

# COMMONWEAL Chronicle

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE COMMONWEAL FOUNDATION



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The Commonweal Foundation operates and supports educational programs and projects assisting underserved children and youth. The Foundation focuses on primary and secondary education.

## FOUNDATION PROGRAMS

- ▶ **Boarding and Day School Program.** Scholarships and Student Support Services
- ▶ **Partners in Learning Program.** Afterschool Math and Reading Tutoring and Parent Education Programs
- ▶ **Learning Support Program.** Special Education Tutoring
- ▶ **Grants Program.** Community Assistance Program and School Enhancement Program Grants

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## Message From President, CEO & Chair

# “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”



Those insightful words of President John F. Kennedy perfectly sum up our sentiments at the Commonweal Foundation as we contemplate the progress of our Strategic Plan’s implementation over the past six months and look forward to the coming months of targeted efforts to meet our key objectives in

assisting underserved youth.

Through this process, we have come to understand how the words, leadership and learning, are intricately woven in our foundation’s ongoing commitment to helping our educational partners and Community Assistance grantees and, ultimately, the youth.

We are convinced that dynamic, well-trained and responsive leaders are essential to guiding schools and other nonprofit organizations through these increasingly difficult economic times. With that in mind, we have dedicated this issue of the *Commonweal Chronicle* to the fundamental qualities of excellent leadership.

This fall, the foundation hosted our 5th Annual Leadership Forum in Washington, DC, gathering 160 leaders from our partner schools, the Adventist educational system and local Community Assistance grantees. Knowledgeable educators facilitated thought-provoking and informative sessions with participants over the three-day conference in October.

Liz Livingston Howard, the associate director of the Center for Nonprofit Management at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School for Management, offered two in-depth sessions for school and nonprofit organization leaders. She outlined the daunting challenges facing faith-based schools and nonprofits in today’s struggling economy and provided discerning advice on surviving and thriving despite those obstacles. In this issue, Howard calls on the staff and board of directors of these groups to form strong partnerships to achieve success despite the economic obstacles.

Another article delves into the role of school leaders who seek to balance their desire to build a

consensus for change with the responsibility to make decisions that positively impact student achievement. Mary Helen Spiri, Ed.D., the executive director of the Chesapeake Coalition of Essential Schools, shares her broad experience in school renewal and encourages educational leaders to ask a very important question when they implement change – “How will what I do affect the learning or lack of learning of the children in my care?” She also advocates that leaders work together with staff, students, parents and board members and share their thoughts and strengths in a truly collaborative approach to promote school renewal. At Commonweal, we believe that good leadership sparks a culture of transparency and cooperation and hope you find this article both encouraging and inspirational.

We also highlight our newest endeavor, the Seventh-day Adventist Capacity Building Initiative – where we take a “holistic” approach in partnering with educational leaders to enhance the quality of academics, encourage professional development for teachers and school leaders, and support data analysis to increase student academic performance. The foundation is joining with the schools in this collaborative approach, which is aimed at improving both enrollment and academic quality at Adventist academies and feeder schools. We look forward to watching the progress of this effort and its impact on the schools.

In 2011, we are committed to further implementation of our Strategic Plan guided by our core principles of quality, leadership, partnership and evaluation. We are invested in finding ways that we, together with our partners, can help the underserved students in our communities achieve their highest good.

As President Kennedy understood, learning and leadership definitely are indispensable to each other. As a philanthropic leader, the Commonweal Foundation is open to learning, along with our partners, how to improve our roles as leaders to promote and ensure academic achievement for all of our students. They are the future generation and we must be instrumental in guiding and helping them evolve into the leaders of tomorrow. ■

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# Leadership for School Renewal

by Mary Helen Spiri, Ed.D. | Executive Director, Chesapeake Coalition of Essential Schools

Schools are challenging organizations. They bring together people of all ages, experiences and aspirations and attempt to engage them in a complex mission. Even in schools where the mission is long-standing and/or clearly articulated, keeping the myriad tasks that make up a school day centered on the mission is no easy task. On top of this challenge, schools cannot isolate themselves from the world. The culture of any school – no matter how centered – is profoundly impacted by the cultures and events of larger society.

School leaders serve as the gatekeepers between the world at large and the community within. Leaders must cling tenaciously to that worth protecting while at the same time welcoming that which might make their school stronger. Leaders must recognize that even though any change, no matter how small, will most likely bring unintended consequences to other areas of the school, change is inevitable. School leaders can neither reject nor embrace every innovation, but instead must use a steady yet flexible lens to determine which paths to follow. Managing change is the key to effective school renewal.

## Building Community through Active Engagement

Managing change cannot be a solitary act. A school is a collection of people engaged in the common endeavor of preparing young people for a rapidly-changing world. The best schools are communities in which every person – grown and



growing – recognizes, embraces, and shares his or her particular gifts. School renewal requires leaders who create opportunities for the sharing of gifts, engendering in staff, students, parents, board members and others both the urgency and the confidence to bring their best attributes and ideas to the table.

The development of such learning communities requires thoughtful and consistent communication, commitment to bringing people together purposely and often, and openness to perspectives other than one's own. Leaders provide the most important examples of what a school truly values; what leaders do, especially in terms of where they put their time and how they make decisions, carries much more weight than what they say. If a leader makes all important decisions alone, then school community members learn that their experiences, knowledge, and opinions are not worthy of consideration. School leadership is a delicate balancing act – a leader must know when to act decisively and when to build consensus.



Perhaps the most important indicator of how well a leader balances his or her responsibilities is consistency in addressing a focus question. Because this question must capture what a leader truly values, it must be carefully and thoughtfully constructed. My question when I was a principal was “How will what I do affect the learning or lack of learning of the children in my care?” I asked myself this question when faced with any decision: whether to suspend or expel a student, when and how to address concerns about a teacher, whether to use funds for athletics or professional development, etc. Consistent attention to my question helped me to know where to put my time and led me quickly to the realization that I needed the community’s active involvement to achieve the school’s goals. My question helped me to weather many new initiatives and provided the lens I needed to manage change.

### Using Data to Strengthen Community

We live in a world awash with data. Without data, we are left with our good intentions, our assumptions, and our often misleading anecdotal evidence of what we think we see. Leaders must seek out ways to capture information that helps to assess the school’s effectiveness and needs. Data are not inherently useful: in the words of Albert Einstein, “We don’t always measure what we value nor value what we measure.” Leaders who marry attention to data to their focus question create an automatic filter to increase the odds that data provide actionable information for the school community’s consideration. “Actionable” is a key term here – collecting information is much easier than engaging a community in analyzing, reflecting about, and using it.

It might be helpful to think of four kinds of data (thanks to Victoria Bernhart for this framework): student achievement, process, perception, and demographic. Suppose that a school community became concerned about a high failure rate among an entering freshman class. Within my focus question, “How will what I do impact the learning or lack of learning of the children in my care?” I am propelled to act to gather data to illuminate this issue. I want

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to gather enough information to understand the issue deeply, richly, and well so that our school community can address it thoughtfully. I might facilitate the gathering of these data:

#### Student Achievement

- Failures of freshmen by subject
- Freshman reading levels
- Freshman failure rates previous 2 years
- Failure rates of all classes

#### Perception

- Interviews with failing freshmen
- Interviews with successful freshman
- Staff survey
- Parent survey

#### Process

- Teacher grading practices
- Available supports for struggling learners
- Parent communication about student progress

#### Demographic

- Sorting of other data by gender
- Sorting of other data by previous schools (feeder pattern)
- Comparison of current class demographics to previous classes

Once the data are in hand, effective leaders facilitate a collaborative process through which the school community (staff certainly, parents and students if appropriate) can explore and respond. This undertaking can be time-consuming, as people need to understand first what the

data SAY and then what they might MEAN. There is a tendency to rush to judgment and action. School renewal requires slow, deep, and thoughtful review of the data, ensuring that community members understand each piece in turn before attempting to see relationships among them. A leader might be tempted to unpack all of the data in one faculty meeting, exiting with an action plan that begins the very next day. Instead, sharing the data provides a wonderful opportunity to strengthen community, attending together to strengths, surprises, needs, and hopes. Collaborating around data can be potent professional development. Like all worthy professional development, it’s not a quick-and-easy proposition.

School renewal is a never-ending journey, part burden and part joy, that is the lot of every serious school leader. A great school never arrives, but instead is led by an individual who inspires thoughtful change along the way. Respect for community, a focus question, and responsive data can make the ride a smoother one. ■



# Effective Partnership Between Staff and Board of Directors Essential to Thrive in Current Economy



A strong partnership between the staff and board of directors of faith-based schools and community nonprofit organizations is critical for these organizations to “survive and thrive” in today’s challenging economic climate.

Liz Livingston Howard’s assessment was the crux of her presentation for faith-based school leaders in the Boarding and Day Scholarship Program and executive direc-

tors and board of director chairmen of nonprofit Community Assistance Grantees at the Commonwealth Foundation’s Fifth Annual Leadership Forum.

Because of the bleak economy, Howard, the associate director for the Center for Nonprofit Management at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, said nonprofits and faith-based schools are facing more

challenges today than ever before due to the current economy.

“They need the strongest possible resources to meet those challenges,” she said. “One critical resource they have is the people engaged in the work they are doing. Organizations with strong leaders, paid staff and involved board of directors are the ones which will find the most creative, innovative approaches that will lead them to success.”

A strong and involved board of directors is essential for a school or nonprofit to traverse the current rocky economic path, she noted.

“Historically, board members have offered their time, talents and treasures and that is even more critical today,” Howard explained. “The role of the board today is to be keeper of the mission and steward of the organization’s resources, promoting its image, building awareness of it, asking people for donations and giving money themselves. The competition is huge and they have to stand out.”

At the forum, Howard outlined these four major challenges impacting faith-based schools and nonprofit groups and offered advice on addressing them:

- Increased competition.
- Accountability regarding the organization’s impact.
- Changing generation of leaders and donors.
- The depressed economy.



## Increased competition

The worldwide Internet dramatically has changed the landscape of philanthropic donations, Howard noted.

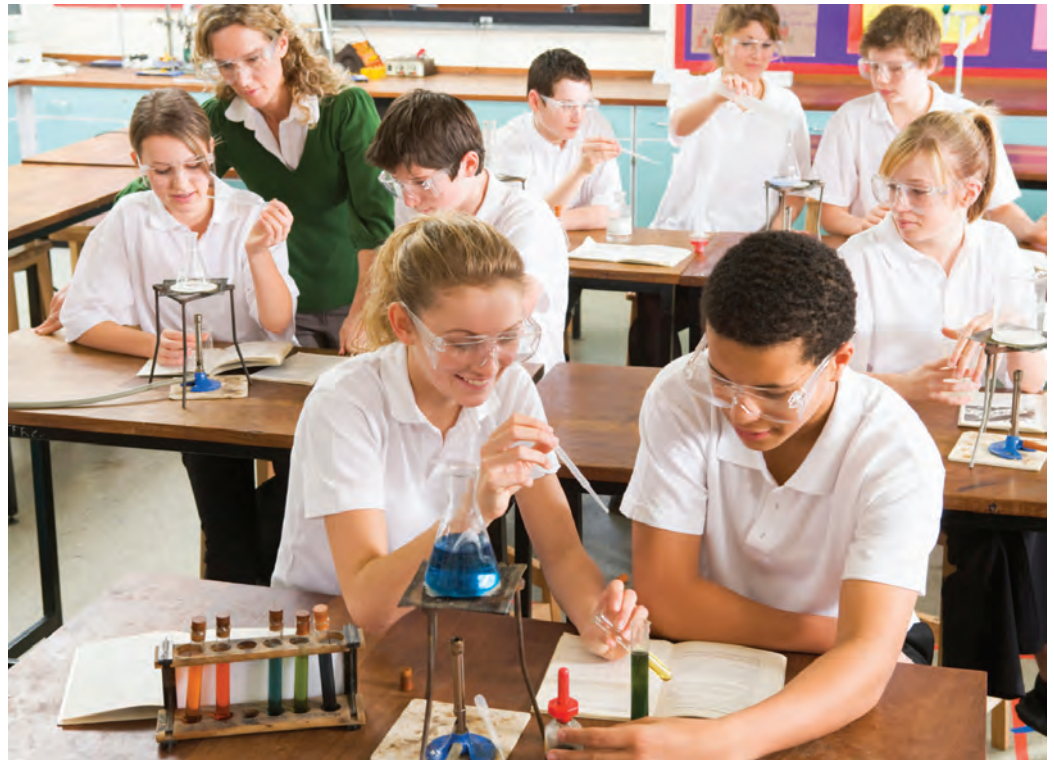
“Previously, if you were looking for a school or beneficiary of charitable funds, you had a limited sphere – it was community based,” Howard explained. “The Internet has changed that definition of competition and these faith-based schools and community nonprofits now compete in a global marketplace. People see themselves as citizens of the world and understand the challenges and needs of people far away because of the Internet and want to donate money.”

Consider the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that left over 150,000 people dead and millions homeless and the 2010 Haiti earthquake which claimed the lives of 230,000, injured 300,000 and left one million homeless.

“Within hours, you could text to a number on your cell phone and make a donation to disaster relief,” Howard said. Such international outpouring has had “a tremendous impact” on the local community nonprofits and the faith-based schools because donations traditionally earmarked for the community are being sent abroad.

“There is so much competition for the philanthropic dollar,” Howard said. “Community nonprofits and faith-based schools have to position themselves as the best investment for that money and the best scenario or experience for those they serve.”

Christopher Herr, the executive director and founder of Heroes Helping Heroes, a Baltimore nonprofit program targeting



at-risk boys, agreed, saying organizations continually must refocus on program improvement, fundraising strategies and operational plans.

“You can’t control things you can’t control,” Herr said. “You can’t control the stock market or the global economy, but you can be more creative and determined. If leaders are committed to the mission, the organization is going to survive.”

For example, typical fundraisers for Heroes Helping Heroes previously had a \$20 entrance fee, but that was scaled back to \$10 due to the economy, Herr said. The group sold more tickets that way.

“People are getting more thrifty on how they spend their money and you have to be creative in finding ways to attract

donors as well as make your mission even more attractive,” he added.

## Accountability

Organizations are being held more accountable for what they are doing to achieve their mission. As Howard explained: “It used to be good enough for them to say we’re doing good and people turned over a check. Today, people want to know what is being done with their money. You have to do good efficiently, effectively and transparently. It’s not enough to say enrollment is up 10 percent; you have to show how well you serve those additional children.”

Herr has found it is beneficial to tell the story of how his students are impacted. He begins each board of directors’ meeting with a story of one youth in the program, his previous challenges and how he has grown through the program.

“By making it personal, the board members become more invested,” he said. “When they are engaged and sit down with a prospective donor, they speak with passion and conviction. You can’t fake that. To be genuine, you have to know the kids’ names and experience the growth of the students and program.”

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## Changing generation of donors and leaders

Today's donors are different from previous generations of donors in the way they give and what they value, in part due to their Internet savvy. As Howard elaborated: "A good board of directors is about assuring its effectiveness. But if you look at most boards, they do not reflect that generational difference. If you are going to attract new resources and the next generation of donors, you have to attract the next generation of leaders first."

Howard suggests inviting younger members onto the board – ones with passion and willingness to ask hard questions and think creatively about the future. She describes a good board member as a team player, yet independent thinker; great listener who is open minded; willing to ask hard questions, speak hard truths and focus on the mission; and is responsible for carrying out the board duties.

"The role of a board member still means time, talent and treasure, but means more than that today," Howard said. "It means you have to market the organization, be a spokesperson for it, help assure its fiscal stability and ask tough ques-

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*"... faith-based schools and nonprofit groups (must) educate board members on their roles and how to be partners in effectively fulfilling the mission, whether it is educating children, serving the elderly or ending homelessness."*

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tions, like which programs are essential and which are not."

## Economy

While competition for donor dollars has increased, the faltering economy has put additional pressure on both faith-based schools and community nonprofit organizations in attracting contributions.

Despite the economy, Howard said, a board can be an effective fundraising tool, not only giving money but also asking others to donate and finding ways to help schools or the nonprofits to "stand out in the crowd. Word-of-mouth marketing is the most effective way of marketing. The board has to be the positive voice and be willing to encourage others to invest in it."

Howard strongly urges faith-based schools and nonprofit groups to educate board members on their roles and how to be partners in effectively fulfilling the mission, whether it is educating children, serving the elderly or ending homelessness.

Father Dave Mastrangelo, president of Detroit's Loyola High School, a Jesuit Catholic school which works with "under-prepared" students, can attest to the impact of the economy on faith-based schools.

"Detroit particularly has been hit hard, making it difficult to raise money in this kind of economy with corporations cutting back," he said. "That source of funding had dried up, but is beginning to come back. There's more optimism in Detroit these days. It's not as bleak as it was two years ago."

Describing his board as very involved, Mastrangelo said school leaders and the board have engaged in strategic planning for the past eight months. They held a retreat this month to "take a good, honest look at ourselves because that will decide the directions we take in the actual strategic plan."

Mastrangelo is convinced that the most effective way to increase donations "is to get better at what we want to do. It's not a matter of slick marketing. It's not smoke and mirror marketing. If we are who we want to be, people will see that, will experience that and will want to give. The upside of a struggling economy is it does bring out the best in a lot of people."

Echoing Mastrangelo's sentiments, Howard said she is convinced the sector covering nonprofit and faith-based schools "is going to recover because I do believe that there is passion, commitment and people willing to work hard. I have a strong belief that sector is going to come back as strong as it has ever been." ■



# Seventh-day Adventist Capacity Building Initiative

Building up Adventist academies and their feeder schools in both total enrollment and academic quality is the prime focus of the recently unveiled Seventh-day Adventist Capacity Building Initiative (SDA Initiative).

The SDA Initiative, announced at the Commonweal Foundation's recent Leadership Forum, is underway with a pilot program at Takoma Academy and its two closest feeder schools, John Nevins Andrews and Sligo Adventist, said Fred Lowenbach, the initiative's program director.

The cluster of Adventist schools have experienced common challenges, including student populations dropping by as much as 50 percent, financial inability of families to afford religious school education, reduced overall skill levels of students and the lack of resources to provide quality programs.

"These schools have long offered a meaningful, faith-based education to their students but you can do that hand-in-hand with an outstanding academic education," Lowenbach said. "It doesn't have to be faith-based or high-flying academics. Why can't we do both of those things? We are to open doors for children who go there, not to close them or limit the students."

The goal is to build capacity within the schools so their quality academic programs attract parents to do whatever is possible to get their children in the schools, he explained.

Although in its "infancy" stage, the initiative hopes to incorporate a "holistic" approach with the schools to improve instruction, data analysis, professional devel-

opment, curriculum development, administration, finance and construction, Lowenbach added.

Rozita Green, Commonweal's vice president of programs, said the foundation simply writing a check would not produce the necessary changes to improve the schools.

"We want to create a sustainable effort where we bring key stakeholders together," she said. "Change happens because key stakeholders in the school and community recognize the need for and want to change.

Our first phase is to bring people together for them to realize they have a common goal of student academic achievement."

Lowenbach noted: "You can't demand people do what you want. They have to want to do it. A significant part is for them to see this is beneficial for their school and students. They have to be their own advocates."

The initiative's key areas to help these schools include:

- Increasing student academic performance through continuous, systematic data analysis and a targeted action plan.



- Providing additional teacher development to improve classroom instruction.
- Scheduling professional development days to discuss common issues.
- Identifying strengths/best practices of the three schools and encouraging the sharing of expertise among them.
- Expanding technology use to advance student instruction and engagement.
- Broadening career guidance programs.
- Enhancing the work-based learning programs for a wide range of careers.
- Creating sustainability through marketing campaigns and outreach.

"We want to help these schools create learning communities and feeder patterns so their academics K-8 support the 9-12 academy," said Green. "They can work together to enhance administration and the quality of services they provide students."

The ultimate goal is reversing declining enrollments by focusing "on quality

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## SAVE THE DATE

- ▶ **Council on Foundations Family Philanthropy Conference**  
New York City, NY  
January 23 – 25, 2011  
<http://www.cof.org/events/conferences/2011fam/>
- ▶ **Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University Center for Non-Profit Management Executive Education Programs**  
Evanston, IL  
<http://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/research/nonprofit/execed/programs.htm>
- ▶ **Developing High Performing People**  
March 7–8, 2011
- ▶ **Leading for the Future**  
May 16–17, 2011
- ▶ **Grants Managers Network 6th Annual Conference**  
Seattle, WA  
March 21–23, 2010  
<http://www.gmnetwork.org/annual-conference/2011/home>
- ▶ **Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development 2011 Annual Conference**  
San Francisco, CA  
March 26 – 28, 2011  
<http://www.ascd.org/conferences/annual-conference/2011.aspx>
- ▶ **Commonweal Foundation 6th Annual Leadership Forum**  
Washington, DC  
October 11 -13, 2011

## SDA INITIATIVE *continued from page 7*

academics, professional development of teachers and leadership at the schools,” Green said, adding the initiative hopes to replicate this model at other Adventist partner schools nationwide.

“This is a work in progress,” Lowenbach said. “You don’t do this overnight. This is cultivated over time. This is, at least, a five-to-seven year commitment.”

Agreeing, Green said the initiative is “high engagement. You have to be prepared to put time in the trenches to make it work. This is about people coming together for a common goal. Just like pieces of a puzzle, the picture won’t be complete until all the pieces are put together. Each individual organization doesn’t

have the complete answer. You need them to come together, bring those strengths together and build on strengths. In the end, it will have a positive collective impact because it’s all about the students.” ■



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