urban School Districts Initiative

The success of any collaborative hinges upon its members. Consequently, identifying the right partners for the Urban School Districts Reform Initiative (USDRI) was of utmost importance.

For the Weingart Foundation, the first step was to create an initiative that was strongly aligned with its mission – to improve educational outcomes, especially for economically disadvantaged, underserved students. The precise area of need – smaller urban school districts in Southern California – was identified jointly by the foundation's board and staff. The foundation then commissioned research by the Center on Educational Governance (CEG) at the University of Southern California, which had considerable knowledge of urban school districts and with whom the foundation had a long-standing relationship. CEG's research included studying current thinking about the district's role in urban school reform, interviewing experts in the field, and identifying evidence-based best practices. Of significance, this research phase emphasized soliciting input from the foundation's current and former grantees that had knowledge of the issue. Based on this research, the foundation, in collaboration with CEG, identified strong organizations to invite to participate in the initiative.

This was a departure from the Weingart Foundation's usual approach to grantmaking. The vast majority of the foundation's work is conducted in response to letters of inquiry. A core belief of the foundation is that expertise rests with grantees (not the foundation) and, further, that reforms need to be owned by grantees in order to succeed. As Goren and Wurtzel (2008) explain:

National foundations often arrive with their own agendas and need to "brand" their multidistrict initiatives. To secure funding, districts may surrender their own aspirations to the foundation's. Or, lacking a strong agenda, they adopt the foundation's to get funding. Either way, the initiative can remain the foundation's and never gain traction in the district (p. 28).

While the Weingart Foundation determined the scale and scope of the effort to be funded under USDRI, and set forth specific goals and timelines, the districts were invited to propose projects that were organic and integrated into their own strategic plans.

Based on research findings compiled by CEG, the Weingart Foundation concluded that school district reform was an emerging and unmet need in many Southern California communities. The Los Angeles Unified School District, as well as some other large districts, appeared to be siphoning off an unusually high amount of federal, state, and local financial support, leaving smaller urban districts strapped for resources.

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Once the foundation's priorities for USDRI had been established, CEG researchers used archival documents to assemble a list of eligible grantees based on size (fewer than 35,000 students); student composition (low-income, underserved minorities); and location of the school district. The research team then conducted a trend analysis based on three years of school-level achievement data (downloaded from the state accountability system) to identify districts that showed improvement in math and English/language arts at the elementary and secondary levels. Of the districts identified, six were chosen for further study based on the trend analysis and the ethnic composition of the minority population.

CEG researchers conducted interviews with the six district superintendents. The conversations with superintendents never mentioned the

**TABLE 1** USDRI District Demographic Information

Student Demographics				
District	Enrollment	% Free and Reduced Lunch	% Minority (nonwhite)	% ELL
A	28,775	55.9	72.9	23.5
B	15,234	63.3	99.6	30.3
C	7,478	89.4	99.6	59.3
D	30,779	77.4	94.1	43.4

Source: Enrollment and percent minority information from California Basic Educational Data System School Information Form, <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/>; percent free and reduced lunch and ELL from API Growth File, California Department of Education, <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/>

foundation by name (at Weingart’s request) or the potential for future funding. Rather, interviews explored each district’s reform agenda and long-term strategic plan. CEG presented the results from these interviews to foundation staff and, together the chief executive officer of the foundation and the CEG director, invited four school districts to submit proposals for district-defined projects. The foundation’s aim was to fund districts with strong leadership that were steadily improving and highly strategic about long-range goals and how to achieve them. The Weingart Foundation was not interested in funding reform efforts that did not align with existing district objectives.

CEG researchers worked with each school district to develop reform projects that would be manageable given USDRI’s three-year timeframe defined by the foundation. Too often, foundations and districts agree to highly ambitious reforms that promise to improve student achievement on a scale rarely accomplished in urban schools (Goren & Wurtzel, 2008). In the case of USDRI, proposal development was an iterative process between CEG and the districts so that there was a reality check on the partner’s capacity to implement the chosen reforms. Ultimately, four smaller urban districts were awarded three-year grants, ranging from about \$800,000 to more than \$1 million. The president and CEO of the Weingart Foundation explained:

We were always above board with the districts that USDRI funding was not equally distributed across the four of them, but rather was related to reform costs and potential impact. No one was too surprised that the school district proposing to expand technol-

ogy use in the classroom proved to be the most expensive (Personal communication, interview, Fred Ali, President & CEO, Weingart Foundation).

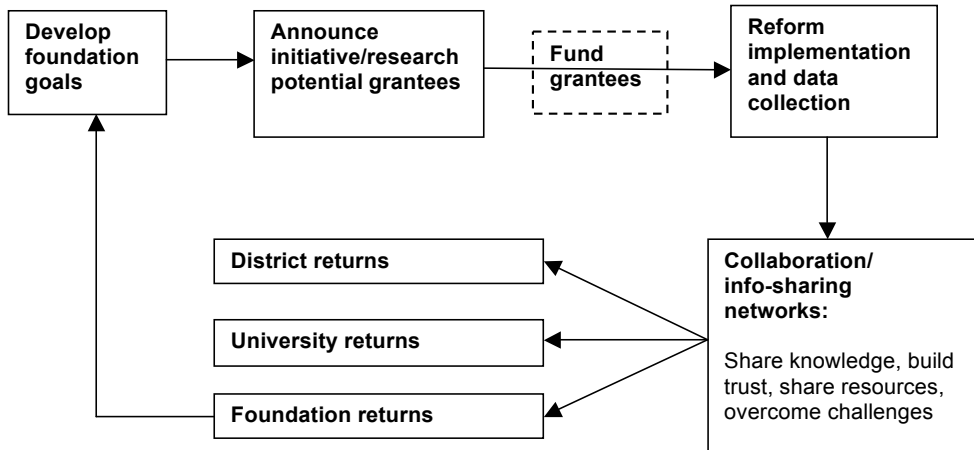
Table 1 (above) displays demographic information on the final four districts chosen to participate in USDRI. As has been previously mentioned, these districts were all high-minority, high-poverty urban districts.

Structuring USDRI involved more than selecting competent, motivated grantees. The foundation did not want grantees to spend three years working in isolation. Its theory of action hypothesized that collaboration among grantees, university researchers (as the intermediary), and the foundation itself would accelerate the pace of improvement and produce benefits for each party. The primary vehicles for collaboration were semi-annual grantee convenings – these forums were an integral part of the USDRI. They offered a time for reflecting on reform implementation and practice. The grantee convenings were intended to foster knowledge-sharing, collaboration, and problem solving to help USDRI participants achieve a deeper and focused impact with regard to their own reform objectives. (See Figure 1.)

At the first grantee convening, participants included the four district leadership teams (superintendents, project leaders, program evaluators); CEG researchers; and leaders from the Weingart Foundation. Much of our time together concentrated on participants sharing information about their various projects and deciding, as a collaborative, expectations for members. The collaborative committed itself to:

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FIGURE 1 USDRI Theory of Action



1. hold two convenings per year – one in the fall and one in the spring;
2. 100 percent attendance at each meeting – no substitutes permitted;
3. presentations at each convening by district teams;
4. honesty – the purpose of the convenings was to troubleshoot and help one another tackle challenges; and
5. using feedback from participants to shape subsequent grantee convenings.

The last component that made USDRI unique was its emphasis on evaluation. In addition to submitting progress and final reports, all four school districts were required to hire program evaluators as a condition for receiving funding from the Weingart Foundation. The program evaluators were considered equal members in the initiative and, as noted above, attended grantee convenings. Additionally, CEG as part of its grant from Weingart was expected to evaluate the strengths and challenges of the initiative model of grantmaking, as well as to distill lessons learned about school reform across the four districts. CEG’s evaluation included semi-annual site visits to the four districts and interviews with Weingart leaders, in addition to data collection during the grantee convenings. It is important to emphasize that

CEG’s role as an evaluator was confined to this cross-case analysis. At no point during the three-year USDRI was CEG responsible for evaluating individual grantees’ (school districts) efforts to implement reforms and improve student achievement. As will be discussed, this untraditional role proved vital to the success of the initiative.

Districts were directed to submit progress reports directly to the University of Southern California (USC) in addition to the foundation. At some point during each convening, CEG researchers reported back what they had learned both from the site-visit interviews and the progress reports, trying to identify themes that captured commonalities across the projects. Findings also were reported out in journal articles (Hentschke, Nayfack, & Wohlstetter, 2009; Thomas & Wohlstetter, 2009, 2010; DePedro, Nayfack, & Wohlstetter, 2009) and at national education conferences (Hentschke, Nayfack, & Wohlstetter, 2007; Nayfack & Wohlstetter, 2008).

Developing the collaborative was a purposeful process geared toward assembling a group of stakeholders that would benefit from three years of collaboration. However, did the collaborative help leverage the Weingart Foundation’s financial investment more effectively?

### Creating High-Impact Philanthropy: USDRI’s Contribution

The answer to the above question is rooted in

three components of the USDRI: regular grantee convenings, foundation flexibility, and having an intermediary (the university) as neutral territory.

*As consistently reported by all participants, USDRI stakeholders saw grantee convenings as a valuable forum for holding participants accountable. Under traditional grants, periodic progress reports keep the foundation informed about a grantee’s progress in meeting a project’s objectives. Here, regularly scheduled convenings forced grantees to reflect on their reform projects routinely and allowed for successes and challenges to be shared.*

*Grantee Convenings*

In its role as intermediary, CEG was responsible for designing agendas and facilitating the grantee convenings. Convenings were held all day (9 a.m. to 3 p.m.) and on Fridays (the best day for the districts). CEG routinely communicated with the project leaders in the districts and with the foundation to ensure the agenda reflected their interests and to jointly plan formal speaking roles for all participants. Typically, the agenda was structured to include time for each district to report out on the progress of their project: What’s going well? Where are the challenges? CEG often (at the suggestion of the foundation) suggested a focus area. Over the course of the USDRI, focus areas included:

- How does your project fit in with your district’s reform agenda?
- What methods and tools are being used to

evaluate your reform?

- How will you sustain the reform past the grant period?

Whole-group discussions followed district presentations to offer a forum for joint problem-solving. In sum, the convenings encouraged participants to be honest – to flag implementation challenges and weaknesses and to learn from mistakes. As one stakeholder explained:

We try to share what we are learning with each other because that is the purpose of getting together. The umbrella of USDRI is a reminder to everyone that when we meet, it’s very valuable to share our successes, and also our failures and the potential risks ahead.

In addition to whole-group presentations and discussions, the agenda included time for breakout groups. Typically, one breakout group had districts meeting among themselves and responding to a prompt (e.g., “What do you see as common elements across the four reform projects? What are the primary differences?”). The other breakout session gave time for job-alike groups to meet. The superintendents enjoyed the time with other superintendents they didn’t often network with; the project leaders and program evaluators were usually encouraged to bring tools to share. Participants offered a protocol for parent intake interviews, a classroom observation tool for principals, and so forth.

As consistently reported by all participants, USDRI stakeholders saw grantee convenings as a valuable forum for holding participants accountable. Under traditional grants, periodic progress reports keep the foundation informed about a grantee’s progress in meeting a project’s objectives. Here, regularly scheduled convenings forced grantees to reflect on their reform projects routinely and allowed for successes and challenges to be shared. Also, the broadened accountability of convenings and site visits created a sense of lateral accountability (district-district-university), not just the more vertical relationships (foundation-grantee) to which most stakeholders were accustomed. One of the project leaders analyzed it this way:

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The main downfall of any grant is people say that they're going to do something but they don't do it... that's why the foundation is really smart to have grantee convenings to report out and share knowledge from each project – a really good idea to keep us on our toes.

The leader of a different project had a similar observation:

The grantee convenings were structured so that people were held accountable – they had to prepare and present at the meetings. I think this pushed us to keep seeking and searching and challenging ourselves – stretching. You know most of the time you get a grant and that's it. You just send your expenditure reports into the foundation and that's about all you have to do.

The grantee convenings also offered the Weingart Foundation a rare opportunity to become an “insider” working alongside the grantees as they focused on individual reform projects. This enabled foundation leaders to provide far richer, more accurate feedback to their board because they were involved firsthand with conversations that focused on trouble-shooting and problem-solving. It also created the opportunity to consider how learnings from USDRI might impact or improve other areas of the foundation's grantmaking. For grantees, the convenings created a nonthreatening environment where university and foundation resources, as well as the expertise from other school districts, could all be leveraged to improve reform efforts. As an example, the Weingart Foundation organized a panel of local foundations during one of the second-year convenings in response to district interest in better understanding how foundations operate and make decisions about who they fund. CEG tapped into the research literature, and identified and disseminated practitioner-focused research and practical tools highly relevant to the reform work in each district.

#### *Foundation Flexibility*

In addition to the convenings, which increased accountability and allowed the foundation to have broader access to grantees, USDRI proved successful in part because the Weingart Foundation

remained flexible – both with the grantees and also as an organization.

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First, participating school districts were allowed to define their own reform objectives, in light of district context, and the foundation then supported each district's individual project goals. One district focused on improving after-school intervention services for English learners, another worked on creating a more useful accountability system for principals, and another concentrated on increasing technology use throughout the district. While the diversity of reform projects ultimately proved limiting when it came to interdistrict collaboration, the fact that reforms were well-aligned with district strategic plans and objectives was extremely beneficial. Even districts that embarked on “new” initiatives were careful to choose reforms that aligned closely with district goals and long-term objectives. (See Table 2.)

**TABLE 2** USDRI Reform Initiative Characteristics

Reform Initiative Characteristics		
District	Initiative Focus	Continuing/New
Desert Sands	Improved technology use through professional development and the addition of classroom-based responders	Continuing
Inglewood	Improved mathematics instruction through a new, collaborative style of professional learning that emphasized teacher-leaders	New
Lennox	Improved academic performance for a specific subset of English language learners through an after-school journalism program	New
Pomona	Improved principal accountability through an evaluation system developed by a subcommittee of school principals	Continuing

The Weingart Foundation could have easily dictated the type of reform it wanted grantees to address. In choosing to be flexible about reform content, the foundation was able to leverage its financial support by encouraging reforms that met the existing needs of grantees.

Secondly, the foundation felt comfortable adapting its role in order to respond to the needs of all of USDRI stakeholders. As noted earlier, the foundation sponsored the “Meet the Grantmakers Forum.” The foundation also created a special portal on its website to showcase its initiatives and hired a journalist to write in-depth profiles of the four USDRI projects. Additionally, as the USDRI progressed, the foundation became increasingly more active at the convenings. Initially, the foundation’s role, in keeping with convention, was hands off. At the most, foundation staff would offer a welcome to the group or serve as time-keepers for district presentations. As the initiative evolved (and with prodding from USC), the foundation took on a more active speaking role. For instance, foundation staff led a lengthy group discussion during the third year on the issue of sustainability. Despite providing each district with a significant grant of discretionary funding, the foundation was clear from the start that it did not intend to fund the projects forever. The foundation expected grantees to make serious efforts to transfer their USDRI work to district resources; the grantee convening turned out to be an effective forum to get that message out. With the foundation stepping into a role with higher visibility, USDRI convenings felt more balanced; all three

stakeholder groups – district, foundation, and university – were contributing to the development of the initiative.

*University as Neutral Territory*

Hiring CEG to conduct an assessment of each project in order to gauge whether goals were being achieved would have prevented USC from becoming an active member of the community. Instead, the Weingart Foundation decided to move in a different direction. As noted earlier, a condition of each grant award was for the district to hire a program evaluator. This relieved USC from playing an evaluative role, making judgments about what in each project was going well and what needed to be improved. Instead, the university’s main role, in addition to facilitating a learning community, was to identify patterns and themes across the four projects – lessons learned about implementing urban school reform – and to help strengthen and inform the foundation’s decision-making and future grantmaking.

This strategy enabled CEG to establish itself as neutral territory – a nonthreatening intermediary – that helped facilitate an open, honest, and safe environment for sharing. During site visits, district leaders and university researchers enjoyed candid conversations about the progress of projects and the initiative overall. As one participant commented: “I saw the university researchers as truly a support. They are not acting like evaluators; they offer us encouragement and insight, while striving to remain impartial.” Another stakeholder was more specific about the univer-

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sity's role as intermediary:

CEG provided us with information to help us improve what we were doing. For example, they kept us in touch with cutting-edge research that was relevant to what we were trying to do and, at just about every grantee convening, they discussed what they learned from their site visits, so we could learn from each other. I also saw the university as supporters of our reforms; they made the extra effort to visit us twice a year in our districts and interviewed people individually. They also took the time to design and facilitate our convenings. I thought the questions they asked helped us reflect on our practice and guided next steps.

Additionally, participants felt their projects were recognized and validated through the articles CEG researchers wrote about such topics as superintendent leadership and strategies for early success.

Finally, involving an intermediary as part of the initiative helped the foundation build its capacity to deal with unanticipated events. While USDRI districts were selected in part based on superintendent leadership, during the course of the initiative three of the four superintendencies changed hands (one superintendent retired, another's contract was not renewed by the school board, and the third was appointed by President Obama to the post of assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education in the U.S. Department of Education). As Goren and Wurtzel (2008) point out, when a new superintendent arrives the district is likely to support the foundation's area of interest, but this can be problematic if the new superintendent says yes before he or she is able to realistically assess the fit between the district's and the foundation's agenda, implementation capacity, and timelines. Complicating matters, staff at the Weingart Foundation (like most other foundation staff) had limited capacity – they managed multiple projects in numerous locations simultaneously and had limited time and attention to give to this one initiative. The university as intermediary, in addition to the project leaders on the district teams, supplemented the capacity of the foundation by providing

information and attention to smooth the leadership transitions.

### **Improving Future Philanthropy-Driven Collaboratives: Learning From USDRI**

USDRI's unique design facilitated nontraditional roles for participants and increased accountability for all of its stakeholders. Yet, with no existing framework from which to build, the initiative was bound to leave room for improvements. Analysis of site-visit data, data from the grantee convenings, and biannual surveys of USDRI members revealed two key factors that proved especially challenging to collaboration: differences in individual grantee reform projects and rethinking the traditional roles of stakeholders.

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#### *Differences in Grantee Reforms*

As has been previously mentioned, the breadth of reform projects adopted by the school districts allowed each district to leverage their grant money to the highest degree. Unfortunately, the breadth of reform projects also made collaborative relationships more difficult to cement. All of the district stakeholders commented that it was challenging to think beyond their immediate activities to incorporate ideas that were being tested in other districts. According to interviews, stakeholders perceived that the other USDRI projects aspired to vastly different goals, that members from other districts had different knowledge bases, and that



the districts' priorities were different. As one of the program evaluators commented:

Their goals are slightly different. ... I mean, do you see a common thread? Our project and the one for English learners has the goal of trying directly to impact the academic experiences of students and their learning outcomes. The other two projects have different goals and different beneficiaries; they're focused on professional development for teachers and principals.

To complicate matters, the district teams were comprised mostly of project-specific educators who had little involvement in other aspects of reform taking place within their districts. For example, the project leader of the improving English proficiency reform was not connected with the district staff focused on technology use, and vice versa. Generally speaking, stakeholders commented on the fact that the project leader for technology use possessed highly technical content knowledge on the use and application of electronic devices in classrooms for students and teachers. At the same time, few of the other stakeholders had the same level of expertise. Consequently, the skills and experiences of the district teams did not readily apply across districts. This challenge was raised by participants both in feedback surveys and during group discussions. One solution considered was to open up grantee convenings to a broader group of reformers in each district; however, it was not adopted:

I like the size of our group now [about 20-25 per meeting] and increasing it would change the community feeling we've worked hard to establish. Plus, we all know each other now and feel comfortable sharing things – both the good and the bad. It would take a long time to acclimate new people.

Geographic dispersion also proved challenging for USDRI stakeholders attempting to collaborate. Two of the four districts were adjacent to one another, but they each served different grade levels: one exclusively K-8, the other K-12 with a focus on its secondary math reform. CEG was lucky enough to visit all of the grantees twice a year. However, USDRI stakeholders mentioned during interviews that the lack of commonali-

ties combined with the distance between most districts hindered such visits. With limited access came a certain degree of detachment. USDRI stakeholders shared experiences at every grantee convening, but never had the opportunity to see reform implementation in action.

Lastly, the age of the reforms and their corresponding stages of development were challenges to collaboration. In several districts, USDRI was the catalyst to start something new (as with the after-school English language program). In others, USDRI funding helped accelerate implementation of existing reforms, as was the case with the classroom technology project and the principal-evaluation project. As a consequence, stakeholders were not necessarily dealing with common planning and implementation issues; some were targeting an initial launch, while others were in a position to refine and scale-up reforms.

#### *Definition of Roles*

Along with the challenges associated with the diversity of reform projects, the USDRI collaborative struggled at times with the process of defining appropriate roles for each of its stakeholder groups. For example, CEG was not commissioned to conduct program evaluations. Instead, each district selected their own program evaluator, and these evaluators became part of the USDRI collaborative. The presence of both sets of researchers complicated CEG's role to some degree. Questions arose over how evaluative CEG's work should be, given the concurrent district evaluations that were taking place.

The Weingart Foundation also found itself in a unique position. Normally, grantees provided information to the foundation in progress reports, final reports, or through phone calls that clarified the information presented in these documents. USDRI allowed the foundation unique access to grantees by guaranteeing twice-yearly grantee convenings that allowed them to be part of discussions that focused on problem-solving and knowledge-sharing. The issue of project sustainability beyond the life of the grant was an important issue for the foundation but, based on discussions at grantee convenings, it was clear

some reform projects were more serious about sustainability than others.

On the flip side, the redefined relationship between grantee and grantor often raised questions about how much access the Weingart Foundation should have to information gathered during CEG interviews or through district-level evaluations. Sometimes foundation staff commented that they felt more removed from the day-to-day activities of the grantees because CEG was partially fulfilling the role that they normally assumed. Furthermore, interview data revealed that district project team members often found it difficult to transcend the natural hierarchy created when a foundation is providing financial support in exchange for agreed-upon activities. The USDRI stakeholders worked hard throughout the initiative to change this dynamic, but when funding to one school district was terminated, all other stakeholders were reminded that creating equality across the collaborative would always prove challenging.

### Conclusions

Given the challenges, how might a collaborative like USDRI be strengthened? Using *Atlas.ti*, a software program designed for hosting and coding qualitative data from multiple sources, CEG researchers compiled interview data, data from the convenings, and other relevant materials (progress reports, meeting agenda) into a single storage unit which enabled researchers to code for themes and patterns across all data sources and USDRI participants. Our thematic analyses of the study data produced a few lessons:

- Confine an initiative to a content area or target population. If the districts had either the content of their reforms in common (math literacy) or a target population (English learners), participants might have been more on an even playing field.
- Pay attention to geography. If the grantees were closer in proximity, they might have visited one another. CEG's efforts to organize tours of reform projects and to have different districts host the grantee convenings might have been more welcomed.
- Encourage boundary-spanning. The more

comfortable foundations, grantees, and intermediaries are crossing into each other's territories, the richer the experience will be for all three stakeholder groups.

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The three lessons that emerged from USDRI reinforced current research on effective philanthropy. Both researchers and philanthropists alike are acknowledging the positive effect that convening grantees can have on the outcomes of each individual initiative (Frumkin, 2006; Lobman & Bacchetti, 2007; Pearson, 2006). Similar to our work with USDRI, these scholars acknowledge the inherent challenges that come with developing collaborative networks. In its most recent report, "Benchmarking Trends in Education Philanthropy, 2010" (Bearman, 2010), Grantmakers for Education offered lessons on collaborating that align well with those described above. These included recognizing the resources required to build strong collaboratives, being clear about each party's interests, and valuing differences

across organizations.

Despite the challenges encountered, USDRI provided an opportunity for grantees to share knowledge and to trouble-shoot with like-minded colleagues. Stakeholders, through the application process, also learned the importance of establishing clear goals and expectations upfront. The initiative also allowed the Weingart Foundation to move beyond responsive grantmaking in a manner that leveraged investments beyond a single grantee. The foundation gained valuable information about the education reform process and philanthropic collaboratives that could be applied to future grantmaking. Finally, USDRI increased accountability among stakeholders in new ways and taught participants the value of remaining focused on project goals.

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