

## CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

A SERIES OF STORIES, RESULTS,  
AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM  
SEVEN YEARS OF  
EDUCATION INVESTING BY  
THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



# CREATING QUALITY CHOICES: *DISTRICT SCHOOLS*

THROUGH ITS EDUCATION INVESTMENTS, THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION HELPS ENSURE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE GRADUATE FROM SCHOOL PREPARED TO SUCCEED AS ADULTS BY SUPPORTING QUALITY SCHOOL CHOICES AND STRONG SCHOOL/COMMUNITY/FAMILY CONNECTIONS.

Through its continuing evaluation of its education investments and its documentation of lessons learned, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has found out that district school systems are hard to change, and that district change requires large investments that are beyond the scope of the Foundation's relatively modest education portfolio.

Nevertheless, Casey has supported a number of different efforts at district school improvement in order to learn how small investments might contribute to closing the achievement gap and helping young people graduate ready to succeed as adults.

This publication presents an in-depth look at the Foundation's multi-year investment in a school district feeder pattern in Atlanta. It also includes stories about Casey's contributions to district improvement in Oakland and Philadelphia.

### **A Concentrated Investment Strategy Gets Results**

In Atlanta, Casey's education program has pursued a strategy of concentrating resources in an urban district where the Foundation has other concurrent and complementary investments. Home to UPS, whose founder Jim Casey created the Foundation, Atlanta is a Casey Civic Site. This means that Casey has deep roots and longstanding relationships there and has made a commitment to long-term support.



**“When many of the school children are from single-parent, grandparent, or no-parent homes, you need help. You have to have a major partner.”** *Chris Waller, Parks Middle School Principal*

The Atlanta Civic Site focuses on a group of five adjacent neighborhoods. Children in these neighborhoods go to elementary and middle schools that feed into a single high school, so Casey education investments have concentrated on improving outcomes for students in that group of schools.

This strategy has paid off. Parks Middle School, a chronically failing school at the center of the feeder pattern, has improved dramatically in the past three years. The school has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind law for two years in a row, and it is currently the second highest performing middle school in Atlanta Public Schools (APS). Of the 500 students that Parks serves, 97 percent are black and 94 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

#### **Many Factors Contribute to Success**

Many factors have contributed to success at Parks. They include: low-income students rising to high expectations, a highly motivated principal, a hands-on partnership between the school and the Casey Civic Site team, an effective community outreach program, and numerous active partnerships between the school and local businesses and organizations.

Another important factor in the success at Parks Middle School has been consistent support from the APS leader Dr. Beverly Hall and her team. When Dr. Hall started as superintendent in 2000, districtwide student achievement levels hovered below 40 percent proficiency, the high school graduation rate was low, and few systemic initiatives were proven with urban student populations.



## RESULTS IN ATLANTA

### Impact

- Parks Middle School made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind law for two years in a row.
- Parks is the second highest performing middle school in Atlanta Public Schools.
- Sixth-grade students at Parks who scored 65 percent proficient in reading three years ago recently scored 94 percent proficient as eighth graders.
- Sixth-grade students at Parks who scored 51 percent proficient in math three years ago recently scored 90 percent proficient as eighth graders.

### Influence

- Numerous partnerships, including Project GRAD, Communities In Schools, Salvation Army, United Way, Hands on Atlanta, After School All Stars, One Economy/Digital Connectors, and others.

### Leverage

- \$1.9 million in public, private, and in-kind investments.

**“The data led us to the education work in the Atlanta Civic Site. We realized that economic success depends on quality education.”** *Gail Hayes, Casey’s Atlanta Civic Site Team*

Dr. Hall has overseen improved performance across APS. In 2007, 83.5 percent of district schools made AYP. “Dr. Hall has a vision,” said Michael Pitts, head of APS School Reform Team 2, which oversees Parks Middle School and the elementary schools that feed into it. “She believes in data and collaboration, and she is a systemic thinker.”

### Why Focus on Parks Middle School?

Parks Middle School is the centerpiece of the feeder pattern that starts with three elementary schools in the Atlanta Civic Site neighborhoods and ends with what was until recently known as George Washington Carver High School.

Residents in the neighborhoods are 92 percent black. Roughly 60 percent of children there live in poverty, nearly 13 percent of adults are unemployed, and almost half do not have high school diplomas.

The community’s narrow streets, lined with pastel-colored matchbox houses, are alive in the late afternoon with children on bikes, adults hanging out on stoops, and grannies sweeping sidewalks, while prostitutes and drug dealers ply their trades in the alleys. Vacant lots, heaps of trash, construction scraps, and piles of old tires dot the landscape.

Although Casey Civic Sites typically focus on economic development and early childhood education and steer clear of school improvement, the Atlanta Civic Site team learned from families in the target neighborhoods that schooling was important to them and critical to their children’s success.

## Philadelphia Experiments with Education Management Organizations

In Philadelphia, Casey has invested \$1.3 million over five years in Foundations, Inc., a nonprofit that manages and provides technical assistance to district schools in the northwest part of the city.

In 2002, the state of Pennsylvania took over the Philadelphia school district. Many of the lowest performing schools were turned over to management organizations, and the city became the country's largest experiment to date in the private and nonprofit management of public schools. Foundations, Inc. won a contract to manage six schools.

Also in 2002, a new superintendent implemented major changes, including new districtwide curricula and a system of frequent benchmark tests to track progress. Foundations, Inc. enhanced the quality of education in its network schools by providing instructional coaching and professional development for teachers and principals, creating parent resource

centers and data rooms in each school, funding an extended school day and homework support operations, and purchasing additional school police officers, teachers, and school administrator positions. The organization also developed a high school work readiness and career program that has placed over 400 students in part-time jobs and 50 graduates in full-time positions.

Philadelphia has seen substantial districtwide gains in the proportion of students achieving proficiency since the state takeover, but achievement gains in schools operated by management organizations are on average no different from districtwide gains, according to a report by RAND Corporation.

Foundations, Inc. cites a number of factors that contribute to this phenomenon. For starters, the district has frequently changed management requirements and definitions. In addition, management

organizations have little leverage over teachers because the teachers' union is very strong. Finally, schools assigned to some management organizations were not in single feeder patterns, so it was difficult to have a longitudinal influence.

In spite of these challenges, schools managed by Foundations, Inc. have done well. Two of its three elementary schools have made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind law three out of the past five years, and the average percentage of third graders meeting reading standards in all three elementary schools increased from 33 percent in 2002 to 45 percent in 2007.

Also, Martin Luther King High School, formerly one of the most dangerous and low-performing schools in the city, has increased its graduation rate from 60 percent in 2003 to 91 percent in 2007.

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**“It is challenging and sometimes impossible to compare results across district-based school improvement efforts, because districts are using different terms and indicators and different methods to collect data.”** *Bruno Manno, Casey Foundation*

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## Coaching Small Schools in Oakland

In Oakland, Casey invested \$600,000 over seven years in Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) to coach teachers and principals participating in Oakland's small schools initiative.

BayCES started working with Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) in Oakland's low-income communities back in the late 1990s, when many inner-city schools were severely overcrowded and failing to help students learn. Rallied by BayCES and OCO, thousands of families called on the district to fix the city's schools. The district responded with the “New Small Autonomous Schools” policy in 2000.

The state took over the school district in 2003, because of a \$70 million deficit, and BayCES worked with the state administrator and OCO to craft a new district reform plan called Expect Success. Its goals

were to create small schools and improve student learning. The idea was that small schools mean more personal attention and greater accountability.

So far, 22 low-performing schools have been converted to 44 new small schools. BayCES coaches 30 of these with a model it created that includes assisting schools to set up efficient administrative structures, implement student-directed learning, and create personalized learning environments such as advisories and student exhibitions. BayCES also provides ongoing coaching to teachers and principals, as well as support for engaging parents and community members in school life and decision-making.

Under the Expect Success reform plan, the Oakland school district was the most improved urban district in California in 2005 and 2006. In addition, a

recent independent evaluation of Oakland's new small schools indicates that they are headed in a positive direction as compared to ten schools in the district that serve demographically similar students.

According to the study, the new small schools accelerate English language arts and math achievement more frequently than comparison schools do. Graduation rates at the new small high schools are also higher, ranging from 69 to 97 percent, compared to 61 to 80 percent at comparison high schools.

In addition, average student, parent, and teacher satisfaction ratings in the new small schools exceed those at comparison schools. BayCES and the district agree that the stage is set for even greater improvement in the next few years.

After doing some research on the local schools, the Civic Site team found that children in the five neighborhoods were doing well in the elementary schools. This success was due in part to Project GRAD, a coordinated package of evidence-based programs that Dr. Hall brought with her when she joined APS in 2000 and that Casey's education program has funded in Atlanta since 2002. The Project GRAD package includes reading and math programs, a classroom management system, an on-site community and school coordinator, and a college readiness program.

The site team found that children started to fail when they hit middle school, and the drop in student performance snowballed as they moved into higher grades. When team members learned that the district was already restructuring the chronically failing George Washington Carver High School into four small academies called the New Schools at Carver, the team turned its focus to Parks Middle School.

### **A Determined Principal Leads the Way**

Parks Middle School sits part way up a hill, looking neat and tidy in a coat of fresh white paint. Neighbors say it didn't always look this way. The building and the school were in bad shape for years.

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**“Principal Waller was a quick study. He knew how to use data, he changed the climate at Parks, and he learned to be collaborative.”** *Michael Pitts, Atlanta Public Schools*

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“When I was principal at one of the neighborhood elementary schools, there were many, many parents who said they would not send their children to Parks for anything in the world, because it had a reputation for lots of fighting and little teaching,” said Marcene Thornton, principal of Carver Early College, one of the New Schools at Carver.

Parks had had three principals in as many years when Chris Waller came on board to lead the school in early 2005. Waller is a towering African-American man who wears a wide-lapelled gray suit.

Principal Waller had his hands full from the get-go. “I had to hurry up and create an atmosphere where the children could learn,” said Waller.

He had to instill a sense of discipline, raise expectations for students, and find a way to get staff and teachers motivated to work for him when he hadn't hired them. He set ground rules for appearance and behavior, including “Operation Pull and Tuck,” which required that all students pull up their pants and tuck in their shirts. The school had an institutionalized feel, so he added artificial trees, park benches, and a painted mural of the solar system on the main wall outside the office. He was also very visible in the hallways and in the community.

The school had been on the “needs improvement” list for eight years, and morale was at an all-time low. Waller took all teachers and staff to Florida on a successful retreat. Then, student behavior and class performance began to improve.

### **Parks and Casey Join Forces**

Meanwhile, Casey Civic Site team leader Gail Hayes had secured \$50,000 from Casey’s education program to pay a consultant to lead the Civic Site’s new student success strategy, which had emerged out of the site team’s research on the neighborhood schools.

“We realized we needed someone on the ground to coordinate the work and seek out other partners,” said Hayes. “We needed someone who understands a results focus and who makes things happen.” Hayes chose Atlanta consultant Elizabeth Kelly for the job.

In summer 2005, the Casey Civic Site team approached APS and Principal Waller. “Casey and Parks, our visions aligned,” said Waller. “Casey brought resources to the table, and I didn’t feel like I was in it by myself anymore. It became a group effort.”

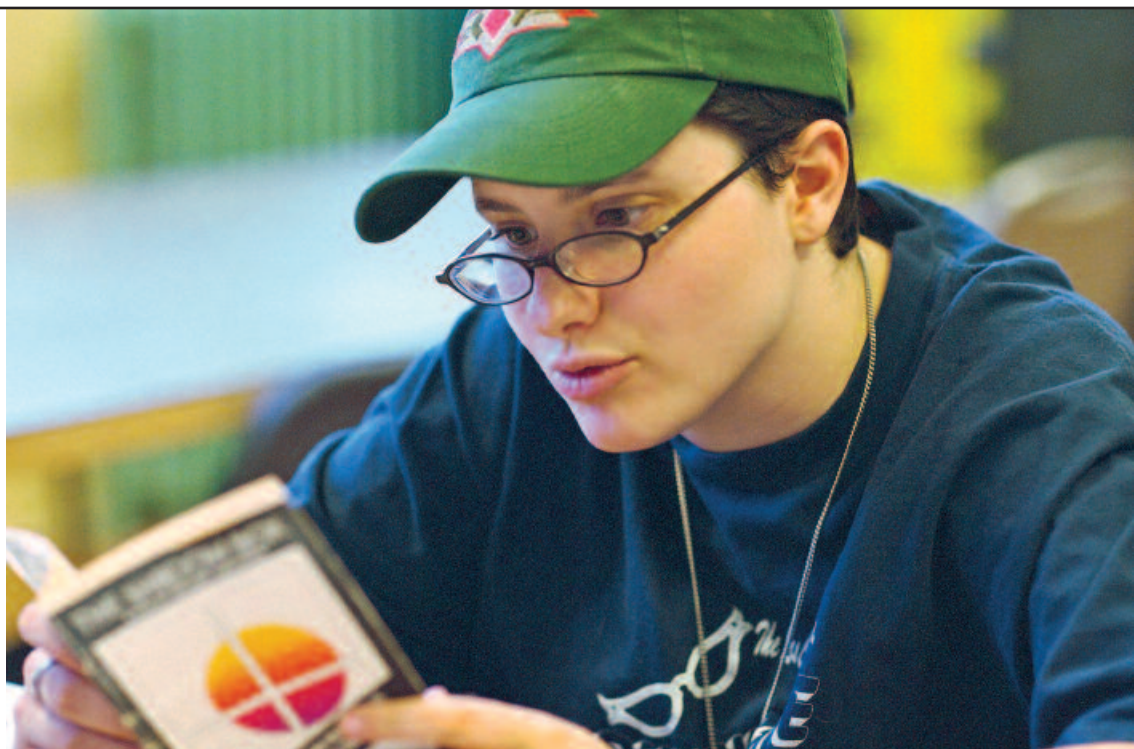
Kelly is a white woman who stands out in the predominantly black school and surrounding neighborhoods, and it took a while for her and Principal Waller to figure out how to work together. Once they did, Waller and Kelly made a formidable team.

Within the first few months of working together, they brought in a comprehensive after-school program called After School All Stars and an academic summer school program,

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**“The Casey consultant brings the people and the resources. I can keep my focus on my job. I’m the education expert, and she is the partnership expert. We make a good team.”** *Chris Waller, Parks Middle School Principal*

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and they strengthened the school's relationship with Communities In Schools, the Project GRAD component that provides an on-site community and school coordinator. Numerous other partnerships and programs have followed.

### Curriculum Alignment and Transitions

Waller and Kelly quickly honed in on a major problem in the feeder pattern. There was misalignment between the fifth-grade curriculum at the elementary schools and the sixth-grade curriculum at Parks, and between the eighth-grade curriculum at Parks and the ninth-grade curricula at the New Schools at Carver.

Student experiences bear this out. "Half of what I'm learning in sixth grade at Parks I already learned in fifth grade," said sixth grader Shamika Mapp.

APS had recently begun to develop a curriculum alignment program for the entire district, so Parks, APS, and the Casey Civic Site team decided to work together to pilot alignment in the Carver feeder pattern. Casey's education program is investing \$90,000 per year in the alignment effort.

Waller and Kelly also noticed that students faced difficult cultural transitions when they move from one school level to another. In elementary school, students have the same teacher for most of the day. In middle school, students have multiple teachers. Bullies are suddenly part of your daily reality, and drugs and pressure to have sex are also prevalent.

**"The teaching style here is different, and the kind and amount of work are different. In eighth grade, I didn't have to do a lot. This is much harder. I have to be on the job here."** *Daniel Krowell, Jr., 16, Carver Early College*



## HOW CASEY MADE A DIFFERENCE IN ATLANTA

- Casey brought partners to the table, enabling Parks to provide many coordinated programs to its students. UPS board members played a key role by introducing the site team and Parks to potential partners.
- Casey's education program funded the Civic Site's student success strategy consultant, who plays a crucial role in finding partners, bringing together all the players, and keeping them focused on the desired result.
- The Civic Site team helped Parks leadership see the school as a part of an entire feeder pattern in which schools must work together to graduate young people ready to succeed as adults.
- Casey's education program funded early work on curriculum alignment and school transitions in the feeder pattern, creating a learning laboratory for the entire district.

“In fifth grade, it’s like you’re king of the school,” said Shamika Mapp. “You go to middle school and you’re at the bottom again.”

To address the transition issue, Waller has created a special summer program for incoming sixth graders. “It focuses on the transition to middle school life,” he said. “That way, when kids start sixth grade, we can go straight into academics.”

### **Parks Middle School Today**

People who visit Parks today barely recognize it. The halls are empty unless students are between classes, and students are neatly dressed. Attendance at family events at the school has increased dramatically. When Waller first started, three or four parents would show up for a meeting. Last spring, a dinner for dads brought in 150 parents.

Test scores have improved dramatically. Sixth-grade students who scored 65 percent proficient in reading three years ago recently scored 94 percent proficient as eighth graders. Over the same period of time, the same students went from 51 percent proficient to 90 percent proficient in math. Students are holding their heads high as they walk down the school’s hallways between classes.

Students at Parks are working hard to meet high expectations and do well on tests. For all of them, school has become serious business. “Education is work, it’s not about fun,” said eighth grader Kelvin Beasley, 14.

### **Next Steps for Casey and School Districts**

Based on its experience in Atlanta, Casey’s education program will increase its focus on district feeder patterns in cities where the Foundation has concurrent investments. It will also support continuity in public education from pre-kindergarten through college.

## **LESSONS FOR DONORS**

- Listen carefully and be responsive. Avoid pushing a particular plan.
- Success doesn’t require a huge investment of money if the conditions are right.
- Target support for school improvement to schools that are in the same feeder pattern.
- The principal is crucial to any school improvement effort.
- The school district must support and endorse the work.
- Hire a high-performing liaison to work on the ground with the principal.
- Provide flexible, ongoing funding.

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