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# Foundations Invest Cautiously in Public Education Innovations



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ARTSSMARTS.

**THOSE WITH AN INTEREST IN PUBLIC EDUCATION**

**SHARE A DESIRE TO INVEST IN PROGRAMS**

**PROMOTING INNOVATION AND STUDENT SUCCESS,**

**BUT THE NATURE OF FOUNDATION SUPPORT VARIES**

**WIDELY ACROSS THE COUNTRY.**

LIKE MANY GRANT-MAKING PHILANTHROPIES IN CANADA, the Winnipeg Foundation for years had no history of giving directly to schools, fearing that could let governments off the hook for public education.

But in 2003, the Winnipeg Foundation invested \$3 million over five years in one of the city's most impoverished neighbourhoods, with a local school as the hub for intensive services delivered by the school board, government agencies, and non-profit partners.

"We've gone through a fairly significant transition," says foundation president Richard Frost of his organization's evolution in thinking over the past decade. "There has been a growing acceptance at our board level that schools are the centre of a neighbourhood and that a lot of the neighbourhood cohesion we want to see can be facilitated through schools," adds the head of the second-largest community foundation in Canada.

The Winnipeg Foundation is one of several Canadian philanthropies rethinking how they relate to the K-12 sector. Those with an interest in public education share a desire to invest in programs promoting innovation and student success, but the nature of foundation support varies widely across the country.

In Quebec, the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation of Montreal has pledged a stunning \$450 million over the next decade for two joint initiatives with the province (which earmarked \$340 million in cigarette tax revenue over the same period) on early childhood education and healthy lifestyles for youth up to 17 years. In Toronto, the Laidlaw Foundation has adopted a new strategy to foster innovation through grants to youth-led initiatives, most carried on outside the classroom. In Alberta, the Edmonton Community Foundation provides grants to the local school board and a community non-profit for pregnant teen mothers – and teen fathers – to complete their high school studies. On a different tack, the Max Bell Foundation of Calgary and Toronto-based Donner Foundation each have funded research on the performance of public schools and policy alternatives in education, such as parental choice.

**EN BREF** Au Canada, les fondations ont longtemps hésité à faire directement des dons pour l'éducation publique, ne désirant pas décharger les gouvernements de leurs responsabilités en matière d'éducation publique. Mais de nouvelles relations se créent entre les donateurs et les secteurs du primaire et du secondaire, car on considère que les écoles ne peuvent fournir à elles seules ce qu'il faut aux élèves pour réussir au 21<sup>e</sup> siècle. Quoiqu'elles partagent un intérêt pour les innovations en enseignement et en apprentissage, le financement accordé par les fondations canadiennes prend plusieurs formes. Certaines deviennent des partenaires des gouvernements provinciaux et des conseils et commissions scolaires; d'autres versent directement des fonds à des jeunes en âge d'études secondaires; d'autres encore travaillent avec des enseignants sur les programmes d'études; plusieurs investissent dans la recherche sur l'ensemble du système. Quelle que soit l'approche adoptée, la frontière entre la philanthropie privée et l'éducation publique devient plus floue, alors que certains donateurs et fonctionnaires scolaires explorent des possibilités d'avoir une conversation utile sur ce qu'il faudra aux jeunes Canadiens pour réaliser leur potentiel.

### **CANADIAN EDUCATION GIVING IS SMALL-SCALE COMPARED TO U.S.**

With some notable exceptions, philanthropic giving to the K-12 sector is relatively small-scale (by American standards) and time-limited, usually up to three years. Typically, the focus is on projects to help students realize their potential, not system-wide reform espoused by philanthropies in the U.S.

"Many American foundations are vastly larger than Canadian ones, and their assets give them the scope to plan and carry out significant interventions on the scale required in public education to make change happen, and stick," says Hilary Pearson, president of the 92-member Philanthropic Foundations Canada, whose members include the biggest private donors in the country. In 2007, 20 percent of \$195 million in grants disbursed by her members were in education, including donations to private schools, student scholarships and the post-secondary sector.

University of Toronto education professor Ben Levin, a former Deputy Minister of Education in Ontario, praises the work of foundations here but says they lack the resources or staying power to bring about system-wide school change.

"I don't think the problem in education is the lack of innovation," he said. "We have had too much innovation. We have not had enough sustainability or scalability."

Still, despite limited resources and a long-held aversion to "letting government off the hook," some Canadian foundations are picking their spots in recognition that schools cannot do it alone.

The old conundrum in Canada is "what is the public's responsibility and what is the role of private philanthropy?" says Tim Brodhead, President and CEO of Montreal-based McConnell Foundation. The historic, dismissive response, he adds, is: "We pay our school taxes and *damn it* the government is supposed to deliver education for everybody."

That's beginning to change, with McConnell an early leader in redefining the relationship.

### **MCCONNELL'S ARTSSMARTS YIELDS UNEXPECTED RESULTS**

In 1998, after years of school budget cuts to the arts, McConnell launched ArtsSmarts, a national initiative that brings teachers and artists together in the classroom, with music, dance, and theatre used to nurture active, independent thinking by students in all their subjects. The program turns the arts into a building block of learning, not an after-thought, a strategy that has yielded some unexpected results.

"One of the collateral benefits has been that sometimes the least engaged students in the classroom turn out to have talents no one suspected," says Mr. Brodhead. "When they are given the opportunity through some form of experiential learning through the arts it changes the way they see school."

Over the past decade McConnell pledged \$9.7-million to ArtsSmarts, facilitating grassroots networks among teachers, artists, and community groups who have worked with more than 223,000 students in 1,400 schools across Canada.

In a similar vein, McConnell launched Green Street a decade ago to improve environmental education. Since then, the foundation has committed \$9.7 million for the organization to deliver web-based and other teaching materials linked to the curriculum, with accredited "green" organizations providing opportunities for students to learn about environmental stewardship in their own back yard. The project is more than half way to its goal of reaching 500,000 K-12 students in Canada.

Despite its long-term financial commitment – rare for foundations – McConnell always intended for others to pick up ownership of the two projects. That proved difficult with no obvious national body in education. After a couple of short-lived relationships with other groups, ArtsSmarts this year became a national not-for-profit (still with some McConnell funding) that works with provincial ministries, school boards, and cultural groups. Green Street has migrated to the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) and the Centrale des syndicats du Québec, which serve as the secretariat to connect teachers to high-quality materials and experts.

"There are many teachers out there looking for that extra piece to tack on to the regular curriculum," says Pauline Théoret, Green Street coordinator for CTF. "They are looking to enhance the experience for their students and that is where Green Street comes in." As McConnell winds down its funding next year, Green Street is seeking new donors.

While often collaborative, the relationship between foundations and schools can be strained too.

### **CHAGNON, QUEBEC PARTNER TO HELP AT-RISK YOUTH**

In Quebec, spokesmen for teacher unions and others took exception to the Chagnon Foundation's unusual private-public partnerships with the provincial government, raising doubts over who is in charge. But Chagnon is undeterred, this year joining forces with the province on a new five-year \$50-million (each puts up \$5 million a year) stay-in-school program. Elsewhere, foundation-backed research on parental choice, standardized testing and school performance comes under attack from school spokesmen as misleading indicators of quality.

## **THE OLD CONUNDRUM IN CANADA IS "WHAT IS**

## **THE PUBLIC'S RESPONSIBILITY AND WHAT IS THE**

## **ROLE OF PRIVATE PHILANTHROPY?"**



PHOTO COURTESY OF ARTSSMARTS.



## ARTSSMARTS: ENGAGING YOUTH IN THE ARTS AND SCHOOL

Founded in 1998 by the McConnell Foundation of Montreal, and now a national non-profit organization this year, ArtsSmarts operates inside the classroom to integrate arts into all school subjects. Curriculum-based collaboration between teachers and working artists aims to engage young people in artistic activities that support their development as critical, independent thinkers. ArtsSmarts relies on a grassroots network of teachers, artists, community groups, provincial governments and others to share information about projects and effective models of teaching and learning.

The approach to learning embedded in ArtsSmarts – hands-on, working in groups and exposure, through the artists, to models of creative enquiry – has generated some unexpected, positive consequences. For example, some of the least engaged students are able to discover skills and capabilities that allow them to re-connect with school. As well, an artist in the classroom allows students to relate to an adult who is not an authority figure, like a parent or teacher. “He (the artist) doesn’t look at us like little kids, but as responsible young adults,” one student reported on an ArtsSmarts survey. “Maybe that’s why I listen better to him than to anyone else.”

ArtsSmarts executive director Annalee Adair says “there is definitely an inter-generational component to ArtsSmarts – between artists and young people; however it is the modeling of collaboration between the teacher/artist and the students that changes the classroom dynamic.”

Link to ArtsSmarts website: [www.artssmarts.ca](http://www.artssmarts.ca)

“The public school system is protective of the status quo,” says David Elton, president of the Max Bell Foundation. “It is much more interested in saying ‘we are doing a good job, leave us alone and we will continue to do what we do.’” Several years ago, there were howls of protest from school officials over Fraser Institute research, funded in part by the foundation, that ranked schools based on standardized-test scores. In 2006-08, Mr. Elton’s organization gave \$57,000 in grants to researchers at the C.D. Howe Institute to refine the analysis to account for socio-economic differences among schools. “It’s one of the few reports that say parents should pay attention to the schools their kids go to,” says Mr. Elton. “Seldom do they have any tools to measure the effectiveness of schools.”

Other foundations express their giving for impact through grants for school-age youth, not the institution. Toronto’s Laidlaw Foundation works directly with youth aged 14-25 to build their capacity for social enterprise. With a heavy dollop of peer mentoring, Laidlaw grantees carry out an array of imaginative activities in culture and grass-roots politics, gaining confidence and leadership skills. “Regrettably, schools and school budgets have cut back on those kinds of experiential forms of learning,” says Laidlaw Executive Director Nathan Gilbert. “They have been sacrificed.”

One Laidlaw grantee, Chantle Beeso, was a 16-year-old student at Oakwood Collegiate in Toronto when she received \$33,720 to publish three issues of a youth magazine she created for young entrepreneurs and artists. Mentored by members of the ReMix Project, a youth-led incubator for urban artists also supported by Laidlaw, Ms. Beeso later coached the graphic artists, writers, and photographers she hired for BeSo Magazine (a play on words of her name).

“It gives students a chance to be independent – something that doesn’t happen too much within the [high] school system,” says Ms. Beeso, now in first year at Carleton University studying political science and journalism. “It proves to other students that anything is possible and there are adults out there who trust us and are willing to give us that independence. It’s a great feeling.”

From Laidlaw’s perspective, youth-oriented grants carry a big pay-off, expressed in the creativity and independence of a new generation of learners.

“The stated outcome is not about becoming a magazine publisher, but to encourage youth to work collaboratively to explore neat ideas and see what issues are facing young people today,” says Laidlaw Program Manager Ana Skinner, of Ms. Beeso’s project. “We saw her passion and commitment and how she intended to use that platform as a way to create opportunities for her peers.”

## COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS DIRECTLY FUND SCHOOLS

Among Canadian philanthropies, those directly funding schools are often community foundations that manage endowments from local donors.

Still, “it is a bit of a delicate balance,” says Scott Graham, Director of Community Grants for the Edmonton Community Foundation. In 2008, education-related grants accounted for 19 percent of the foundation’s total giving of \$10.2-million. “We don’t want, as the charitable sector, to be giving a tacit message to the government ‘you can step back,’” he said. “We can’t afford to do everything but we are happy to help.”

Since 2003, various donors with ECF have contributed to the City Centre Education Partnership, a network of seven inner-city schools set up in 2001 by the Edmonton Public School Board to receive enriched funding from a host of local, provincial and federal agencies. In 2007 and 2008, the foundation provided \$30,000 in grants for summer recreation and learning programs for low-income children who otherwise would fall behind academically during the vacation break.

Having the foundation as a local partner that can fill in gaps for children gave an enormous boost to education officials on the front lines. “We didn’t feel alone anymore,” says Nancy Petersen, a former principal of one of the inner-city schools and now a board coordinator for the network. Her “aha” moment came three years into the project. “All of a sudden we realized the kids were coming to school happy, they were co-operative, they wanted to learn and school was a positive place to be,” she says.

An evaluation of the project, presented to the Edmonton board this year, cited improved test scores, student engagement and a drop in suspensions over a

six-year period. CCEP proved so successful that the provincial government has adopted it as a model for collaborative service delivery across Alberta.

In Winnipeg, after several years of small donations to the Winnipeg School Division, the community foundation took a bold step in 2003, committing to a five-year, \$3-million investment in a largely Aboriginal neighbourhood marked by high unemployment, low educational achievement, and a high incidence of female-led households. The foundation, the school board, and other agencies joined forces with parents and others in the community, using Dufferin School as the focal point for Centennial Neighbourhood Project. Early results point to increased student attendance and higher reading scores.

"Concrete initiatives are more important [to donors] in terms of delivering real results and can inspire change more effectively than abstract policy decisions," says Winnipeg Foundation president Richard Frost.

In the future, foundation and school officials see room for a deeper conversation about working together to promote student success. "We can't do everything on our own," says Winnipeg School Division Chief Superintendent of Schools Pauline Clarke. "We need people to work collaboratively with us and for us to work collaboratively with others involves dialogue and discussion." |

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## PATHWAYS: IMPROVING EDUCATION OUTCOMES FOR DISADVANTAGED YOUTH

Founded in 2001 by the Regent Park Community Health Centre in Toronto, Pathways to Education is a community-based initiative to help disadvantaged youth succeed in high school and move on to higher education. By design, the program complements life in the classroom, with intensive, after-school mentoring, tutoring and other supports and activities for students and their families.

The program, which has since expanded to five other locations in Canada, is heavily reliant on corporate and foundation giving as well as a network of government and non-government partners. An early supporter of Pathways was the Donner Canadian Foundation, which gave \$386,002 between 2002 and 2008, and has a major donation to the organization under consideration this year.

"The overall objective is to improve the educational outcomes for Canadian young people," says Donner Executive Director Helen McLean, of her foundation's rationale for giving to Pathways. "In doing that we are ready to explore a number of avenues." Earlier this year, a study of five communities that have adopted Pathways reported a one-year reduction of up to 52 percent in the number of Grade 9 students academically at risk of dropping out. "It is a tremendously successful and powerful program," says Ms. McLean.

Link to Pathways to Education website: [www.pathwaystoeducation.ca](http://www.pathwaystoeducation.ca)

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