

First Focus

The Issue

Shortly after Lois Salisbury joined the David and Lucile Packard Foundation in March of 2002 as director of its Children, Families, and Communities program, she set out to ensure a strong advocacy voice for children in Washington, DC. Child advocates in the capitol were missing a unified voice with which to advocate for children within federal tax and budget debates, where so much federal policy was set. Existing groups tended to focus on individual issues, lacked relationships with state-based advocates, and wielded little clout on Capitol Hill. Salisbury envisioned a new project, housed within an existing organization. That project would draw on the best state-level thinking about issues and priorities—and use it to inform legislative advocacy.⁴ Salisbury viewed this work as critical to ensuring the overall success of Packard’s Children, Families, and Communities program.

Salisbury and her team knew that Packard would need help testing assumptions about the need for a strong advocacy voice for children and defining the right approach to take. But other philanthropic organizations rebuffed her pitch to form a collaborative effort. “It’s very difficult to get funders engaged if it’s not their idea,” said Salisbury. “So we got a tepid response from most when we proposed the investigation we wanted to do.”

One group, however, answered Salisbury’s call: The Atlantic Philanthropies. “It was a serendipitous connection—Packard and Atlantic. We hit it off,” said Salisbury. Additionally, these foundations found a like-minded ally in the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Working together, the three philanthropies soon verified the need for a new children’s advocacy group, which they planned to call First Focus. And they teamed up to take the next steps.

Fast Facts

Type of collaboration: Create a new entity

Established: 2008 (formerly known as the Children’s Investment Project)

Funders involved: Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation

Shared goal: A bipartisan advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families the priority in federal policy and budget decisions

Funding committed by Packard to date: \$3.4 million

⁴ The David and Lucile Packard Foundation is a tax-exempt charitable organization qualified under section 501(c)(3) and classified as a private foundation under section 509(a) of the Internal Revenue Code. Packard Foundation funds may have been used to support some, but not all, of the activities of grantees and others described in this case study. No Packard Foundation funds were used to support or oppose any candidate for election to public office. No Packard Foundation funds were earmarked or designated to be used for lobbying or attempts to influence legislation (as defined in section 4945(d)(1) of the Internal Revenue Code).

How the Collaborative Worked

Rather than launch First Focus as a stand-alone entity, the funders resolved to nest it within an existing organization dedicated to supporting young people. A competitive bidding process led them to pick America's Promise Alliance, a collaborative network founded in 1997 now comprised of more than 400 organizations that facilitate volunteer actions to benefit children and young people. With grants from the Packard Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies, the Alliance launched First Focus in 2008 and billed it as the organization's "policy affiliate." Annie E. Casey Foundation soon joined as a founding funder. First Focus describes itself as "a bipartisan advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families the priority in federal policy and budget decisions."

During the organization's formative stage, Salisbury and her partners at Atlantic Philanthropies spent a lot of time on First Focus. "I was in DC every couple of months, and we were on the phone a lot," Salisbury recalled. "It was very hands-on for a while." Added Michael Laracy, Annie E. Casey Foundation's director of Policy Reform and Advocacy, "Casey brought a very strong connection to DC. Being based in Baltimore, it was very easy for us to hop over to DC." But after time, once First Focus had established itself with grounded leaders, the funders backed off. Each funder recognized that for First Focus to be successful, it needed to have its own leadership team making strategic and operational decisions and to gain additional funding from other sources.

However, this was not always an easy line to walk. Salisbury recalls the need to provide strong feedback when it became clear to the funders that the initial leader they had helped select to run First Focus was not a good fit. As Salisbury recounted, "We had to be carefully engaged in giving America's Promise our feedback, while not interfering."

Under the leadership of current president Bruce Lesley, First Focus has achieved the independence that Packard had hoped for. The organization conducts polling and opinion research, and writes fact sheets, legislative comparisons, and policy reports to be used as resources for lawmakers and others working on behalf of children. The work spans a number of topics, including early childhood, education, health, juvenile justice, and tax and budget policy. First Focus staff members also testify in Congress as part of the organization's efforts to direct attention to how issues ranging from immigration reform to health insurance and the justice system affect children.

Today, First Focus has a collaborative of funders providing general support, including Packard, Atlantic, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Other supporters, including Goldman Sachs, have provided funding for specific projects. For its part, Packard remains involved in steering the organization's work. "In terms of level of funding, I think they're very much like any grantee in the portfolio," explained Meera Mani, Salisbury's successor after she retired in 2011. "That being said, we tend to be fairly involved in the organization's strategic direction and about advocacy in the field overall." Along with general

operating support, Packard has also provided funding for targeted purposes, such as a 2010 organizational effectiveness grant to help First Focus enhance its grassroots engagement strategies.

Results

First Focus publishes a wide variety of reports and fact sheets to serve as resources for budget-makers and other nonprofits and children's advocates whose efforts may be focused more narrowly. One example: Each year since 2008, First Focus has published "The Children's Budget," a detailed guide to federal spending on children, offering information about more than 180 federally funded children's programs.

First Focus counts among its successes the work it has done to increase national focus on issues of children's health insurance and to protect federal support for all programs that impact children and low-income families. These cross-cutting efforts benefit Packard's other efforts within its Children, Families, and Communities portfolio—part of the Foundation's original impetus in forming such an entity.

Key Takeaways

- **Ensure collaboration is truly necessary for success:** Packard initially sought out collaborators given the magnitude of the challenges at hand, but struggled initially to find a like-minded partner given its own strong point of view. In considering collaboration, ask yourself: Do we need collaborators or simply additional support? As Mani put it, "The changes we seek have complex solutions and can benefit from collective experience. That being said, one must be clear that all of the collaborators have the same understanding of what is to be achieved and be willing to make hard choices and learn from mistakes." Moreover, when collaboration works well, it sends an important message to the field. "We expect our grantees to work together, coordinate, look for efficiencies, and it's really about trying to walk that talk, even if partnering in philanthropy is hard," said Mani.
- **Explore alternative options before deciding to create a new entity:** Before establishing a stand-alone entity, funders should examine whether an existing organization can add the new role to its existing portfolio of activities. In this case, the funders solicited bids from existing organizations to identify the right one to establish First Focus.
- **Keep the ultimate purpose of the collaboration in mind:** Often, as a collaborative effort evolves, people tend to behave as if collaboration is a goal in and of itself. It's not. As Mani said, "We are conscious about asking 'what is our message, where is the value add, why Packard, why now?'" Anything the funders do ought to link directly to the outcomes they're seeking together. Otherwise, said Mani, "It's too easy for collaborations to distort the value of their coming together."