

EMBEDDED PHILANTHROPY PROFILE

From “Embedded Funders and Community Change: Profiles”
(Chapin Hall Working Paper, 2006)

COMER SCIENCE AND EDUCATION FOUNDATION

1010 East 72nd Street, Chicago, IL 60619

SUMMARY

The Comer Science and Education Foundation practices philanthropy in two areas of interest to its founder. On the science side, the foundation supports research and infrastructure to study global warming and the effects of human activity on the environment. In education, the foundation is deeply engaged in supporting the infrastructure, activities, and quality of education at Revere Elementary School, a public school on the south side of Chicago, and the neighborhood surrounding the school.

HOW AND WHY DID THE FOUNDATION EMBED ITSELF IN THIS PARTICULAR NEIGHBORHOOD?

Gary Comer, founder of the Lands End catalogue company, grew up in south Chicago and graduated from Revere Elementary School. Comer’s sale of Lands End capitalized the foundation, and Mr. Comer designated a portion of his philanthropy for improving the school and the educational outcomes of children who attend it.

WHAT BELIEFS AND THEORIES OF CHANGE INFORM THE FOUNDATION’S WORK?

The foundation’s basic assumption is that to succeed in school and later life, children need the help and support of their families, which in turn require neighborhood resources and opportunities. Comer began with an interest in educational outcomes and the potential for improving them by strengthening infrastructure and pedagogy at Revere Elementary School. As foundation staff learned about the family circumstances and community factors that affect student achievement, they broadened their activities to include family support services, adult education, community organizing, and housing development. The result is a community development approach centered on the school and the population connected to it.

WHAT STRATEGIES HAS THE FOUNDATION USED?

The foundation aims to make Revere Elementary School a community resource. To that end, it has invested in multiple components of change, including:

- ❑ School infrastructure (e.g., wiring, computers, and renovation)

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- ❑ Instruction (e.g., curricula, and teacher training)
- ❑ Programming (e.g., adult education, GED classes, social services for Revere students, family support services, and after-school programs)
- ❑ Management (e.g., building staff capacity at the school and at the foundation; creating new organizations to lead pieces of work, such as housing development; and developing partnerships with local universities, hospitals, service providers, museums, and youth workers)
- ❑ Connecting families with services (e.g., adult education programs for parents of Revere students; job training for residents hired to construct the foundation’s housing project; and a state-of-the-art youth center that, when completed, will offer activities and programs for the community’s young people and space for meetings, classes, and exhibits)

Early community engagement efforts helped foundation staff identify community needs and interests and select appropriate programs. Comer sponsored a series of town hall-style meetings, held at the school one Saturday per month for 8 months, where residents could eat breakfast, hear new ideas, and brainstorm together. The foundation also hired a community organizer to organize block clubs throughout the neighborhood. Block club leaders meet weekly at the school to share information and plan activities. The foundation gives the clubs small grants for neighborhood projects, and a committee of residents reviews the applications.

WHAT INTERNAL PRACTICES, STRUCTURES, AND POLICIES HAS THE FOUNDATION DEVELOPED TO SUPPORT THE WORK?

The flexibility and responsiveness that characterize the foundation’s work in and around Revere stem from the donor’s direct, personal role in making decisions and allocating resources. In the early days, the foundation’s contributions reflected Mr. Comer’s own perceptions of immediate needs. Thus, for example, the foundation paid to update the school’s electrical wiring to accommodate computers, install new doors, and provide school uniforms to all students. The grant-making process was refined over time, but decisions are still made by Mr. Comer in consultation with the foundation’s executive director, the president of Gary Comer Investments, and the principal of Revere Elementary School.

The foundation’s operating relationship with Revere is unique. In a sense, the foundation is a nonprofit organization embedded within a Chicago public school and operating both independently and in concert with the school. The school provides space for foundation offices,

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foundation staff work on projects within the school, the foundation gives the school money to hire substitute teachers, and a foundation employee is the school’s full-time business manager.

WHAT HAS THE FOUNDATION ACCOMPLISHED?

Between 2000 and 2005, significant changes occurred in Revere and, to a lesser extent, the surrounding neighborhood. Student test scores improved. The school gained a state-of-the-art computer lab, computers in every classroom, new wiring and air conditioning, new doors, and supplies. Additional teachers were hired and trained on the computers. New reading and math curricula were selected.

The school now offers an array of after-school, adult education, and family support services. A new youth center is under construction. The first phase of housing development is underway, with four houses completed and sold (mostly to school employees). Block clubs are organized and functional; they sponsor community-building events, such as block parties, and organize neighborhood safety projects, such as an agreement that all residents of a given block will call 911 to report crimes or emergencies in order to improve police response time.

WHAT WERE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES? HOW DID THE FOUNDATION CONFRONT THEM?

Building trust and changing systems. The Local School Council (LSC) was wary of the changes at first; members distrusted the foundation’s motives and the working relationship between the foundation and school principal. It took time, turnover of LSC members, and Comer’s willingness to share information before the foundation dispelled the doubts and concerns. The public school system’s bureaucracy posed a second, related challenge. Foundation leaders had to find flexibility within the rules of operation so Revere could use the resources that Comer provided.

Maintaining a sharp focus on goals. As the change agenda has expanded to community issues beyond the school walls, it has grown more difficult to keep activities and investments strategically focused on the goal of improving the educational experience, achievement, and life trajectories of Revere students.

INTERVIEWEES

Greg Mooney, Executive Director, Comer Science and Education Foundation

Shelby Taylor, Principal, Paul Revere Elementary School

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Nathaniel Carter, neighborhood resident and block club president

Karen Darring, neighborhood resident and Head Start aide, Paul Revere Elementary School

