

Working to Institutionalize Sex Ed (WISE)

The Issue

Since 1997 the federal government has invested more than \$1.5 billion in abstinence-only sex education programs. These programs exclude important information that could help young people protect their health and have little or no evidence of effectiveness. Comprehensive sex education (CSE), on the other hand, stresses abstinence but also provides information about contraception and condoms. There is evidence that CSE programs can delay the initiation of sexual activity and reduce sexual risk.

By the second half of the 2000s, the tide was turning against abstinence-only programs. In 2007, 10 states declined federal abstinence-only funding; by 2009, nearly half of the states chose not to accept the funds. Many states and localities were also passing new laws that supported CSE. And there was public support as well. One survey found that 82 percent of adults polled favored programs that teach students about both abstinence and other methods of preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

However, in site visits across the country, the eventual leaders of WISE found that gains in CSE advocacy were not being fully realized because too few resources were used for implementation. In many places, having a favorable policy climate did not lead to schools actually delivering comprehensive sex education programs to their students.

How the Collaborative Worked

In 2009, four foundations—Grove, Ford, William and Flora Hewlett, and David and Lucile Packard—stepped up.⁵ They supported the WISE Initiative to provide focused funding to states and localities where there was a favorable policy climate and where a public-private collaborative was poised to significantly improve CSE programming in K-12 public schools. The initiative supports state and local implementation efforts and seeks to expand the field's knowledge about best practices for institutionalizing CSE. Initially, it made investments in seven state and local partners. Today, its work has expanded to 11 states. For the first two years, WISE encouraged grantees to test multiple strategies to get CSE into schools. By the third year, it had codified a five-step CSE implementation model called the WISE Method.

Fast Facts

Type of collaboration: Create a new entity

Established: 2009

Funders involved: Grove Foundation (lead), David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Ford Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, with additional funders joining in 2011

Shared goal: Provide public school students with access to comprehensive sex education

Funding committed by Packard to date: \$1.3 million

⁵ Hewlett stopped funding WISE in 2012.

The Grove Foundation leads the collaboration, and the foundation's Rebekah Saul Butler is the WISE program director. "Rebekah really had a vision in mind, and she was the lead funder and conceptualizer. We at Packard saw a real opportunity to partner with and lean on Rebekah's expertise," explained Lana Dakan, Packard Foundation program officer for population and reproductive health. Packard provides Grove with flexible, multiyear funding, and Grove, in turn, makes grants to subgrantees.

Governance is quite informal. The funding partners meet once a year, but otherwise, said Dakan, "There aren't any memoranda of understanding or specific structures. Rebekah leads it, and then there's a key consultant." Initially, the partners formed an advisory committee, but over time the committee was dismantled, and now WISE relies on a set of informal advisors.

What helps to keep WISE on track despite the informal collaborative arrangements among the funding partners? "Having a clear evaluation plan and metrics is really important," said Dakan, "because then you are very clear about what the initiative is trying to achieve and the progress you're making towards those outcomes. It helps guide conversations and means there are no big surprises." Even without a highly formalized governance structure, the partners often communicate with each other. "Communication doesn't have to be formal or lengthy," said Dakan. "Rebekah shoots off quick emails, and it keeps us all engaged."

Results

In the first three years of the initiative, all of the WISE sites made significant progress toward their objectives. WISE-supported activities have reached over 500,000 students; more than 700 teachers have been trained; and hundreds of schools have either implemented sex education where there was previously no sex education or significantly improved their program. As of 2014, 11 states and localities are participating in WISE.

Dakan also points to the impact that WISE has had on its funders. "We've built a relationship and shared trust among the foundation project officers involved," she said. "We're able to check in with each other—and not just about WISE, but about low-cost ways to train teachers to teach comprehensive sex ed and ways to reach kids outside of school. We're all working on this together."

Key Takeaways

We observe several success factors in this work:

- **Partner with a motivated lead funder with subject matter expertise:** With growing support for CSE in states and localities, and among the public, and with a new administration in Washington, Grove, Packard, and the other foundations in the initial group of WISE funders were able to take advantage of a much improved climate in which to spread CSE. With this timely opening at hand, Packard saw an opportunity to learn from the Grove Foundation's expertise in this area.

- **Consistent communication and clarity on shared goals can lessen the need for formal structure:** Packard and Grove generally see eye-to-eye on WISE’s goals and strategy. The relationship among all the funders is not defined so much by formal arrangements as by informal communication and trust in the leadership that the Grove Foundation is providing.
- **Start with a clear evaluation plan and learn from metrics:** From the start, WISE has engaged Learning for Action Group as its evaluator. The initiative has made major decisions based on what it has learned from evaluation. For example, results from the multiple strategies tested during the first two years led to development of the WISE Method that now guides the initiative. Clarity about metrics and the evaluation plan has also helped keep the funders aligned with each other and with the overall initiative. In fact, all foundations have agreed that LFA’s work fulfills their individual evaluation needs.
- **The sum is greater than the parts:** Each funding partner brought a particular expertise to the table, and the group worked collaboratively to learn from and deploy those individual assets to enhance the quality of the program. Working together in this way served to create funder buy-in and a sense that “we’re all in this together.”

BOSTON

2 Copley Place, 7th Floor
Suite 3700B
Boston, MA 02116
Tel: 617 572-2833

NEW YORK

112 West 34th St., Ste. 1510
New York, NY 10120
Tel: 646 562-8900

SAN FRANCISCO

465 California St., 11th Fl.
San Francisco, CA 94104
Tel: 415 627-1100

