

Sparking Solutions: Q&A with Helen Cunningham, Executive Director of Samuel S. Fels Fund

By Judy Weightman

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In our final Q&A in our Sparking Solutions series, we talked to Helen Cunningham, executive director of the Samuel S. Fels Fund, one of the most important foundations supporting education in Philadelphia. Some of the answers have been edited for length.

Let's start with an overall description of the Fels Fund.

It started in the '30s and it serves the City of Philadelphia. We make grants in arts and culture — that's about 12 percent of our funds — and in education, which is primarily ways to support the improvement of public education. And then we have a large category called "community," which encompasses lots of things, but it's homelessness, and hunger, and services to immigrants, and legal aid, and a lot of social justice issues. So Fels is a progressive, left-leaning foundation.

Let's talk about education. What do you see as the biggest barrier to providing quality education in Philadelphia?

Well, I don't know that I can say a single big barrier — there are two. The biggest barriers, I would say, are that Philadelphia, like many other school districts in Pennsylvania, is grossly underfunded, so that's one. The school district is, right now, unable to focus on quality education because it's so busy keeping itself alive. So the funding issue is a major one. And the second one is, I would say, that the way schools are managed has gotten way out of control — far too focused on the adults, meaning the union, which has too much sway and not enough focus on children. I just said [the Fels Fund was] left-leaning: we are probably the foundation that would have helped the school district formulate and get a federation started, but now I feel like the federation has lost its way. So, in my opinion, those two things conspire to deliver the last 40 years of very, very poor public education, with some very fine exceptions to that.

So the current budget crisis is just kind of an incident in a longer pattern of failure to prioritize education?

Yes, we've had a broken system for a long time. Under Ed Rendell, the state legislature funded something called a costing-out study, and then, based on that, they put into effect a weighted funding, so if you have special ed, English-language learners, high-poverty children, it costs more, they need more attention, more resources to get them where they need to be. And we put that in place and began funding that, and it looked like we had arrived, and then 2008 arrived and so we have to go back to the drawing board on that.

Do you anticipate that the long-range effects of this budget crisis will have done permanent damage, or will we just return to previous levels of dysfunction?

No, I think that [previous Philadelphia School District heads] Paul Vallas and Arlene Ackerman began the notion that schools [where] children aren't progressing at a certain level year to year just need to be disbanded and reformed. And I think if we could continue on that road, of always getting rid of the bottom, if we could do enough of them in a year and had enough people willing to do turnaround schools, we could really make a difference — especially if there's enough money. Anybody who reads the papers in Philadelphia knows the horrors of not having nurses and counselors, of having too many kids in a class, and all that sort of thing. So there are some things that money alone does solve.

So who are the players that are going to be able to help bring about the changes, once we have a new governor, say?

Well, the School Reform Commission, the head of the school district, they can bring about big changes locally, and if they can work well with somebody in Harrisburg. Harrisburg needs some really fresh thinking. Because in order to fund education, you know, there's not suddenly more money because the legislature votes in a spending formula — you have to take money away from something else or figure out a new tax or do something differently. We just saw Colorado voters, when asked if they wanted to increase money, tax themselves more to put more money into schools, they overwhelmingly said no.

So, it's an interesting time, and personally I don't know where to get the money to do this. But I think our state and our city — I mean, there's no other response to curing poverty, is there? Other than educating people so they can earn a decent wage?

So looking at the non-profit sector, who is doing good work?

The Children's Literacy Initiative, which trains preschool to third-grade teachers — the model classroom thing is something they did before because the district didn't bring them in to do wholesale training of teachers, and now the district is doing that. And the foundation world is stepping up to help pay for it.

So among the really great players in the city on educational issues, I would say that the Children's Literacy Initiative is one of the strongest, most practical, hands-on. Because if children, especially children in poverty, if they can get out of third-grade reading at grade level, then in fourth grade, you stop learning to read, you start reading to learn. Everything sort of switches. And if you never conquered the basic reading, you're just going to fall farther and further behind. So, in this little ideal world, you could, if you got everybody in every public school with a great teacher in your pre-K to third grade, and if you have thousands of children going into fourth grade ready to read their social studies books and understand a math problem in words, and move forward like that — I mean, you just solve an enormous part of our problem altogether.

It's why so many of the charter schools — the good ones — want to get their kids really early, they want earlier and earlier grades, because to try to get someone who's in seventh grade or ninth grade and is reading on a third-grade level, that's a lot of years' work to catch up on. And it's extremely hard — it's doable, but it's extremely hard. On the other hand, if you can get them early, they can continue at an appropriate pace.

[Springboard Collaborative] is another fabulous organization that takes kids who are not finishing those early grades where they should be, and then there's another phenomenon called summer melt, where you go backwards because you don't come from a household where anybody's reading to you, or you're not reading, so you end the year behind your class and then lose ground over the summer, so when you start second grade, you're even further behind.

And Springboard is doing this great work, working with teachers and parents of kids over the summer. And they've had fabulous parental turnout.

I think the Philadelphia School Partnership is another fabulous organization that is looking at — I'm on the board, just as a little disclaimer — and Fels funds the other two I mentioned, so Fels funds all three of these organizations. The Philadelphia School Partnership is ready with money for very, very strong educators to increase the number of children that they reach. And as a model that is fabulous, because it's agnostic — it would help public schools, traditional public schools, it would help charter schools, and it helps parochial schools, as well. And it would support private schools, as long as their student body is similar to the kids in the Philadelphia public schools system. It wouldn't help Episcopal [Academy] or something.

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Looking at your list of 2013 recipients, it looks like you give small amounts to a wide variety of groups.

Well, the really small amounts are all in arts and culture. So we make a big distinction between the arts and culture thing and the rest.

But even the education groups, there's a fair number of — like Mighty Writers gets \$7500. It looks as though you're trying to support broadly, rather than deeply. Is that fair?

Well — I guess, because we don't make three grants in education and put all our money in those things, I guess you could say [that]. But there's even broader that we could go that we don't. So we fund programs that improve arts and culture inside schools, so there you see Young Playwrights and Dancing Classrooms and Musicopia. And we fund some of that stuff in the community [grants category] too. When it's education but not in the school setting, it might end up there. One of the things that's great about Fels is that our silos are pretty "melty" — you wouldn't tell somebody wonderful they can't get a grant here because they don't fit a category. So you'll see there's also a fair amount in education advocacy. We're trying to fund the people who are working on changing the funding formula, doing that kind of work.