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Annenberg Foundation: Private Funding for Public Education

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The Annenberg Foundation built its reputation on large scale projects that fit into its broad-based mission to “advance the public well-being through improved communication. As the principal means of achieving its goal, the Foundation encourages the development of more effective ways to share ideas and knowledge.” (1). This goal has been embraced by many of the great visionaries in history: those who understood the control and distribution of information was the most important aspect of a society. Today, the most successful politicians (aka. those who were elected) understand that our mainstream media is the conduit to the public. As a result, creating a message and timing its delivery is a primary concern of all politicians. The most watched media is most concerned with announcing news events and press releases from the government as quickly as possible. Careful analysis and investigative journalism rarely see time on the major news sources. This homogenization is evident with the panels of “experts” whose “comments” on events substitute for careful analysis. One possible explanation for this is the shift in the type of information is the shift from writing to video. Before television and radio, reporters wrote stories that had to pass through editors and editorial boards before they were sanctioned for print and distribution to the public.

Now, a news anchor often serves as a mediator to a group of experts fighting for air time. Editors may review some prepared statements and general overviews of a news show, but the news personalities and anchors often control the tone and pace of the conversations.

Our communication tools have driven this evolution. More specifically, people figuring out how to use a number of existing tools as a group has driven the process. This is not a new phenomenon in history. In the 16th century, The printing press made the “cheap and swift” dissemination of information possible. The information was still the words of people-written words they were. Now the internet has allowed us to redefine cheap and swift into free and immediate. The careful and patient among us see this as dangerous and spontaneous; while the adventurous and impulsive among us see this as important and necessary.
Back to the foundation. A macro view guides people with vision who anticipate change and do
great things. As with all great people of vision, Ambassador Annenberg observed that the
transmission of information is a factor in “every human advancement or reversal.” (1)

As I stated earlier, the Annenberg Foundation “exists to advance the public well-being through
improved communication. As the principal means of achieving its goal, the Foundation
encourages the development of more effective ways to share ideas and knowledge” (2). The
Foundation funds programs that fall into the categories of education, culture, the arts, and
community and civic. All funded programs must be able to effect positive change on a macro
scale.

The Foundation’s most famous program is the National Challenge Grant for Public School Reform
(3). The program has provided $500 million worth of matching grants to schools. In 1993 the
Foundation unveiled the $500 million “Challenge to the Nation” Program. Over the course of time
the total dollars jumped to $1.1 billion. It is the largest privately funded program in public
education. It is focused on three goals: To improve education in inner-city schools; To bring long
overdue assistance to isolated rural schools; To demonstrate that arts should be a basic part of
every child’s education.

Eighteen locally designed Challenge projects operated in 35 states, funding 2,400 public schools
that served more than 1.5 million students and 80,000 teachers. Over 1,600 businesses,
foundations, colleges, and universities, and individuals contributed $600 million in private matching
funds.” (5).

After examining a sample of the major grant recipients, It seems clear the common characteristic
of the funded projects is their multidimensional approach to school reform that operates under
the assumption that a school is a hub of a community. And if school reform has any chance of
being successful, it must be accompanied by community and family support reform. In each
Challenge Program local planning groups rely on teamwork. Educators, foundation officers, and
community and business leaders make up the group (5). An example of this is the Community
Learning Collaborative (6). Self-described as “A school-anchored community development
initiative” (7). the program focuses on Atlanta and Los Angeles schools, communities, and
families.

Though the Foundation understands how to coordinate large scale programs, they understand
the details that make fundamental change possible in public schools that will advance the public
well-being: it rests on the sharing of information within and between these core groups: schools,
communities, and families.

The Annenberg Foundation does not use a grant application form. To initiate contact with the
Foundation, send a letter of inquiry to determine whether the Foundation’s current interests and
funds permit consideration of the request (6)
References

(1) http://www.annenbergfoundation.org/home

(2) http://www.annenbergfoundation.org/pressRoom/pressReleases/8-ck1xChwVQKNLUGpyOmr/view

(3) http://www.annenbergfoundation.org/about/history/view

(4) http://www.lessonsandreflections.org/

(5) http://www.lessonsandreflections.org/about/index

(6) http://www.annenbergfoundation.org/grants/letter

(7) http://www.annenbergfoundation.org/grants/programs/view

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