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INTERVIEW

Partnership and Capacity Building: An Interview with Bob Corcoran and Kelli Wells of GE Foundation

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Partnership and Capacity Building: An Interview with Bob Corcoran and Kelli Wells of GE Foundation

IN 2005, GE FOUNDATION, the philanthropic organization of the General Electric Company, launched the *Developing Futures in Education* program, to which it has committed more than \$150 million to drive reform at six U.S. school districts. While the objective is to prepare students for college and for careers in math and science, this program is unique in its approach. The program focuses on growing school district management capacity through a vibrant partnership between the districts and GE's corporate and divisional managers. GE managers bring to bear their expertise in core areas such as personnel management, resource allocation, collaboration, and technology to accelerate change and scale up innovations. Districts have experienced impressive successes, from implementing new math and science curricula to enhancing professional development programs. In this edited interview with Bob Corcoran, President and Chairman of GE Foundation, and Kelli Wells, Director of U.S. Education Programs of GE Foundation, DMC's John J-H Kim discusses *Developing Futures*, and GE's innovative approach to working with these districts.

The impact of the *Developing Futures* program has been exciting. But, I know GE's prior experience with its successful *College Bound* program helped shape the program you have today. Can you share with us some of the lessons learned that affected your structuring of the *Developing Futures* program?

Corcoran: *College Bound* was a very successful program we had in place for 18 years. The metric for the program was simple: to improve the college matriculation rates of schools in distressed districts serving underserved and challenged students. When we first began the program, the average college matriculation rate was around 35%; after 18 years of running this program, we were working with a total of 22 schools, and the average college matriculation rate had reached 76%—remarkable by any measure.

However, as we looked at scalability, we realized that while all the schools were achieving the objective, we were essentially funding 22 very different programs. Some schools achieved the objective through afterschool programs, some focused on parental outreach, some emphasized curriculum reinforcement, and others hired full-time staff to help with college coaching and counseling. When you are trying to effect large-scale reform and trying to affect the outcomes for millions of children being failed by the system, you need to focus on scalability. A single unit approach is not the answer no matter how good the innovation. So, over a period of four months back in 2004, we convened experts from around the country to help us evaluate and address the issues facing American education. We brought in people from the national level, the district level, various consultants, etc., >

and looked at the issues, the challenges, and the opportunities for GE Foundation to make a difference going forward.

So what were the key conclusions?

Corcoran: There are perhaps 50 significant variables that can impact student achievement. But, in drawing on our business practice, we know that if you try to do everything, you do nothing. You just can't do it. The key is to pick a handful of variables that you can reasonably focus on to drive change. Through the *College Bound* program, we learned that one of the biggest predictors of college readiness and college matriculation, regardless of race and ethnicity, was the taking of higher level courses in math and science. So, we decided this was the

objective we wanted to target. We centered our efforts on implementing math and science curricula aligned with globally competitive standards, encouraging professional development to help teachers teach curricula, and implementing key metrics and data systems to enable districts to evaluate progress.

As successful as the *College Bound* program was, we came to the conclusion that the unit of change has to be the district. It is the district that has full accountability for managing the education process. The classroom is unbelievably important because that's where the students and the teacher interact and that's where the knowledge transfer and inquiry happens; the principal is incredibly important to ensure that the school runs. But, from the standpoint of fiscal accountability and

FIGURE 1

Developing Futures			
<i>Developing Futures in Education</i> is GE Foundation's innovative approach to growing school district capacity to prepare students for college and for careers in math and science through systemic reform and high standards. With over a century of experience in developing new technologies, leading innovation, and managing a diverse workforce, GE recognizes the importance of preparing all students with the skills to prosper in a technologically-focused society. GE Foundation accelerates growth in school district performance by increasing management capacity in collaboration with teachers, professional associations, elected officials, policymakers, and community organizations. <i>Developing Futures</i> is working with the following six districts:			
District	Amount of Grant	Number of Schools	Number of Students
Jefferson County Public Schools <i>Louisville, KY</i> Superintendent: Dr. Sheldon Berman	\$25 million	150 schools	97,000 students
Stamford Public Schools <i>Stamford, CT</i> Superintendent: Dr. Joshua Starr	\$15.3 million	21 schools	16,000 students
Cincinnati Public Schools <i>Cincinnati, OH</i> Superintendent: Mary Ronan	\$20 million	62 schools	35,000 students
The School District of the City of Erie, PA <i>Erie, PA</i> Superintendent: Dr. James Barker	\$15 million	21 schools	12,637 students
Atlanta Public Schools <i>Atlanta, GA</i> Superintendent: Dr. Beverly Hall	\$21 million	94 schools	50,631 students
New York City Public Schools-Harlem <i>New York City, NY</i> Chancellor: Joel Klein	\$28 million	1,450+ schools	1,100,000 students

Source: GE Foundation



Bob Corcoran (left) and DMC's John J-H Kim (right)

providing equal access to quality education for all children, it happens at the district level – period. So, in designing *Developing Futures*, we chose to engage with six districts on a long-term basis to really drive change there (See Figure 1).

The districts you chose are very different from each other. They're in different parts of the country and vary in size and demographics. What did you find when you actually engaged with these districts?

Corcoran: The interesting thing is that there are more similarities than differences in terms of how the systems operate. That would also be true within GE of a lighting factory versus an aircraft engine factory. The product is different and some of the equipment is different, but fundamentally, there's a process, people, and outcomes. Of course, the presenting problems differ by district. One of the districts already had a common math curriculum while another was desperate to upgrade their math curriculum. One district had severe problems with data, and was working off a 1971-vintage IT infrastructure. But, the similarities outweigh the differences. They all have teachers and professional development. They all have curriculum. They have

budgets. They have long-term growth issues as well as state and federal government metrics. All these districts have the same kinds of things they have to address, and for GE, helping them deal with these issues became a matter of sequencing. We at GE needed to allow for the differing ways these districts function. Our focus was to make the priorities meaningful for the school systems so that they could fully own and appreciate the work we are doing together.

What seems really unique about the *Developing Futures* program are the types of collaboration you have chosen to focus on. Essentially, what you have done is to take the fundamental lessons from the success of GE in terms of process, systems, management, measurement, and organization and transfer those skills to the districts. *Developing Futures* seems to be focusing on, for lack of better terminology, the unsexy work of capacity building. We know from our work that this is something that is missing from a lot of philanthropic efforts.

Corcoran: For the majority of reforms over the last decade, the focus has been at the state level ▶

FIGURE 2



around required testing and standards. Or, it’s been in the classroom, around the testing of students. However, there has been little attention paid to one of the most important supporting structures: how you manage all of this to have the best possible outcomes for your district. This is where GE comes in because that’s what a corporation does every day. We’re business folks, so every day we look at systems, process, measures, and metrics. We make tough decisions on resources and processes; that’s what GE does.

With the school districts, we apply our process mentality to the education support processes, engaging GE leaders with the teachers, teacher’s reps, and administrators (see Figure 2). That’s made a big difference. We realized that as a corporate foundation, one of the things that GE Foundation has and can leverage is our deep understanding of how to run an efficient and successful organization by applying process, structure, goals, and measurement. These are things that many school districts need.

Tell us more about how you get your people involved and about how your partnership works.

Corcoran: Every grant has a GE employee who has been seconded full-time to work as the grant program manager within the school district with the superintendent and the association leader. We've had IT leaders and their teams help a district examine data elements, requirement definitions, and the current systems to help them justify and scope out the student data management systems and the academic systems needed. We've had our IT leaders stand with district leaders before the local board to support the case to improve and maintain these systems. We've had facilities managers go in and create a 10-year plan on building management and maintenance with a school district; for example, Cincinnati saved \$10 million on building maintenance and rent. It may sound somewhat irrelevant that we saved them money on their building, but they are now able to put that money towards something that could positively affect district results.

Wells: Having a full-time program manager involved makes a tremendous difference. We've actually been able to build strong, long-term relationships. What I find surprising is that now when there is an issue the districts want to brainstorm about, they will pick up the phone and call their program manager. It's a very different relationship.

I just want to emphasize that when we go into the district, we are really working in partnership with the superintendent and the central office. We do a needs-analysis and then work with them. We don't go in with all of the answers; we really go in wanting to forge that relationship and partnership, leverage our tools, and try to fit in. You just don't show up like Rambo saying, "Hey, we're here to solve all your problems."

It's definitely not the one-size-fits-all approach.

Wells: Exactly. It's about understanding the needs. There was a level of trust that started to be built, and they realized that we weren't in there to tell them, "Here's what you must do." Instead, we were there to work with them. In the very beginning at

every single location, the districts would tell us that everything was perfect. There was nothing wrong. They only wanted to share the good. Our feedback was you need to tell us the whole story. We need to know what's working and what's not working, and to use this as an opportunity to dialogue and have a conversation. Now, when we come together as a group, it is actually a productive discussion. You have the unions sitting at the table, and you have the district central office folks, and you have the board of education members, and they start asking questions and having a real exchange of ideas. I think that has fed into the process of making this a constant cycle of reflection and learning. The districts realize that we are not like any other funder out there; we are there to build the relationship.

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—Bob Corcoran

A true partner. The district management and leadership issues that you're addressing have been a focus of our work at The District Management Council, and over the last four decades, the percentage of dollars that goes into that has actually shrunk. Do you believe that with the help and the support that you have given these districts that management capacity building is sustainable? Over time, can those skills be built and be sustained without support from the outside?

Corcoran: Absolutely. When you look at organizations and cultures of excellence, they become enduring and successful without regard for who happens to be leading them at the time. When I go to Washington and walk through the Capitol, ▷



Kelli Wells (left) and Bob Corcoran (right) discuss cultivating management capacity and sustaining change.

there is a sense of excellence there that transcends the people who occupy the building. So, I absolutely believe that institutions of excellence can be built and sustained without the constant influx of money. The key is about sustaining the change.

Mark Twain, who is credited with almost every pithy saying, said, “Quitting smoking is easy; I’ve done it a hundred times.” Well, implementing change is easy. We’ve done it a hundred times. The challenge of change is not conceiving it or implementing it, it’s sustaining it. One of the tools that we bring from the GE toolkit is called Change Acceleration Process. It’s now almost 20 years old. It’s an approach and a way to bring discipline and process to sustain change with supporting structures. What we see in the districts after a couple of years is that at the teacher level, the principal, and the administrative level, you have hundreds and thousands of adults who are invested in the system; we couldn’t take out some of these things if we wanted to. The grants have always been five-year grants and need

to be sustainable at the end. There’s never been a promise that we would continue to pay and continue to re-up, etc., because that would be failure. Anybody can take money, do things, and when the money stops coming, they stop doing things. So the grants from the start have been focused on that.

So, the real key is building management capacity and collaboration.

Corcoran: Yes. The key to all of this is to get all of the adult stakeholders—the school board, the parents, the business leaders in the community, the teachers, the teachers’ union, the administrators’ union, the administrators—all focused on improving opportunities for children. When you have divisiveness—people who are more focused on their views or agenda than they are on the outcome for children—no amount of money can fix things.

So, it is incumbent upon the business community to play a big role because they have processes.

Corporations face problems every day; business is not easy. You've got customers. You've got competitors. You have resource constraints. You've got shareholders. If you can bring a collaborative process, and focus on what unites us, which is improved outcomes for children, you're in better shape. The disciplines, the systems, the structures are absolutely necessary, but you must first have a fundamental collaborative approach that is tailored to the style of the district team—be it tough or engaging, depending on what is needed to be the most effective.

As you reflect on the *Developing Futures* program, is there anything you would do differently?

Wells: I think one key thing would be for us and the district to have a better sense of where the district is when we begin.

A diagnostic.

Wells: Exactly. As I think about the future plans for this work, that's the number one thing I'd do. I would complete a diagnostic assessment. I'd like to do a recap of where the district thinks it is in particular areas—its strengths and weaknesses.

The second piece of it is we've always gone into a district and created a steering committee structure. By the time that we hit Erie, which was our fourth district, we did a much better job of having the right players in at the right time. Having good cross-representation and becoming more of a working committee has been fantastic.

Another challenge has been around the evaluation piece. Many evaluation techniques essentially require that you leave significant groups of children behind as a control group to validate the success of a program. That's not what we are after. We want to help all children.

One of our biases is that too much effort and funding are focused on islands of excellence. You end up with a great this program, a great that program, but none of it is actually tied together. What we find really exciting about

what GE is doing is that you're really talking about knitting these things together to get better performance overall.

Corcoran: With a couple hundred thousand schools in the country, you have to find replicable solutions. The importance of what the states are doing now on advancing towards common core standards in a couple of areas is important. Measurement of student achievement is important. But, in the middle, you need to find ways to support and build capacity of the districts to manage efficiently and to get the most effectiveness out of those organizations.

GE has a tremendous history of innovation, which is a big focus of the federal government right now with regard to education. I think what you are saying is that innovation may not be what we need at the moment, right?

Corcoran: To paraphrase Thomas Alva Edison, the founder of GE, innovation is 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration. There is a lot of discussion these days about innovation, but we should not lose sight of the fact that 99% perspiration with a little bit of innovation makes a tremendous impact. Brilliant ideas, poorly or never implemented, are useless. I would suggest that we not get blinded by bright shiny objects. The investment community and America was blinded by the dot-com boom in the late 90s; they had people thinking that you could buy pet supplies on-line and that would be worth more than General Motors. In the end, you have to deliver a product. In the end, it's hard work. In the end, there has to be value. In this case, new ideas or proven ideas implemented well are innovations. Take a decent idea around timeline tasks. Go implement it and go do it. That's innovation. □



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