NURTURING HIGH-IMPACT PHILANTHROPISTS:
Learning Groups for Donors and Small Foundations

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In *On the Brink of New Promise*, a recent report on the future of American community foundations, "nurturing high-impact philanthropists" is cited as one of the top priorities for community foundations (Bernholz, Fulton & Kasper, 2005). Indeed, for the field of philanthropy as a whole – foundations and individual donors, as well as corporations and religious institutions – this is an important objective that will have much to do with philanthropy's future ability to create change in communities. As in all areas of life, good people are needed to do good work.

The Family Foundation Information Exchange and the East Bay Donor Learning Group/Giving Circle are two successful examples of such nurturing. Both have created trusting environments in which donors, as well as family trustees and staff of small family foundations, can learn together as peers, and take action to improve their philanthropic effectiveness. They are the subjects of the two case studies presented here, from which some observations about nurturing high-impact philanthropists have been derived.

Over the last few years, increasing attention has been paid to strategies for individual donor education, ranging from publications to seminars to training and technical assistance consultation (Siegel & Yancey, 2004; Remmer, 2000). There also has been a much-increased focus on developing foundation learning approaches (Bernholz, 2002). Knowledge management programs have become common among the larger American foundations. Many of them are technology-based, though there is growing recognition that peer networking also needs to be featured if good learning is to occur (Backer, 2005).

The challenges are different for small foundations – of the more than 68,000 foundations in the United States, the vast majority of them are un-staffed or have very small staffs, so their needs more closely parallel those of individual donors (and many foundation donors or family trustees also engage in individual philanthropic activities). Organizations such as the Association for Small Foundations and the National Center for Family Philanthropy help meet some of this need. Community foundations and regional associations of grantmakers also serve an important function.

Knowledge and skill resources for small foundations are being created by these groups and many others, and there are now ways to access these resources both locally and nationally (see Backer, 2004, Sampson, 2004). Colburn Foundation Executive Director Allison Sampson's concept of "investing in ourselves" is a particularly relevant one to a learning approach for either small foundations or individual donors.

Donor learning groups and giving circles also are springing up all over the country (Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers, 2004). These programs all are based on the concept of *peer networking*, which has emerged as one of the most powerful methods for promoting learning and building capacity among donors and the foundations they create.

At the heart of these approaches is the *trust* donor-initiated and donor-run groups can create – an atmosphere in which donors can speak off the record with trusted peers, not just for information-sharing but for active problem-solving. Approaches to donor education which lack this atmosphere of trust are less likely to result in real learning and action. That is one of six "good practices" that have emerged from the case studies presented here of two recently-initiated learning groups.

The Cases

The first case study is of the Family Foundation Information Exchange, a donor-initiated group of about 20 Southern California family foundation donors and staff. They come together every other month for breakfast, and for dialogue about how to be better grantmakers. The group has been in operation for more than three years, with a paid coordinator helping to organize the meetings and disseminate information to group members.

The second case study is of the East Bay Donor Learning Group/Giving Circle in the San Francisco Bay region. It was created in April 2005, and brought together for informal lunch meetings about a dozen East Bay donors, some of whom also have family foundations. After two meetings focused on a more general learning agenda, the Donor Learning Group "morphed" in Fall 2005 into a Giving Circle, with some but not all of the same participants, and has expanded its membership. The East Bay Community Foundation continues to coordinate the group's activities, which now focus on raising funds for a major reform of the Oakland Unified School District.

How the Case Studies Were Created

The author served as "participant-observer" for both groups. This provided a useful perspective for creating the two case studies, since the groups could be observed in operation over a substantial period of time.

In addition, "triangulation" of the case study observations was provided by the groups' coordinators, and in the case of the Southern California group, by its members as well, both by review of a case study draft, and by a meeting of the group devoted to reviewing its operations through the prism of the case study. While case studies by their nature are somewhat subjective, this triangulation procedure provides a greater degree of confidence that the following brief reports describe with some accuracy how these two groups evolved, and what they have accomplished so far.

Good Practices

The specific learnings that have emerged from the operations of the Family Foundation Information Exchange and the East Bay Donor Learning Group/Giving Circle stand on their own in the case studies that follow, and will not be repeated here. However, six more general "good practices" for philanthropic peer networking groups stand out from the analysis of commonalities between the cases:

1 - Trust, Trust, Trust Over and over again, it was evident that the success of both learning groups was determined in considerable part by bringing together donors and family foundation trustees/staff for private, off-the-record sessions in which they could interact as peers. The lesson from this is that peer networking as a process is strengthened by the establishment of a trusting environment, with ground rules about what stays inside the group, and the lack of any need to present a public, on-the-record face.

2 - Simultaneous Loose-Tight Properties First advanced by Peters and Waterman in their famous management book *In Search of Excellence*, this term neatly describes how both groups have been organized. They have a specific agenda (for learning, for fund-raising), and structure provided by an outside facilitator. But they also allow for informal and spontaneous interaction among the members, so that whatever is on their minds at the time of a meeting can be brought out for discussion. There is just enough structure to move the group's purpose forward, perhaps with somewhat more structure now for the East Bay group, since they have a specific fund-raising agenda.

3 - Outside Leadership Both groups have benefitted from having a non-donor leader facilitating their activities from the beginning, and both are trusted members of the philanthropic community. Mike Howe, long-time executive director of the East Bay Community Foundation, is well-known throughout the San Francisco Bay region, and had worked with all of the donors in his group through the Community Foundation prior to their coming together for this activity.

Jan Kern, coordinator of the Family Foundation Information Exchange, had worked previously both in the nonprofit community and in the foundation world, and had been president of the Los Angeles Junior League, so she too was well-known to the members of her group.

This meant that facilitation was "coming from the inside," and that it was sensitive to the complexities of philanthropy. It also meant that the group's vitality was increased, by having this function taken on by a paid staff person rather than through the volunteer efforts of one of the donor-members.

Volunteer leadership is of course critical for the success of groups like these, but if it is not supplemented by paid coordination of activities, the chances for long-term operation are likely to go down. Donor members may not have the time (or in some cases the skill) to do their own coordinating, and the result may be a loss of energy and focus that over time reduces the "survival chances" for the group.

4 - Evaluating Process and Impact Both groups have looked at how they operate and what impact they've had on both the participants and their communities, though the Family Foundation Information Exchange has been somewhat more intensive in its evaluation approach (at the end of each meeting, and at the end of each year of operation). This helps both to keep participants engaged, and to continually improve the way in which the groups function. Both groups can point to real accomplishments that can be attributed to their interactions, including impact on their local communities.

5 - Changing Form to Follow Function Both groups have evolved over time, though the East Bay Donor Learning Group/Giving Circle, as the long name implies, has been through the most significant "morphing." They moved from having primarily a learning agenda in their first two meetings, to having a fundraising agenda in all subsequent gatherings. The East Bay group also interacts much more with the outside world than they used to – recruiting other donors into their group, coordinating with foundation funders, and meeting regularly with Oakland school district leaders about how the reform is going.

All of these "Good Practices" begin with the bedrock concept of peer networking. Exchange among peers is one of the most valuable strategies in the adult learning field, and its application in philanthropy is no exception.

All also stand in sharp contrast to the ways in which many other foundation and donor learning experiences are organized. Many tend to involve donors or foundation trustees and staff in a fairly passive way, as readers of print materials, or as "students" in a seminar or workshop. Even when the mechanism used is technical assistance consultation, the terms and conditions of the consultative process are usually set more by the consultant than by the recipient. Learning and action objectives are defined by others, and tend (at least in the short term) to be fairly inflexible.

None of this means that there aren't good, useful donor education and foundation learning experiences around – there are many of them. More interactive strategies such as the donor-run learning groups such as More Than Money, active giving circles such as Social Venture Partners, and foundation learning activities such as the Rochester Effectiveness Partnership are examples. These innovative approaches also are likely to use at least some of the "good practices" cited here, and all are based at least in part on the principles of peer networking.

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A Year With FFIX:
Case Study of the Family Foundation Information Exchange

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Case Study Subject The Family Foundation Information Exchange (FFIX) is a donor-initiated small group of Southern California family foundation donors and staff, who come together every other month for breakfast and dialogue about how to be better grantmakers. Its members have been "voting with their feet" by participating in this small peers-only group for more than three years.

Case Study Objectives Why do a case study of FFIX? This project came about after the author was the first outside guest speaker at a FFIX meeting in November 2004, discussing collaboration strategies for smaller foundations. An invitation then came from FFIX members for the author to observe FFIX meetings for a year. Much of this brief case study comes out of that 2005 participant-observation, along with analysis of various documents FFIX and its coordinator have produced.

FFIX members already review their activities at the end of each meeting, as part of setting the agenda for the next gathering. They do an informal evaluation of the group's impact and value at the end of each year, so that they can improve its operations and decide whether the value-added is sufficient to continue for another year. This case study supplements that internal review process, both to provide a more objective outside view, and to place FFIX's evolution and activities in the larger context of national philanthropy. The case study can contribute to FFIX's planning for its future, and it can provide guidance for possible expansion of the FFIX model to other peer networking and learning group activities in Southern California.

Learning Group Concept According to a statement circulated at FFIX's inaugural meeting in February 2004, the concept of FFIX is *to bring together a small group of Southern California family foundation executives (mostly, the donors of these foundations) to meet on a regular basis to discuss, problem solve and share critical ideas that will assist them in their work.* Each meeting has an agenda and a particular topic of focus, designed in advance by the participants; selected readings are sent in advance of the meetings to all participants by the meeting facilitator.

Learning Group Process FFIX's breakfast meetings are hosted by Tracey Boldemann-Tatkin of the Gerald Oppenheimer Family Foundation, and sited at UCLA Medical School's Jules Stein Eye Institute. Membership is by invitation, and capped at about 20 participants, most of whom are family members, not the original donor who established the foundation. The meetings are facilitated by a philanthropy professional hired by FFIX for this purpose, but the dialogue is informal. The meeting process actually begins with the previous gathering, at which a topic is selected for the next session. The facilitator then prepares an advance-mailed packet of resource materials to help acquaint members with the topic, and a brief opening statement to launch the discussion.

The meeting format has evolved, but remains divided into three main segments. The first, which begins each meeting, is a general "news and events" segment. In this, members report on their activities, and on recent or upcoming events in the philanthropy community that may be of interest to others in the group.

Then the facilitator opens the discussion of the session's main topic, followed by group dialogue. Because it is a closed meeting, members often present specific examples of grants they have made, interactions they have had in the community, and problems they have encountered in their own philanthropic process (which others in the group can then comment on for possible interpretations or suggested problem-solving).

Each meeting's closing segment highlights individuals and organizations doing "good work," as described by members and/or the facilitator. For instance, at one meeting a member presented an analysis of all the organizations her foundation had funded. Later the FFIX coordinator provided an electronic copy of this analysis to members for their use.

The group sets its meeting dates for the bi-monthly meetings at the beginning of each year, with a typical schedule of five meetings annually (there is no meeting during the summer). The facilitator prepares meeting minutes for each session, which are shared by e-mail with the members.

FFIX is intended to be a learning group – a vehicle to open and explore new avenues of grantmaking. And it is intended to complement the training and learning opportunities presented to smaller foundations by Southern California Grantmakers (SCG), the area's regional association and the informal partner in this operation. SCG is FFIX's fiscal agent, and SCG's Executive Director or another SCG staffer attends FFIX meetings, providing ongoing information and counsel to the group. Nonprofit and foundation executive Jan Kern serves as coordinator of FFIX. The current members are mostly donors of small family foundations from throughout the Southern California area.

The year of participant observation, plus analysis of meeting materials, reveals that FFIX members have (1) shared information with each other in both verbal and electronic formats about various philanthropic issues, community events, and "recommended grantees" (nonprofits in the community they recommend as worthy recipients of funds), (2) made site visits together to potential grantees, (3) collaborated on funding in particular topical areas, and (4) provided technical assistance to each other on a variety of philanthropic strategy issues. These activities will be discussed further below.

Topics covered so far in more than three years of meetings include: overall philanthropic strategy, strategic grantmaking, grantor/grantee communication, collaborative grantmaking, evaluation, succession planning, mission statements, investment strategy, and charter schools (covered also at the first meeting in 2006, which also featured an outside speaker).

Main Learnings About the Group's Value and Impact Overall, the value of FFIX to its members was summarized by one participant as follows: "we get to pick the issues that are the most important to us. Also the group is small and because we know most of the participants anyway ... there is a level of trust and intimacy that is important." Trustees and staff of family foundations tend to work under somewhat isolated conditions, so the group provides collegial interactions for learning and skill development. FFIX members indicated that following specific value added by their participation in this group:

1 - Gaining Perspective It is helpful for small-staffed family foundations to have from peers a wider perspective on challenges of philanthropic strategy. One participant emphasized the importance of networking with "people who have the same problems and opportunities," and several others mentioned that FFIX is the main platform in which they're able to interact with donors or staff of foundations of about their size. The peer networking process goes on before the FFIX meetings begin, during them, and afterwards (through follow-up e-mails, phone calls and meetings).

FFIX members said they were particularly pleased to have input from peers on how to shape and re-frame their foundation's mission (e.g., in response to external environmental events such as emergence of a new problem in the community, or in response to internal events such as a new infusion of philanthropic resources or a disagreement among family members that has to be resolved), on how to identify potential grantees (especially in topical areas or communities with which the donors are not familiar) or on how to operate on the technical side of grantmaking (for instance, specific examples other foundations have used of grant contracts for grantees)

2 - Getting Practical Assistance Some sessions go beyond more general perspective or information-providing. For instance, in one session the members exchanged and discussed investment policies, to compare each other's strategies. The discussion included topics that are quite specific to handling the complex situations of individual families and their dynamics. In some family foundations, one or more family members are in the financial industry and make the financial decisions; others may simply put in more money if the investments don't provide a certain return. The group also talked about how much time they spend working with investments as opposed to grantmaking.

3 - Access to Trustful and Candid Discussion Peer networking was easier because most people in the group know each other from other places - this provides a level of trust and intimacy that is important to open discussion. For example, at one meeting the group discussed a problematic grantee many at the table had funded. They were able to have a useful, off-the-record conversation about what each foundation has done to deal with this grantee and still preserve the relationship.

This comfort level also helped members overcome their hesitance to get involved in new types of grantmaking. As one of the participants put it, "Nobody wants to get on the dance floor first" – so if within this group one mentions making a grant to a particular nonprofit (and shares the due diligence behind it), others feel more comfortable in also doing so.

For one family member new to the position as a foundation executive, FFIX has given her an added level of confidence. She has learned how to conduct business with grantees more professionally (e.g., learning from other FFIX members that it is appropriate to be honest with grantees about changes that are going on within the foundation), and feels relationships with them have improved significantly as a result. She credits her good "learning curve" to the comfort she feels with her fellow FFIX members, several of whom she considers to be her mentors in philanthropy.

4 - Access to Community-Based Learning According to one FFIX member, the key value of the group was that it provided a "structured but not rigid learning environment." Another said: “Sitting at the round table promotes learning and encourages participation – you can’t help but learn.” Thus, in addition to the FFIX sessions, information came in packets from the facilitator that were of more general interest about smaller foundations and their philanthropic strategies, not just on the topic of the next meeting.

Members said they’d learned about specific aspects of grantmaking such as how to do “due diligence,” and how to structure grantee reporting requirements. And several site visits have been organized so that there could be experiential learning with the FFIX members as a small group – members indicated they’d like to see more of this type of event, coordinated by others within FFIX.

5 - Access to Opportunities for Collaboration FFIX also has explored opportunities for collaborative funding, though unlike a “giving circle,” this is not the group’s main objective. For instance, two of the members have considered a collaborative relationship, which makes sense because of their very different perspectives on philanthropy – one comes from a venture philanthropy stance, and the other is more conservative. They visited a grantee together, where one had funded a major program, got other funders involved and expanded the program, thus leveraging the initial investment quite a lot. This encouraged his fellow FFIX member to think in terms of collaboration and other grantmaking approaches that go beyond writing a check.

In another case, several FFIX members conducted a site visit together. Those attending made the visit because they respected the colleague who had recommended they do so, and knew that careful due diligence had been done. Talk now has begun for joint funding of the program they visited.

Sometimes the collaboration isn’t about funding, but about informal problem solving. For instance, two FFIX members both funded a well-known charter school. The director of the school behaved rudely towards one of the grantors, complaining that the grant “should have been larger.” In discussing this situation, it emerged that the other FFIX member was also on the school’s board of directors, and once made aware of the problem, was able to suggest that the school’s director get some executive coaching – both grantors agreed that the school is worthy, but needed to deal with this threat to its reputation in the community.

Larger opportunities for collaboration now are emerging through the selection of additional guest speakers, such as Dr. Helmut Anheier, Director of the UCLA Civil Society, which conducts philanthropic and nonprofit sector research; and Mark Eiduson, Program Officer at the Annenberg Foundation, a large foundation with some of the same program interests as FFIX member foundations.

Ways in Which the Group Could be Improved In both the group discussions that took place during FFIX meetings, and in a small e-mail based survey the author did with FFIX members in early 2006, ratings of the value of this activity were high. A few suggestions for improvement were made:

1 - Bring in More Outside Experts Several participants said they really liked the idea of having an outside speaker for a part of each FFIX meeting, rather than making this an occasional approach as it has been so far. One made the analogy with “The Executive

Committee" (TEC), a method long-used in private industry where a group of highly-placed executives in non-competing industries get together regularly for brainstorming and networking sessions, including input from experts brought in for "guest lectures."

In addition to topics in philanthropy like investment policy, strategies for due diligence, approaches to board development or staffing, etc., FFIX members would like to have experts come in to speak on substantive topics such as homelessness, youth development or higher education. A periodic member survey, which could be done informally by devoting time to this topic at each meeting, would help in this regard.

2 - Increase Organized Information Resources It was suggested by several participants that FFIX develop an on-line "running list" of information resources and contacts for each of the issues discussed at the FFIX meetings. This would be a companion to the hard-copy mailings the facilitator already does, so that more information could be provided (and updated periodically), especially for use by those who are comfortable with Internet-based learning. These materials could be put on the Southern California Grantmakers website, and hard copies might also be physically housed in either the SCG office or the Foundation Center library at the Los Angeles Center for Nonprofit Management.

FFIX members also could be encouraged to contribute materials to this "resource library" on topics of interest. And if this resource were found valuable, the facilitator could be engaged to devote time to more systematically broadening the resource materials available.

3 - Promote Learning Through Grantee Site Meetings One participant suggested that every other meeting of FFIX might be sited at the offices of a grantee supported by one of the member foundations, and co-hosted by that member. With a small amount of preparation, the meeting could then include both a "closed session" as per usual practice, and an open session where the guest speaker would be the executive director of the grantee agency, introduced by the relevant FFIX member.

The grantee agency might also bring in one of its board members, agency staff, and perhaps service recipients as well. Although such site visits would be logistically more complicated than meeting every time at UCLA, the learning potential from such visits would be great.

As an alternative, another FFIX member suggested a "bus tour," in which a meeting (with expanded meeting time to allow for this) might begin at UCLA, but then continue by a small chartered bus (or by private cars if the group is small enough) to visit several grantee organizations in a particular geographic area (Koreatown, South Central Los Angeles, etc.). Nonprofits in a particular area of service might be focused on, so that later discussion (perhaps over a group lunch) could address issues of particular importance to homeless shelters, charter schools, etc.

A guest speaker with expertise on that topic also could be brought in for this lunch discussion. Again, this would require a longer time commitment, and there would be logistical challenges to be overcome. (The Liberty Hill Foundation has had great success with such "bus tours" for its donors, and might be approached for guidance on how to set this up for the FFIX group).

4 - Intensify Learning Experience As already indicated, a number of participants indicated their interest in lengthening the meeting times to permit more discussion about complicated topics such as charter schools or investment strategies. As one participant put it, “This is the first time I’ve ever asked for a meeting to be longer!” Even a 30-minute addition to the regular meeting time would significantly increase the overall impact of the meetings.

5 - Explore Further Collaboration Opportunities Using the regular FFIX meetings as a base, it would be possible, said several participants, to explore more extensive opportunities for collaborations on grantmaking, community convenings and other philanthropic activities. However, participants were clear that this might change the dynamics of the group, so that careful consideration of such a move is essential. Perhaps a “pilot study” period, in which a more active collaboration approach would be tried out, with careful documentation of outcomes and any changes observed in the group dynamics, would be a good idea.

Recommendations for the Future Now that FFIX is more than three years old, there are clearly opportunities to expand the group’s horizons, as well as to continue its essential structure and operations, which seem to have been successful and well-received.

1 - Participate in Research As interest in foundation and donor learning groups expands, opportunities will grow for FFIX to participate in research. As mentioned, the director of the UCLA Center for Civil Society recently spoke to FFIX, which may create opportunities.

Decisions to participate must be made carefully, to be sure that the trustful environment of the peer group is maintained, and that the energy investment in research isn’t more than members wish to make. Advantages include the ability to compare FFIX’s activities with those of other groups, such as the East Bay Community Foundation group also being studied in this research.

2 - Interact with Other Southern California Organizations FFIX might wish to arrange for a joint meeting with other learning groups in Southern California, such as Social Venture Partners Los Angeles. Such an opportunity for dialogue might both identify ways in which FFIX could be improved and expanded, and also could lead to additional collaborations.

3 - Interact with National and International Programs FFIX might establish contacts with the Indiana University Philanthropy Center, the Dorothy A. Johnson Center at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, the Center for Nonprofit Management at Arizona State University, and other academic centers, to encourage sharing of information, or possibly guest speakers from these institutions who could come to an FFIX meeting while in Los Angeles on other business.

Also, contact with projects developing new types of learning approaches might be useful, such as the new center on philanthropy being established at the University of Heidelberg in Germany.

4 - Replicate FFIX in Southern California Southern California Grantmakers has suggested to FFIX that its members could serve as “mentors” for new donor/foundation learning groups that could be established in Southern California. With this case study and other supports (such as a database of resources for topics of interest to FFIX, as suggested above), it would be possible to share some of how FFIX has worked without a major commitment of time on the part of current FFIX members.

This could help to "share the wealth" of how FFIX has contributed to its members with other family foundations and their donors in Southern California.

FFIX Coordinator Jan Kern has been invited to provide on-site technical assistance to the development of a learning group sponsored by San Diego Grantmakers. A September 2006 site visit will initiate this process. Kern also is putting some of the FFIX concepts to work in creating a giving circle for the Los Angeles Junior League.

From Learning to Giving:
Case Study of the East Bay Donor Learning Group/Giving Circle

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Case Study Subject The East Bay Donor Learning Group was created in April 2005 and brought together for informal lunch meetings about a dozen East Bay donors, some of whom also have family foundations. It met twice, in April and June, with a focus on how donors could learn about ways their philanthropy could impact efforts to strengthen families and improve services for vulnerable children in this San Francisco Bay Area region. The Group was created by Mike Howe of East Bay Community Foundation, with assistance from Ira Barbell of Annie E. Casey Foundation and Tom Backer and Kate Groves of Human Interaction Research Institute.

In Fall 2005, the Group "morphed" into a Giving Circle, with some but not all of the same participants, and has considerably expanded its membership. The East Bay Community Foundation continues to coordinate the Group's activities. In this new form, the Giving Circle has focused on raising funds for a major reform of the Oakland Unified School District – a fund-raising task at which it has been quite successful. The Giving Circle meets periodically, and while its members are still interested in a learning agenda, for now the school reform movement is a more urgent priority.

Case Study Objectives This case study is directed both at understanding the initial learning goals and operations of the East Bay Donor Learning Group, and at chronicling its transformation into a Giving Circle in Fall 2005. The impact of the Giving Circle on reform of the Oakland Unified School District also is briefly examined, looking at its success in direct fund-raising and other kinds of impact the group has had on Oakland school reform.

Learning Group Concept Mike Howe of East Bay Community Foundation set forth the "bottom line" for the Donor Learning Group at its first meeting in April 2005: "donors want to know if the investments they're making in communities make a difference, and they want to learn how to make more of a difference." The concentration was on investments in the East Bay region about improving outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

As a secondary purpose, since individual donors often can move more nimbly, they can point the way to new approaches for cooperation and learning in philanthropy. Thus the activities of the Donor Learning Group were shared with a parallel activity (also spearheaded by EBCF), bringing larger San Francisco Bay area foundations together, to consider joint action on cooperation and learning. This foundations group met several times in 2004 and 2005, and issued a report on their experiences with neighborhood investments in the East Bay area. As noted later, the foundations group continues to explore collaborative strategies, which may yet involve the donor group as well.

Learning Group Process Participants for the first meeting of the Donor Learning Group were nominated by Mike Howe. All came from the donor roster of the East Bay Community Foundation, and were selected because Howe thought they would be interested, lively participants in the group process. Some, but not all, of the donors have family foundations as well. Both meetings of the Group were held at EBCF's offices in Oakland over lunch, and both were relatively unstructured to encourage brainstorming and development of a trusting environment.

As mentioned above, Ira Barbell, Tom Backer and Kate Groves helped to coordinate the meetings, and provided some modest handout materials participants could use to help guide the brainstorming process. Mike Howe facilitated both meetings. Each meeting had about a dozen participants in all, with some but not all of the same donors participating in both.

Both meetings explored current avenues for learning among donors in the East Bay area, and also looked at new possibilities. Observations made by Donor Learning Group participants included:

* Local donors already have some ways to network and share experiences, such as Social Venture Partners San Francisco and Full Circle Fund, as well as donor circles started by East Bay Community Foundation. It would be helpful to let more donors know about these various groups.

* Donors want to interact directly with each other, and with nonprofit and community leaders. It would be helpful to create more opportunities for such interactions, particularly since there often seem to be "disconnects" between donors and nonprofits.

* Donors sometimes learn about philanthropic vehicles (such as a donor advised fund at a community foundation) from their advisors – accountants, trust attorneys, investment advisors, private bankers, etc. – so opportunities for donor learning should be coordinated with these advisors.

* It will probably be easier to get donors involved in learning activities if there is a specific subject focus, such as early childhood development, though an ongoing learning group might be organized so that it would cover different topics each time it met. (*Note:* this observation may have contributed to the ultimate re-shaping of the Group into a Giving Circle focused on Oakland school reform; the then-developing school reform effort was discussed briefly at the Group's second meeting in June 2005, when it was observed that a foundation of one of the members had made a major donation to the new reform effort).

* Donors want increased access both to overall community needs assessments, and to assessments of a "due diligence" nature for specific nonprofits in which they might be considering an investment. An effort to promote such access for the East Bay region would be of interest to donors. A Kansas City Community Foundation donor database resource, containing descriptions of more than 700 nonprofits on it, was discussed at length at the Group's second meeting. It was decided that this approach may require more resources than East Bay donors are prepared to commit, but that some more modest type of donor information system would be useful. Several alternatives were discussed at the second meeting about how to create such a system.

* It might also be helpful to promote more regular interactions between donors and the intermediary organizations that work with nonprofits in a particular area of the community. These intermediaries could provide useful information and also make some connections between donors and nonprofits.

* Donors want increased access to information about new approaches to investment strategies – both those developed by other donors and foundation approaches that might be adapted (samples developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation were shared with the group).

* Donors might also like to participate in foundation-sponsored learning events. One example was given of a foundation that asked 12 of its grantees to a networking dinner, and asked each grantee to bring along another funder of their nonprofit (individual donors also could be invited to such an event, either by the sponsoring foundation or by a grantee to which they also had contributed).

* Donors may also be interested in collaborating on community investments, and groups like Full Circle Fund are considering whether they can help in that process.

After the second meeting in June 2005, there was interest among the participating donors in continuing the learning process. In the Fall, three members of the Group came to a meeting of the Oakland school board that EBCF hosted.

This began a dialogue about needed financing for a major school reform effort called Expect Success, created after the Oakland Unified School District went into state receivership. This effort is coordinated by the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES), which has helped design a major re-organization of the system from a centralized to local school leadership model, with a more business-like approach to school services.

EBCF's Mike Howe then sent an e-mail to members of the Donor Learning Group, inviting them to a meeting at which the twin agendas were to talk about next steps for the Group, and to look at the challenges ahead for the Oakland Unified School District. The urgencies of school reform dominated donor discussion at that meeting. In the three to four meetings of the Giving Circle held since then and described further below, the learning agenda has again been mentioned, but the focus has remained on raising funds to support school reform, thus "morphing" the East Bay Donor Learning Group into a Giving Circle. Original member Brian Rogers has hosted the subsequent donor meetings at his offices, and his family and foundation have been major donors to the school reform effort.

By learning about the challenges and successes of the reform program at their Giving Circle meetings, members are able to advocate for support from other donors throughout the East Bay area. Funds from local donors and national foundations support simultaneous operation of the old and new systems during a transition period.

EBCF also has taken on a larger leadership role in the Oakland school reform initiative. It serves as a fiscal intermediary for funds provided by national foundations (Gates, Broad and Dell Foundations), as well as for those provided by individual donors. The Giving Circle's members have helped in positioning Expect Success to other donors, raising a total of $7 million so far (national foundations have given $17 million). EBCF also serves as the formal monitor and collector of evaluation data provided by the independent evaluators of Expect Success.

Now Mike Howe is looking beyond the current school reform effort in Oakland, hoping at some point to re-position the Giving Circle into addressing larger issues of public funding for education throughout California, and the long-term consequences of Proposition 13. If successful, this re-positioning could keep the Giving Circle in operation for years to come, and might also augment its learning role, as it moves into this new terrain.

Main Learnings About the Group's Value and Impact The two meetings of the East Bay Donor Learning Group helped establish this group of donors as a force for philanthropy in the East Bay area, under the coordinating leadership of the East Bay Community Foundation. The Group valued the learning that happened in its two meetings, but the urgencies of school reform overshadowed the learning agenda when they came back into contact in Fall 2005.

From that point on, the fundraising and community support agenda for Oakland school reform has been their central purpose as the Group morphed into a Giving Circle. This happened under the leadership provided by both the donor participants and East Bay Community Foundation's Mike Howe.

Learnings that have emerged from this experience include:

1 - Leadership by a Facilitator There seems little question that without the ongoing facilitation provided by Mike Howe and EBCF, the work of this Group would not have happened in the same way, either at the learning or school reform fundraising levels. More than just help with the creation of the Group is involved. EBCF has played a central role as well in convening the philanthropic community together with the state-appointed school administrator and school board, and has served as a fiscal agent and coordinator of evaluation data. This infrastructure permitted donors to concentrate on their primary agendas of learning about what kinds of changes are needed and how to make them, and to make donations or encourage others to do the same!

2 - Leadership by Donors At the same time, leadership provided directly by a donor, in this case Brian Rogers, is essential if a donor group or learning circle is to realize its potential. The symbol of meetings held at his offices, and the impact of the Rogers family in providing a significant challenge grant as a launching point for individual and corporate support of Oakland school reform, are both parts of that leadership.

3 - Donor Financial Commitments While there continues to be interest in donor learning among the members of this Group, there is some question about whether it would have continued without the focusing interest in school reform – and in raising funds to address this challenge. Donors have continued to come to the meetings, which is one evidence of their interest.

An even more powerful indicator is the willingness of donors to commit their own resources – and to go out into the community to advocate for others to do the same. Donor learning has continued to be a part of the group's operation, but for now the main source of energy in the Group is its commitment to raising funds.

Ways in Which the Group Could be Improved Now that the school reform agenda is underway, at least two additional directions are emerging for the Giving Circle that may have impact in the future:

1 - Return to Learning Agenda One is the possible return to more of a learning agenda regarding the overall needs of families and vulnerable children in the East Bay, beyond the needs for public school reform which have dominated their activities for almost a year now.

2 - Take Group in a New Direction The other is a possible new direction for the Group in taking on the California-wide issue of funding support for public education. This is likely to require alliances with other groups, and a return to the learning process for the donors in East Bay, so that they can fully understand the political and public policy intricacies of this issue.

Recommendations for the Future The following suggestions are made from this analysis of the East Bay Donor Learning Group/Giving Circle:

1 - Create a Summary Perhaps using this case study as raw material, it may be useful for EBCF to create a vibrant, user-friendly one-page summary of how the Donor Learning Group/Giving Circle came to be, its impact so far, and its current and possible future objectives. This brief document could be used to inform other donors, the media, and community leaders in East Bay about this powerful tool for social change. Such information could be particularly useful the next time a Donor Learning Group or Giving Circle needs to be created.

This summary also could mention that EBCF has initiated several other donor groups with a learning focus, on topics such as improving math and science studies in the local schools and enhancing after school programs. These groups also have been successful in bringing donors together for coordinated action.

2 - Identify Focus for Learning Agenda Because the learning agenda of this Group continues to be of interest, as indicated above, a future focus for learning might be considered that would help to revitalize this activity. For example, a number of donors in the June 2005 meeting were interested in exploring further the creation of some type of technology-based donor information system, helping them learn about local nonprofits and their investment potential.

This possibility might be revisited at a future meeting of the Group, to see whether there would be sufficient motivation to take the next step in exploring such a system. This might be done through Group funding of a feasibility study that EBCF could carry out or supervise.

If the Group's learning agenda were to focus on further school reform, including reform of California's overall education financing system, a second type of learning resource could be brought into future meetings. Again, EBCF would have a central role to play in coordinating this effort.

3 - Document Results of Future Activities If there are future interactions between the Giving Circle members and leadership of the larger foundations in the Bay area, it would be helpful to document both how these occur and what results they achieve. At this point, Mike Howe and East Bay Community Foundation continue to work with a group of Bay area foundations to develop a collaborative effort, which could be coordinated with the ongoing activities of the East Bay Donor Learning Group/Giving Circle.