

THE NEXT CHAPTER FOR **K–12 Philanthropy:** *From Fundraising to Community Partnership*

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From financial pressures to *community partnerships*

School Districts are being asked to do more while facing increasingly complex realities yet with uneven resources. Enrollment is changing. Costs continue to rise. Federal pandemic funding has ended. State and local funding environments remain challenging. At the same time, expectations for what schools should provide for students and families have never been greater.

For District leaders, these pressures can make philanthropy and community partnerships feel like an urgent necessity. But our experience suggests that the most successful philanthropic relationships rarely begin with an urgent request for funding.

They begin with a conversation. They begin with listening, understanding what a community values, communicating where a District is headed, and giving people an opportunity to see themselves in that vision.

That may sound simple. In practice, however, it requires a significant shift in how school Districts think about philanthropy and community engagement.



Start with the community, *not the campaign*

Jhone Ebert, Superintendent of the Clark County School District (CCSD), has seen that shift firsthand.

CCSD serves one of the nation's largest and most diverse student populations. Like Districts around the country, it is managing the financial effects of declining enrollment, since Nevada schools are funded in large part based on student enrollment. At the same time, staffing, maintenance, and operational costs continue to increase.

Ebert says the District has been preparing for these pressures, including the end of pandemic-era ESSER funding. But she has also made community partnership a central part of the District's long-term strategy.

That is reflected in The Destination District, CCSD's new five-year strategic plan. The District engaged approximately 50,000 people in developing the plan, including students, families, educators, business leaders, and other community members.

For Ebert, that process was about more than gathering feedback. "Community engagement and philanthropy [are] much more than simply asking people to support our schools," she says. "It is about building authentic, long-term relationships and creating opportunities for the community to be part of the work."

That distinction is important. When a District develops its priorities and then goes looking for someone to fund them, the relationship often begins with a transaction. When the community has been involved in understanding the challenges, shaping the vision, and identifying opportunities, potential partners have a much different starting point. They already understand the "why."



Relationships take time—and sometimes their value is revealed years later

Richard Carranza learned the value of nurturing relationships over the course of his career as a superintendent.

During his tenure leading the San Francisco Unified School District, Carranza worked intentionally to build relationships with philanthropic and business leaders. Funders were invited into conversations about the District's Vision 2020 work, and quarterly meetings created an ongoing opportunity for partners to understand the District's priorities and progress.

One of those relationships was with Marc Benioff, founder of Salesforce. This relationship became particularly meaningful after Carranza left San Francisco to lead the Houston Independent School District...and disaster struck. Hurricane Harvey hit Houston.

Because Carranza had already established relationships with philanthropic and business leaders, he did not have to start from ground zero in the middle of a crisis. There were people who already knew him, had bought into his vision, understood his leadership, and trusted that he would be accountable for the resources they provided.

Within hours of the disaster, Benioff committed \$1 million to support Houston students and families.

For Carranza, the experience reinforced something he had already learned about philanthropy: relationships built during good times can become foundational during difficult ones. "You have to build those relationships before you need them," is the lesson he takes from that experience.



That is also why Carranza prefers to think about fundraising as seeking support, rather than simply seeking money. Support can take many forms. It can be a financial investment, but it can also be expertise, internships, mentoring, volunteers, advocacy, relationships, or access to resources. When the conversation starts with money, those possibilities can easily be missed.

Find the *intersection*

Ebert has seen the same principle play out in CCSD's partnerships. She shared the example of Toyota Financial Services, where an initial conversation about STEM opportunities eventually expanded into a much broader partnership. Conversations with District leaders and Toyota executives helped identify opportunities around STEM labs, field trips, guest speakers, and other student and family support.

According to Ebert, the relationship ultimately developed into a \$6 million, three-year investment focused on school feeder alignments.

The important part of the story isn't the dollar amount. It is what happened before the commitment. The District listened. Toyota listened. The conversation continued until they found an opportunity that made sense for both sides.

Another example involved the Las Vegas Raiders. After reviewing CCSD's strategic plan, the Raiders identified areas where they could contribute to District priorities, including school-zone safety and early childhood literacy. Again, the partnership developed because the organization understood what the District was trying to accomplish and could see where its own resources and interests could align.

This is where relationship-driven fundraising becomes practical.

At the Sanford Institute of Philanthropy, we teach Cause Selling as a relationship-based approach to fundraising. The work begins with understanding the person or organization across the table: what they care about, what they are trying to accomplish, and where their interests intersect with the organization's mission.

The District's job is not to force every potential partner into the same fundraising opportunity. It is to understand the intersection between the District's needs and partner interests.

For K-12 leaders, the same principle applies.

- ✔ A business leader may be interested in workforce development.
- ✔ A foundation may be focused on literacy.
- ✔ A healthcare organization may care about student wellness.
- ✔ A technology company may want to develop the future workforce.
- ✔ A community foundation may be interested in neighborhood-level outcomes.

Be specific about the problem you are trying to solve

That does not mean Districts should be vague about their needs. Quite the opposite.

Ebert described a partnership with the College Football Playoff Foundation as an example. Rather than simply asking the foundation to support education, CCSD identified a specific need: funding for a literacy initiative designed to provide additional support to students struggling with dyslexia. Utilizing combined central and philanthropic funds, the District deployed a Tier III multisensory, adaptive, web-based intervention to support students Districtwide with persistent reading difficulties. The foundation responded. “We couldn’t have launched this new K–12 Districtwide program without them,” Ebert says.

Her experience has reinforced the value of being clear about what the District needs and what the investment will accomplish. “When we are specific about our needs, build relationships, and recognize partnerships, we can get so much more done for kids, together.”

Carranza experienced a similar lesson throughout his career.

He recalls working with Title I schools and learning that the language used to approach potential partners mattered. Asking someone for “money” can make the interaction feel like a transaction. Asking for their “support” opens a broader conversation about what that support might look like.



That mindset also changed how his organizations approached philanthropy internally. Carranza established a cabinet-level position focused specifically on philanthropic engagement. The role helped connect the distinct parts of the organization and provided a consistent point of contact for philanthropic partners.

It was not simply another fundraising position. It was an organizational commitment to relationships.

The message must *meet the audience*

Another lesson Carranza brings to this conversation is the importance of understanding the audience. A Superintendent may talk about the same District priority with a parent advisory group, a foundation president, a chamber of commerce, or a corporate executive. The underlying facts do not change. The conversation does.

Carranza remembers speaking to an English-language learner advisory group and, separately, to business leaders. The issues were connected, but the way he communicated the opportunity needed to reflect what mattered to each audience.

That is a skill we emphasize in our work at Sanford Institute of Philanthropy.

Effective fundraising is not about developing one perfect pitch and delivering it to everyone. It is about knowing your audience well enough to communicate honestly about the same opportunity in a way that is relevant to them.

That is particularly important for schools.

- ✓ The story that resonates with a parent may not be the story that resonates with a business leader.
- ✓ A foundation may want to understand outcomes and scalability.
- ✓ An employer may want to know how students will be prepared for the workforce.

The responsibility of the fundraiser or District leader is to understand those perspectives without changing the underlying facts or overstating the opportunity.



Philanthropy can accelerate *what is possible*

There is another point on which we strongly agree: philanthropy should not be expected to replace public funding.

Ebert is direct about this: “Philanthropy plays a vital role in driving innovation in education, but we should never use it to replace traditional funding.”

That distinction matters. Schools need adequate public investment to fulfill their fundamental responsibilities. Philanthropy should not become a substitute for that obligation.

But philanthropy can do something else:

- ✓ It can create room to innovate.
- ✓ It can bring new expertise into schools.
- ✓ It can help Districts establish career pathways and connect students with employers.
- ✓ It can support pilot programs such as project-based learning, content mastery, or student ownership over their learning.
- ✓ It can provide resources for ideas that might otherwise take much longer to get off the ground.
- ✓ And it can bring people who are not traditionally part of the education system into conversation about what students need.

Carranza has seen this throughout his career. He believes one of the strongest arguments for philanthropic engagement in education is the opportunity it creates for students, not only academically, but economically, and within the broader community.

That means a philanthropic partnership should not end when the check arrives. The District must be prepared to execute, measure, communicate, and steward the investment.

Trust and relationships create opportunities. Accountability sustains it.

What does this mean for a superintendent?

For leaders who are already managing budgets, staffing, academic performance, facilities, safety, and countless other responsibilities, adding “fundraiser” to the job description may feel unrealistic.

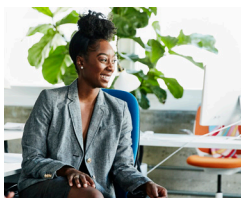
It shouldn't. A superintendent does not need to become a professional fundraiser. But the superintendent does need to help create an environment where relationships with the community are valued and supported.



That can mean making philanthropy part of **strategic planning** rather than an **afterthought**.



It can mean bringing potential partners into **conversations early**.



It can mean giving development staff **access to senior leadership**.



It can mean creating a **dedicated role for philanthropic engagement** when the District is large enough to support one.



It can mean asking principals and educators to help **tell authentic stories about student impact**.



And it means making sure partners can be involved in creating their own **workforce pipeline**.



Most importantly, it means recognizing that **community engagement** is not something that happens only when a District needs money. It is part of **leadership**.

A different way forward

There is no single fundraising strategy that will solve the financial challenges facing K–12 education. But there is an opportunity for Districts to rethink how they approach the community around them.

The examples we have shared—from CCSD’s Destination District planning process to Carranza’s experiences in San Francisco and Houston—point toward the same conclusions.



Start earlier.



Listen more.



Be clear about where you are going.



Understand what your partners care about.



Invite them into the work.



Be specific about the opportunities.



And then do what you said you would do.



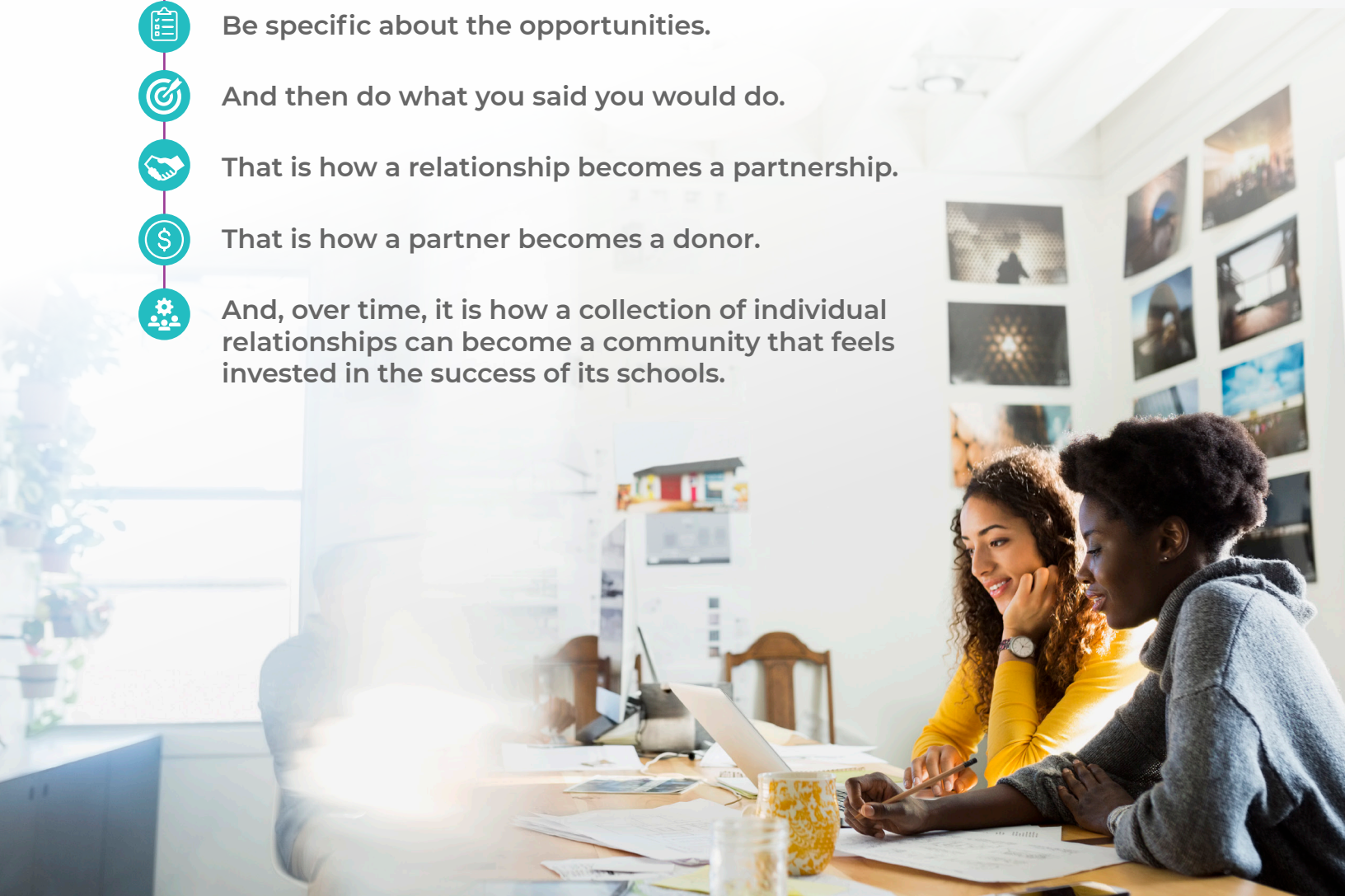
That is how a relationship becomes a partnership.



That is how a partner becomes a donor.



And, over time, it is how a collection of individual relationships can become a community that feels invested in the success of its schools.



Jhone Ebert puts it this way: “The future is not simply about financial contributions. It is about bringing together the expertise, resources, relationships, and creativity of an entire community to solve challenges and create opportunities for students.”

That is the opportunity we see for K–12 education.

At the Sanford Institute of Philanthropy, we are proud to work alongside leaders like Ebert and Carranza and to learn from the experiences of school Districts and education leaders across the country.

Our role is not to tell school leaders what they should ask their communities to fund. It is to help them develop relationship-building skills, fundraising practices, leadership capacity, and culture needed to engage their communities more effectively. The current funding environment makes that work more important, not less.

School Districts should not have to navigate these challenges alone.

- ✓ There are businesses willing to help.
- ✓ There are foundations looking for meaningful opportunities.
- ✓ There are nonprofits with expertise to share.
- ✓ There are families and community members who want to be part of the solution.
- ✓ And there are philanthropic partners who want to invest in the future of students..



The opportunity is to bring those people together around something larger than a fundraising campaign.



The future of K–12 philanthropy is not simply about raising more money. It is about building a community that is willing to invest, in every sense of the word, in the future of its students.