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National Academy Foundation

Reinforcing Core Programs

National Academy Foundation
PARTNERSHIPS FOR AMERICA'S YOUTH

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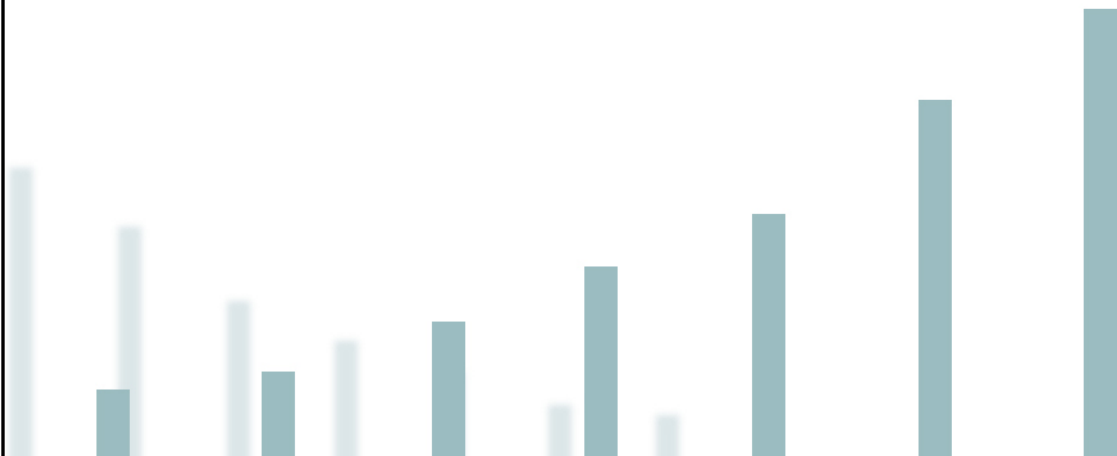
It was 1981 and New York City native Sandy Weill had just sold Shearson Loeb Rhoades (then the second largest securities brokerage firm in the country) to American Express. Taking time to step back from the day-to-day work of running Shearson, he focused on an issue that had concerned him for years: the acute shortage of recent high-school graduates qualified to work in NYC's financial services industry. With this industry playing a central role in the city's economy, Weill believed passionately that area high schools needed to do a better job of preparing interested students to enter the field.

Always an entrepreneur, Weill created a program to begin to address the shortage. In 1982, he joined forces with the New York City Department of Education to open the first National Academy Foundation (NAF) Academy within Brooklyn's John Dewey High School. The Academy taught a finance-themed curriculum and required students to complete paid internships in the field.

A small school within the larger school (and thus a precursor to the small learning community movement), the Academy enrolled 4 percent of Dewey High students. NAF provided the resources required to run the Academy, but did not operate the school itself. Specifically, NAF, in collaboration with NY-area companies, business associations, and higher-education institutions, developed a curriculum that included courses such as Accounting, International Finance, and Securities.

Academy students performed even better than Weill had hoped. Not only did they graduate better prepared to enter the workforce than other Dewey High students, but they also attended college at far higher rates. Over 97 percent of the Academy's first graduating class went on to college, versus approximately 67 percent of their Dewey peers.

The extraordinary results continued, sparking rapid growth of the NAF network, which was funded primarily through corporate philanthropy, special events, and foundation grants. Over the next 20 years, NAF added two more career themes (Hospitality & Tourism and Information Technology) and expanded into new geographies, to pursue its mission of "sustaining a national network of career academies to support the development of America's youth toward personal and professional success in high school, in higher education, and throughout their careers." In Weill's words, "For young people, the NAF Academy experience allows them to see a future for themselves. This changes their lives. It changes their parents' lives. It impacts their communities." As of

early 2005, NAF was running 643 Academies in 40 states and the District of Columbia and serving more than 40,000 students.

As NAF evolved, so did the educational reform landscape. There was growing recognition among school reformers that to truly transform the educational system, change had to happen not only at the individual school level but also at the district level. NAF's leadership questioned how the organization's efforts to help pockets of high-need youth—efforts which minimally involved district personnel—meshed with this district-level trend. And given NAF's pioneering role with small learning communities, they wondered if the organization should play a similar leading-edge role with district-level reform.

Around the same time, the Miami-Dade School District asked NAF to help convert its high schools into small learning communities—mapping out the entire district-wide reform plan, providing the small school model, and supporting the small school network once in place. NAF's leadership accepted that offer, and then seized another district-reform opportunity with the New York City Department of Education. As they looked to the organization's future, they wondered if they should explicitly try to do this type of work more broadly. With a planning grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, they teamed up with the Bridgespan Group to tackle this question head on.

Key Questions

Over a six-month period, a project team comprised of NAF President John Ferrandino (a former New York City Superintendent of High Schools), six other NAF management team members, and five Bridgespan consultants worked together, with guidance from Board Chair Sandy Weill, to hone NAF's strategy. Among the questions they addressed:

- What did it take to engage in high-school reform at the district level?

- Was NAF equipped to do this beyond Miami-Dade and New York City?

- What strategic actions should NAF take to maximize its impact going forward?

What Does District-Reform Work Really Take?

The Miami-Dade and New York City initiatives were generating energy and excitement throughout the NAF organization, and NAF's leadership was eager to see if they should pursue more district-reform opportunities. A necessary first step was to develop a crisper understanding of the likely demand for NAF's services. Were there other districts that were likely to reach out to NAF for help with district-wide high-school reform initiatives, or were the requests the organization had received to date isolated examples?

Reflecting on the process NAF's leadership observed in Miami-Dade and New York, it was easy to understand why districts would ask for help navigating the reform process. Breaking a school district's high schools into small learning communities (SLCs) was an intricate process, involving numerous constituencies: teachers, principals, parents, politicians. It entailed developing an overarching strategy for the reform initiative, establishing the detailed tactics required to execute the strategy, and then implementing the plan. (See Exhibit A for a more detailed overview of the activities involved.) This was a lot for a school district's staff to take on in addition to their already-heavy workloads.

Exhibit A: Activities required to convert a district's high schools to the SLC model

Strategy	Tactics	Implementation
• Develop a picture of what the reformed district will look like and a framework for how to get there 　- Program development 　- Community engagement 　- Fund development 　- Budgeting • Engage high-school principals, unions, and the community to build support • Apply for federal grants to fund the reform effort	• Develop master plan to align all district functions (e.g., curriculum, transport, construction) to support reform • Reorganize district staff to free up individuals to oversee school conversions • Create a menu of potential Small Learning Community (SLC) providers • Establish detailed implementation timeline	• Send out RFP to SLC providers for the first phase of schools to be converted • Plan program and curriculum for 9th grade year • Establish system for capturing and reporting student performance data • Add one grade per year until 12th grade is reached • Capture lessons to incorporate in the second phase of school conversions

While it was relatively clear that districts would need outside support, it was less certain that they would reach out to NAF (as opposed to another school-reform organization). Here the project team looked to NAF's experience in Miami-Dade and New York City for guidance. When these districts decided to pursue school reform, why had they sought out NAF's assistance? Were these factors idiosyncratic, or were they more broadly applicable?

As NAF's leadership reflected back, they realized that one of the main reasons NAF was able to participate in those two district-reform efforts was that it previously had established credibility by having a strong platform of Academies in them. Involvement in this new arena was predicated on its "core business" of opening and supporting career-themed Academies within individual schools.

NAF's platform was strong in Miami-Dade and New York City for two main reasons. First, the Academies were generating solid results. Both Miami-Dade and New York City had numerous NAF Academies that performed at a very high level as measured by student achievement. Second, the Miami-Dade and New York City Academies were considered best-practice implementations of small learning communities, and thus could serve as models for SLC reform.

One other factor present in Miami-Dade and New York City was more idiosyncratic (a nice-to-have but not a must-have): pre-established relationships with district leadership. NAF President John Ferrandino had strong working relationships in both Miami-Dade and New York City thanks to his previous role as New York City Superintendent of High Schools under former New York City Chancellor Rudy Crew (now Miami Superintendent of Schools). However, NAF had been approached by other districts where no prior relationships existed aside from those built through running successful career Academies.

Beyond the Academy platform, the project team identified a demand consideration that was largely outside NAF's control: district readiness. Even the strongest Academy platform would not be enough to entice a district if the district simply wasn't ready for reform. Miami-Dade leadership had invited NAF to help transform the district after they had already begun to think about applying for SLC grants. And NAF sought to become involved in New York City reform work only after the district had committed publicly to large-scale reform.

Should We Do More District-Level Work?

With a strong platform of Academies and a reform-ready district emerging as preconditions to NAF's involvement in a given district's reform efforts, gauging demand for NAF's services would require the NAF-Bridgespan project team to determine the number of districts where both of these conditions existed.

STRONG PLATFORM OF NAF ACADEMIES

The team began by determining how many of NAF's Academies met the strong platform hurdle (i.e., were *performing* well and were *positioned* as a model for small learning community reform). Data on Academy performance and positioning weren't readily available, though, as NAF had only mixed success with Academy reporting.

NAF management, eager to understand the network's performance and needs, had long asked Academies to report data across a number of dimensions. In addition, like most nonprofits, they needed to collect data to satisfy funders' requests for specific performance metrics. For example, corporate sponsors were eager to see detailed data on NAF students' internships.

To address all of these reporting needs, the organization had developed a comprehensive web-based data system complete with 20 separate data-entry pages. Academy directors were to enter information about courses taught, local advisory boards, internship providers, fundraising, and student demographics and achievement. But capturing all of this data was time-consuming and burdensome for Academy directors, and many did not fulfill the data requests in their entirety. The result was a database full of holes.

To circumvent this data challenge, the NAF-Bridgespan project team surveyed the Academies, asking for just the few pieces of information that were essential to assessing platform strength. Among the metrics they selected for Academy performance:

Survey questions	Threshold performance
• How many students enter the Academy portion of the school in the first year? How many graduate senior year? (to determine the Academy graduation rate) • How many students enter the entire school freshman year? How many graduate senior year? (to determine the school graduation rate)	• Academy graduation rate higher than high school rate by 5 percentage points –or– Academy graduation rate of 95 percent or above
• What percentage of eligible students is placed in internships?	• At least 80 percent
• Has the Academy secured a college articulation agreement in which a local college will give credits for certain NAF courses? (an indicator of a strong academic curriculum)	• Yes

Responses from 237 of NAF's 643 Academies indicated that the majority were delivering a solid program. More than 90 percent of survey respondents had Academies that were graduating students at a higher rate than the rest of the high school in which the Academy operated, and on average responding Academies had graduation rates 23 percentage points higher than the rest of the high school. NAF's leadership had long felt that the organization equipped its Academies with the keys to success, and were excited to receive confirmation of this gut feeling. The news wasn't all good, though. Only 60 percent met the team's more comprehensive standards for strong performance.
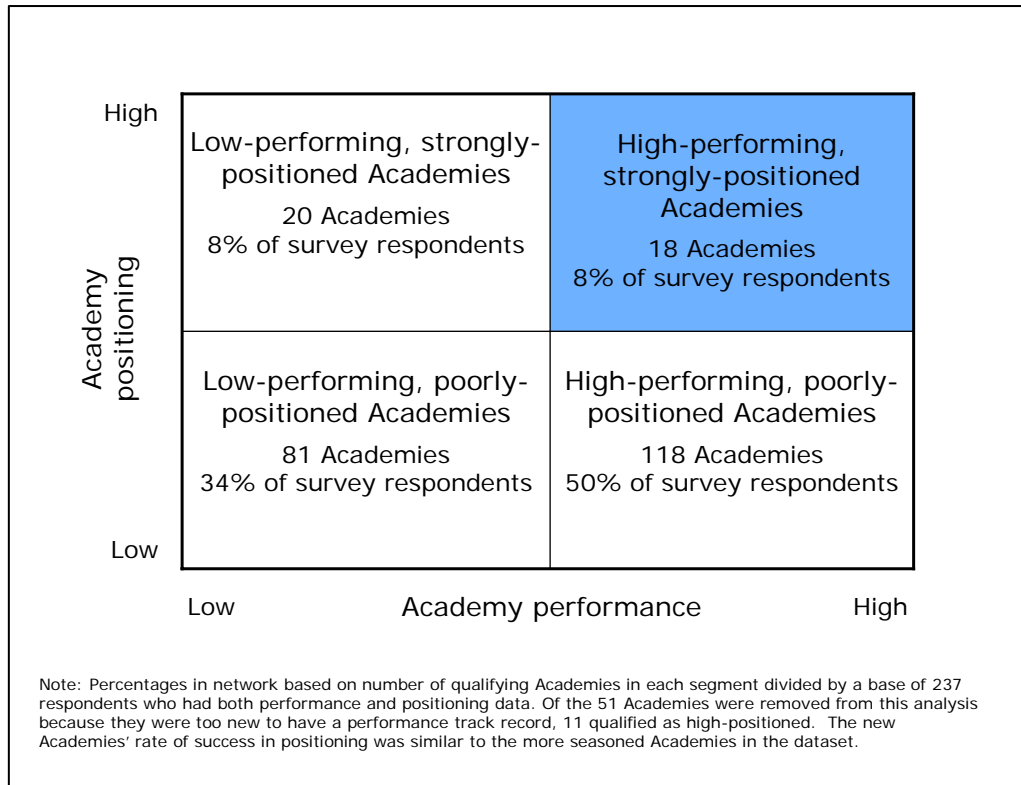
To measure how well individual Academies were positioned to serve as models for SLC reform, the project team included survey questions that assessed how closely each Academy resembled a prototypical small learning community:

Survey questions	Threshold performance
• What is the average number of students per grade in the Academy?	• At least 50 students
• What percent of Academy students' classes do they take together as a group?	• At least 50 percent
• Is the Academy director an Academy instructor or a school/district administrator?	• School/district administrator
• How long is the Academy program?	• Three or more years

The responses were eye-opening. Fewer than 20 percent of survey respondents were positioned well to be a SLC model. NAF's leadership traced this low figure to the fact that NAF had limited control over Academy design, with the schools and districts that housed the Academies having more say on this dimension.

Looking at the performance and positioning considerations simultaneously, only 8 percent of NAF's Academies were high-performing, model SLCs (see Exhibit B). As for the Academies that hadn't responded to the survey, the team assumed their performance and positioning was no better (and probably somewhat worse given selection bias) than that of the survey respondents.

Exhibit B: High-performing, model SLCs in NAF's current network

	Low	Academy performance	High
High	Low-performing, strongly-positioned Academies — 20 Academies — 8% of survey respondents		High-performing, strongly-positioned Academies — 18 Academies — 8% of survey respondents
Low (Academy positioning)	Low-performing, poorly-positioned Academies — 81 Academies — 34% of survey respondents		High-performing, poorly-positioned Academies — 118 Academies — 50% of survey respondents

Note: Percentages in network based on number of qualifying Academies in each segment divided by a base of 237 respondents who had both performance and positioning data. Of the 51 Academies were removed from this analysis because they were too new to have a performance track record, 11 qualified as high-positioned. The new Academies' rate of success in positioning was similar to the more seasoned Academies in the dataset.

NAF's opportunity set was already quite limited, even before considering district readiness for reform. Ferrandino recalls, "The Academies needed more attention than we'd previously realized. It was a major signal to us that we needed to take care of our core work of running high-quality Academies. We'd gotten a bit ahead of ourselves with our district-reform aspirations."

DISTRICTS READY FOR REFORM

To assess each district's reform-readiness, the team looked at whether it had secured SLC or Magnet school funding in the past five years. Applying for such funding is typically a precursor to full-fledged district reform. To piece together this information, the team turned to a variety of sources, searching online databases and interviewing experts in the field.

Nearly 70 percent of districts where NAF had high-performing model SLCs had applied for school-reform funding. While this finding was encouraging, the overall implications of the team's research were clear: the number of districts in which NAF could engage in school district reform right now was quite limited. Only a dozen districts were ripe for NAF's involvement.

How Do We Strengthen Our Core Programs?

The realization that many of the Academies were falling short of NAF's goals prompted NAF's leadership to set some clear priorities. Ambitions to get involved in district reform notwithstanding, first and foremost they needed to strengthen their Academy core. Doing so would be absolutely critical to the organization having its desired impact on Academy students. And given that a strong Academy platform had emerged as a necessary precondition for NAF's involvement in district-wide reform, strengthening the Academy base also would help to establish this work as a viable option down the road.

More specifically, the project team outlined four key initiatives:

1) Strengthen NAF's core of Academies

The network survey results challenged NAF's leadership to decide how best to address the roughly 40 percent of Academies that were not high performing. They felt strongly that the organization should put forth the effort required to bring those Academies up to threshold. Accordingly, they decided to focus on improving rather than growing the network over the next three years.

The NAF-Bridgespan project team identified three levers for improving Academy performance and positioning:

- Enhancing the classroom experience with additional teacher training and/or curricular materials;

- Migrating the Academy design toward a prototypical SLC model by facilitating teacher collaboration, supporting SLC-friendly school and district policies, and increasing the cohesiveness and size of student cohorts;

- Improving the student internship participation rate by building and strengthening community relationships through advisory boards.

To effect these changes, NAF's leadership committed to expanding the organization's field staff. The additional staff members would allow NAF to provide targeted assistance, determining the root causes of an Academy's under-performance and working with the Academy on-site to implement any recommended changes. If an Academy still could not or would not meet NAF standards, NAF's leadership would make the difficult decision to exit it.

2) Continue to learn from the Miami-Dade and New York City pilots

Given the focus on getting top performance out of all the Academies, NAF's leadership began to look at the Miami-Dade and New York City initiatives explicitly as exploratory pilots (rather than the first steps of an imminent push towards district-reform work.) They would take every opportunity to learn from them both to inform the core Academy model as well as any future school district-reform work that NAF pursues.

The team laid out specific questions to try to answer through the pilots. Among them:

- What steps can we take in a given district to help strengthen the Academies located within it?

- What is the full set of conditions that need to be in place for NAF to engage in district reform?

- What is the most effective role for NAF to play in district reform?

- What additional capabilities does NAF need to develop to be able to play that role most effectively?

- What are the impediments to reform?

NAF's leadership also wanted the pilots to have impact beyond NAF's own learning. They saw them as an opportunity to influence district-level high-school reform more broadly. With Miami-Dade and New York City being among the earlier districts in the nation to pursue reform, they carried the potential of serving as models for other districts' reform efforts.

3) Open new Academies in strategic locations

NAF's leadership also committed to being more strategic about selecting new Academy locations when the organization was ready to pursue growth again. The team established a screening process that would guide site selection. They focused on the largest districts, as from past experience NAF's leadership knew that the industry base a large district supports is critical to the organization's ability to secure student internships.

What the project team had learned about preconditions for district-reform involvement also informed the screening criteria. While NAF's leadership would be focused in the near term on strengthening the Academies, they also wanted to position the organization for getting involved in district reform if they decided to pursue that route at a later date. One way they would do this was by clustering Academies in target districts. In large districts where NAF already had at least one Academy, the team set a target of having Academies in at least 20 percent of the district's high schools.

Since opening these new Academies all at once wouldn't be feasible, they prioritized those with a major need for school reform (i.e., districts with a high percentage of low-income students and with records of poor student achievement), both because these were areas where NAF could make a big difference and because these districts were more likely to be receptive to NAF's overtures. To further refine the prioritization, they looked for signs that the district was already pushing for reform. For districts where NAF did not yet have a presence, they would do an initial screen based on need alone. (See Exhibit C for an overview of the prioritization process.)

Exhibit C: Process NAF will use to prioritize locations for new Academies
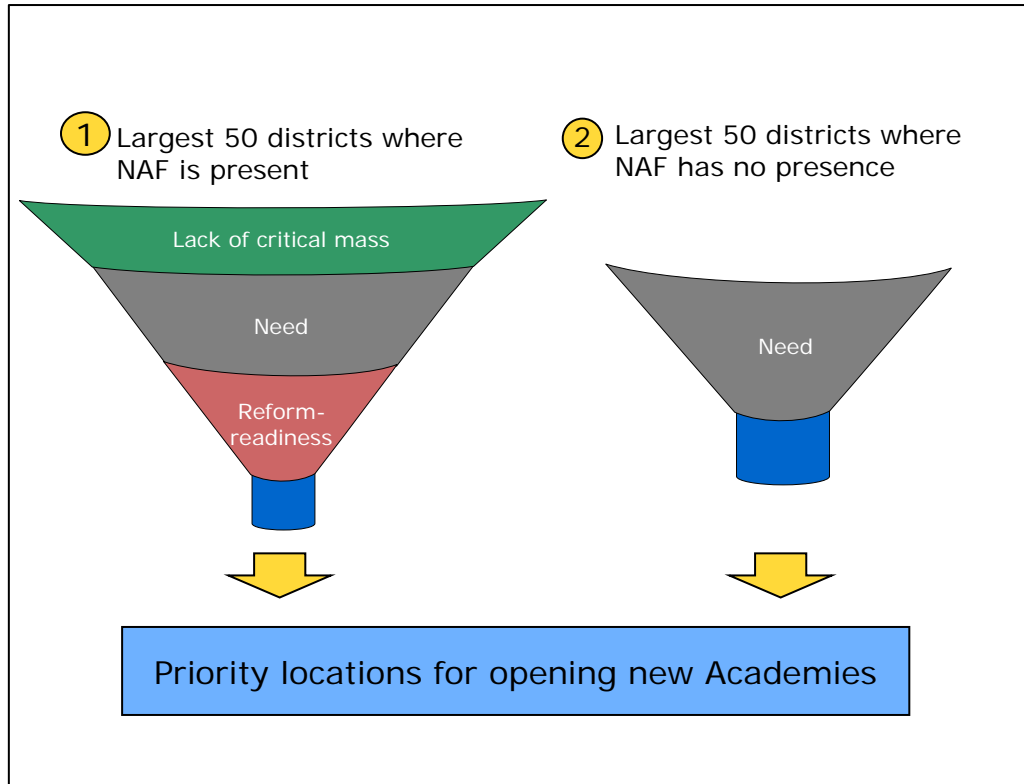
4) Improve data collection

Given how valuable the NAF team found having a rich set of network data, they committed to improving data collection going forward. This would mean big changes for NAF's data collection center and processes. Most significantly, NAF's leadership decided to reduce the Academy reporting burden in an effort to improve response rates.

They immediately simplified the data entry process by highlighting critical areas and simplifying the instructions. Then they initiated a process to narrow the quantity of data Academies were required to report for management tracking purposes. They also decided to move forward with a separate system that required less frequent Academy reporting, to capture the information funders and corporate sponsors uniquely desired. And they began wielding a previously un-enforced "stick": Academies that did not provide the necessary data would not be offered sponsorships to attend NAF's hugely popular annual conference or be eligible for student scholarships.

Adding momentum to these efforts, NAF's leadership shared the survey data with the network. The Academy directors, unaccustomed to seeing network data at an aggregate level, remarked on how valuable it was to see a panoramic view of the organization. The strong hope was that with the directors having seen these tangible benefits, the new data collection processes would be more likely to gain traction.

Making Change and Moving Forward

Through the planning process, NAF's leadership gained a greater appreciation for how critical its core work of operating a large network of successful career Academies is to its ability to play a meaningful role in district reform. Ultimately, they reached the conclusion that having the most impact wouldn't mean focusing immediately on the new development in their environment (i.e., district-level school reform). Rather, it required concentrating on what NAF did best (i.e., operating a network of Academies), but tightening the network and being more intentional about where to locate new Academies.

In the few months since the NAF-Bridgespan engagement, NAF already has made strong progress. According to Ferrandino, "The work we're doing in Miami-Dade and New York has become a wonderful source of information to us—increasing our understanding of what district reform takes and helping us to define our core work in the Academies. We now recognize that when we open a new Academy we need to build relationships not only at the school level but also at the *district* level. We had been selling ourselves short by focusing nearly exclusively on the schools. With strong district relationships, our Academies can have staying power even if the school's principal leaves." To trigger more active engagement at the district level NAF has, for example, begun requiring a full board of education resolution before opening a new Academy; formerly the superintendent's sign-off sufficed.

"We're on the right track," says Ferrandino. "We're reinforcing our core programs now and look forward to using that solid base as a vehicle for getting involved in district reform efforts in the future."