Three Foundations and the Pittsburgh Public Schools

“I would discourage any parent of Pittsburgh to permit his or her child to attend a board meeting for fear of the profanity and disrespect for authority modeled there. A child attending a board meeting might be led to believe that intimidation tactics, temper tantrums that culminate in storming out of rooms and pounding tables, and street-wise name-calling are avenues for solving problems and negotiating settlements.”

—Rebecca Hamilton, in a letter resigning her position as head of Pittsburgh’s Literacy Plus teacher training program

Part A

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA, MAY 2002

William Trueheart, president and chief executive officer of the Pittsburgh Foundation, sat in attendance at the in Committee Room of the historic Pittsburgh Board of Education Administration Building as beloved local philanthropist Elsie Hillman rose to address the school board. Though married to the city’s wealthiest citizen, billionaire industrialist Henry Hillman, Elsie Hillman drove herself around town and did her own shopping at her neighborhood grocery. Over many years Hillman had given not just huge amounts of cash, but time and energy to the city.

Trueheart listened as Hillman spoke of the need for the nine school board members to put aside their differences for the good of the community. She pleaded with the board to raise the level of civility, to look beyond their own interests, and to do what was right for the children of Pittsburgh. The board listened respectfully. When Hillman took her seat, the board members immediately went right back to bickering.

Trueheart thought: They listened to Elsie, but they didn’t hear her.

After the meeting adjourned, Trueheart walked down the steps of the building and into the cool night air. The board had conducted yet another contentious, bitter meeting during which very little was accomplished. For Trueheart, the treatment of Elsie Hillman had represented a clarifying moment. He realized that something would have to be done about the board’s behavior.

A few days later, Susan Brownlee, executive director of the Grable Foundation, and Maxwell King, president of the Heinz Endowments, were attending another meeting, of local civic leaders. The subject of the school board came up, as it frequently did. The feeling in the room was one of overwhelming helplessness in the face of the board’s dysfunction.

Leaving the meeting, Brownlee said to King, “We have to do something, Max.”

King nodded. He too was fed up with the way the board was acting. The problem wasn’t just the board members’ constant boorish behavior. Their micromanaging approach to the district’s affairs was out of control. They spend hours debating trivial issues such as which brand of furnace to purchase for a particular school. Meanwhile, student achievement went unaddressed. “Talking to them doesn’t accomplish anything,” King said. “The time has come for action.”

The Grable Foundation, the Heinz Endowments, and the Pittsburgh Foundation had awarded the Pittsburgh public schools grants totaling more than $11 million over the preceding five years. The foundations’ money had supported conventional initiatives such as after-school programs, summer schools, technology programs, arts camps, and math instruction programs. Just the year before, the three foundations had committed more than $3 million to a major teacher-training program called Literacy Plus.

The rift on the school board was in large part a product of how Pennsylvania law enabled Pittsburgh’s race, gender, and class demographics to play out in the schools. By law, each Pittsburgh school board member represented one of nine geographic areas within the city. Because board elections tended to draw low turnouts, small groups of highly motivated voters often determined the outcome of elections. Consequently the board had a preponderance of members who strove to represent the interests of a minority of citizens within a district, regardless of the interests of the district as a whole, or indeed of the city as a whole.

Brownlee and King wondered if the time had come for the major independent funders of the public schools to try to influence the political system that had produced the perennially ineffective, even counterproductive school board.

“I’ll call Bill Trueheart tomorrow,” Brownlee said.

“Let’s get together and talk this over,” said King. “We’ll want to be sure of what we’re doing before we commit to anything.”

Brownlee and King promised to stay in close touch over the coming weeks as they planned a course of action.

THREE PITTSBURGH FOUNDATIONS

The Grable Foundation
An executive of the Aluminum Company of America (later Alcoa), Errett M. Grable purchased the Wooster Rubber Company in 1927. Marketing a line of brightly colored plastic kitchenware items, the company evolved into the Rubbermaid Corporation, a major housewares manufacturer.

Minnie K. Grable, Errett Grable’s, founded the Grable Foundation in 1976 with a mission to “help children and youth to become independent, caring, contributing members of society by supporting programs critical to a child’s successful development” by focusing on “improving educational opportunities so that children can achieve their potential; supporting community efforts that create an environment in which children can succeed; [and] strengthening families so

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2 Interview with Susan Brownlee, March 2007.
they can serve as the core support of children and society.”3 In 2002 the Grable Foundation awarded grants totaling $9.0 million on assets of $200.8 million.4

**Grable Foundation Leadership**

A 1964 graduate of Wellesley College, Susan Brownlee earned a master’s from New York University in 1967 before teaching history in high schools in Connecticut and Pittsburgh. After earning an MBA from the University of Pittsburgh and serving as an administrator in school reform organizations, Brownlee was named executive director of the Grable Foundation in 1998.

**The Heinz Endowments**

Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, John Henry Heinz (1844-1919) was the founder and namesake of the famous company that marketed horseradish sauce, pickles, vinegar, and tomato ketchup among other products. His son, Howard Heinz (1877-1941), rose to become president of the J.H. Heinz Company, as well as an officer of the Mellon Bank, the Pennsylvania Railroad, and numerous other industrial and financial concerns. In addition to his corporate interests, Heinz served on the boards of various philanthropic and nonprofit organizations, including the Community Fund and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Howard Heinz’s sister-in-law, Vira Ingham Heinz (1888-1983), worked to support local cultural institutions such as the Pittsburgh Symphony Society, the Pittsburgh Opera, and the Civic Light Opera. Both Howard Heinz and Vira I. Heinz provided in their wills for the establishment of philanthropic foundations.

Since 1986 the Howard Heinz Endowment and the Vira I. Heinz Endowment have been jointly operated as the Heinz Endowments. The mission of the Heinz Endowments is to “help [the Pittsburgh] region thrive as a whole community—economically, ecologically, educationally, and culturally—while advancing the state of knowledge and practice in the fields in which [the Endowments work].”5 As of 2007, the Heinz Endowments operate programs in five fields: arts and culture, children, youth and families, innovation economy, education, and the environment. In 2002 the Heinz Endowments approved grants totaling $70.3 million on assets of $1.2 billion.6

**Heinz Endowments Leadership**

A 1967 graduate of Harvard University, Maxwell King pursued a career in journalism, writing for the Louisville *Journal-Courier & Times* and working at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, where he was named editor and vice president in 1990. In 1999 he was named president of the Heinz Endowments.

**The Pittsburgh Foundation**

Currently the seventeenth largest community foundation in the country, the Pittsburgh Foundation was established in 1945 by officials of the Union Trust Company (a bank) and the Mellon Bank to provide individuals, organizations, and corporations from the Pittsburgh area an avenue for giving. During its early years, the Pittsburgh Foundation received funding for administrative costs from the Howard Heinz Endowment. The Pittsburgh Foundation shared office space with the Heinz Endowments until 1993.

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The Pittsburgh Foundation works to “improve the quality of life in the Pittsburgh region by evaluating and addressing community issues, promoting responsible philanthropy, and connecting donors to the critical needs of the community.” The Pittsburgh Foundation channels unrestricted donations into five grantmaking areas—achieving educational excellence and equity; fostering economic development; supporting families, children, and youth; reducing disparities in health outcomes; and advancing the arts—as well as a “responsiveness fund” for projects that fall outside the five areas of concentration. In 2002 the Pittsburgh Foundation awarded grants totaling $27.0 million on assets of $467.4 million.

Pittsburgh Foundation Leadership

A graduate of the University of Connecticut, William Trueheart earned a master’s in public administration and a doctorate in education from Harvard University. After serving in administrative positions at UConn and Harvard, Trueheart was named president of Bryant College in Rhode Island, becoming the first African American to lead a four-year private college in New England. He served as president of the nonprofit Reading Is Fundamental, Inc., before joining the Pittsburgh Foundation as its president and chief executive officer.

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

Located at the confluence of the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers, which join to form the Ohio River, Pittsburgh was for decades the nexus of the nation’s steel industry. In the late 1970s, with the implosion of the American steel industry and the closure of Pittsburgh’s major mills and factories, the city endured economic devastation. While the population of the region as a whole declined somewhat—in 1960, the Pittsburgh metropolitan area held 2.7 million people, while in 2000 it held 2.4 million—the city proper suffered the majority of the population drain. Between 1960 and 2000, as families abandoned the city for the suburbs, the city’s population fell from 604,000 to 335,000.

At the end of the twentieth century, many of Pittsburgh’s 90 officially designated neighborhoods retained their historic distinctiveness. Italian-Americans populated the Bloomfield neighborhood their great-grandparents had settled in, German-Americans lived in Allegheny East, and Polish-Americans lived in Polish Hill. Recent immigrants from Eastern European had gathered in Mount Washington. Larimer and Garfield were populated mostly by African-American families. University students and yuppies lived in gentrified Shadyside and in the renovated Victorian houses of Squirrel Hill. It wasn’t unusual for multiple generations to live within walking distance of one another, and many residents of Pittsburgh felt greater loyalty to their neighborhoods than to the city.

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The Pittsburgh Public Schools
Opening its first public school in 1834, Pittsburgh elected its first board of education a year later. Starting in 1911, the 15-member school board was appointed by a panel of judges from the Court of Common Pleas. Over time, the appointed school board came to be perceived as out of touch with and unresponsive to the public, and in 1976 a citizens group succeeded in changing the law and instituting an elected school board.

The post-1976 school board consisted of nine members, all of whom were elected by district (i.e., there were no at-large members nor any appointees). Board elections were held in November in odd-numbered years (1979, 1981, etc.); members served four-year, unpaid terms, their seats coming up for election on a staggered schedule. Under Pennsylvania state law, the school board wielded unusual power, including authority over budget and personnel decisions—authority typically granted, in other states, to school superintendents. The board even set property-tax rates to fund the school system. The mayor’s office, for its part, had no legal authority over the school system or the school board.

Pittsburgh had never been as strong a magnet for mid-century African-American immigration as some other northern cities, such as Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland, had been. In 2000, even after the closing of the steel mills and the desegregation of the public schools had induced many white families to abandon Pittsburgh, whites still made up 67.6 percent of the city’s population; the remainder was divided among African-Americans, at 27.1 percent; Asians, at 2.7 percent; and Hispanics (of any race), at 1.3 percent. The city had never elected a black mayor. Yet because the city’s white population was disproportionately elderly, and because many white families sent their children to private schools, African-American children made up about 55.4 percent of public school enrollment.

During the 1980s and 1990s, a number of issues bedeviled Pittsburgh’s school system. Even as the tax base shrank, many families, both black and white, remained strongly attached to their neighborhood schools and were reluctant to see them closed. Because all school board members were elected by district, the board found it politically difficult to shut down any schools. In 2001, with a student population that had dipped below 40,000, the system operated 97 schools with capacity for 51,000 students.

Partially due to the cost of operating underenrolled schools, the city had one of the highest per-pupil funding rates in the state of Pennsylvania. Though Pittsburgh’s student population decreased by more than 5 percent over the period 1997-2001, the school district’s budget increased by 24 percent, to $486 million. The 2001 budget ran a $36.5 million deficit.

In terms of student achievement, Pittsburgh’s schools showed mixed results. On standardized tests of both reading and math, the city’s elementary and middle school students on average scored better than did students from similar urban districts elsewhere in Pennsylvania. Nevertheless, scores were below the state average and failed to meet state standards of proficiency, and one fourth of Pittsburgh’s entering high school students failed to graduate. African-Americans performed more poorly on standardized tests and dropped out at higher rates than did their white counterparts. Within the system, performance varied widely from school to school, with predominantly black schools faring worse than predominantly white schools.
The resegregation of the public schools was a cause of concern. In the 1980s, to stave off a potential court order, Pittsburgh had voluntarily enacted a desegregation policy that included a busing program and the establishment of magnet schools. But following a series of Supreme Court cases in the 1990s that weakened the threat of court-mandated desegregation, the old pattern of segregation by race began to reassert itself, in Pittsburgh as well as in many other cities across the country. By 1999, one fourth of Pittsburgh’s African-American students were attending schools that were at least 90 percent black; only 3.3 percent of African-American students attended schools that were at least 75 percent white.\(^\text{17}\)

Another area of concern was the growing “digital divide”—the gap between students with access to digital technologies such as computers and the Internet and those without. A May 2001 article in *Education Week* magazine singled out Pittsburgh as a prime example of a city that had failed to address the digital divide, describing public high school students in poor neighborhoods as typing assignments on outdated Tandy 1000 computers while kids in nearby private high schools created newsletters on expensive laptops.\(^\text{18}\)

Underenrollment, perennial budget deficits, overall low student achievement, the racial achievement gap, racially segregated neighborhoods that were producing de facto segregation in the schools, the digital divide—these were the issues the Pittsburgh school board faced as the city entered the new millennium.

### A Crisis of Leadership in the Pittsburgh Public Schools

#### Background

Contentiousness on the Pittsburgh board of education dated back to the early 1990s, when shouting and name calling became regular features of board meetings. On at least one occasion a fistfight broke out. During the decade of the 1990s, three school superintendents left the system, frustrated by the position’s lack of autonomy and by the constant incivility among board members. A fourth, interim Superintendent Helen Faison, agreed to take the job only after the board members signed a 15-point good-behavior pledge.\(^\text{19}\)

The pledge, while no doubt making life easier for Faison during her tenure, led some board members to believe that they wanted a similarly assertive, forceful superintendent who could help keep the peace. The pledge also may have lulled candidates for the job into believing that the board was a functional, if sometimes quarrelsome, entity. In any case, the superintendent signed to a five-year contract by the board in February 2000 to replace Faison was indeed assertive and forceful, and he arrived in Pittsburgh determined to make some necessary changes in the schools.

#### John Thompson

Schools Superintendent John Thompson came to Pittsburgh after having served as the superintendent of the Tulsa, Oklahoma, school system for six years. Before leading the Tulsa schools, he worked in systems in Kentucky and North Carolina. Thompson’s hiring was opposed by a minority faction within the school board who would have preferred to work someone with ties to the Pittsburgh area.

A six-foot five-inch African-American man who shaved his head and wore impeccably tailored suits and polished wingtips, Thompson was an instantly polarizing figure. He believed strongly in the importance of closing the digital divide by introducing up-to-date technology into

\(^\text{17}\) Smolkin, op. cit.


\(^\text{19}\) Maxwell and Oliphant, op. cit., p. 15.
the schools—a priority not shared by every member of the school board. With an annual salary of $165,000 a year, Thompson was the highest-paid school superintendent in Pennsylvania, though Pittsburgh’s school system was only a third the size of Philadelphia’s. While conceding that Thompson could be charming at times, his critics characterized him as overbearing, arrogant, and impolitic.

The faction that had opposed the hiring of Thompson was led by a white long-time school board member named Jean Fink.

Jean Fink

Fink had been among the leaders in the successful effort to shift Pittsburgh to an elected board of education in 1976, and she had been a member of the first elected board. Except for a four-year hiatus in the 1990s, Fink had been a member of the school board since. During the 1980s, she had opposed Pittsburgh’s busing program on the ground that students should be permitted to attend the schools closest to their homes. If desegregation were to occur, Fink had argued, it should not come at the expense of neighborhood schools. A frank, plainspoken character, Fink had deep roots in working-class, gritty Pittsburgh. Her husband, two of her sons, and two of her sons-in-law all worked for the public schools, and she considered herself a custodian of the city’s traditions and values.

A Plan to Close 11 Schools

Superintendent Thompson’s first order of business was to try to balance the budget. In the fall of 2000, Thompson proposed a plan to close 18 underenrolled schools and raise property taxes by 23 percent. The plan met with strident opposition from much of the public, and seven school board members told Thompson that they could not support his budget.

In December, while Thompson prepared a revised budget proposal, the board took its annual vote to elect officers. A coalition consisting of Alex Matthews, Mark Brentley, Randall Taylor, Evelyn Neiser, and William Isler succeeded in reelecting Matthews as school board president, defeating an attempt by Jean Fink, Darlene Harris, Jean Wood, and Margaret Schmidt to have Wood elected president. Though all members of the school board were Democrats (as were Pittsburgh’s mayor and the majority of the city council), the 5-4 vote broke along well-established racial/ideological lines. The winning coalition included all three African-Americans on the board (Matthews, Brentley, and Taylor) and leaned liberal politically, while the losing coalition was all white and conservative.

Soon after Matthews’s reelection as board president, Thompson submitted a revised budget, this time calling for the closure of 11 schools over two years and a hike in property taxes of 20 percent. The school board voted, by the established 5-4 split, to approve the school closings and the tax increase. The minority was incensed. After the budget passed, Fink stated, “I still don’t understand what the point was, other than to destroy the top-achieving schools we should be emulating. Merry Christmas.”

Thompson commented, “My conscience is clear. I know we're hurting some children temporarily, but I believe this will prevent us from hurting more children in the long term.”

Fink vowed that she would not allow the closings to stand.

The Literacy Plus Program

In early 2001, concerned by the reading performance of Pittsburgh elementary schoolchildren, staff from the Heinz Endowments and the Grable Foundation collaborated with the district

21 Associated Press, op. cit.
administration to develop an intensive reading-promotion program. Superintendent Thompson hired a full-time director of elementary school reading instruction and redirected resources into teacher training and curriculum development. A widely admired and respected 32-year veteran of the Pittsburgh schools, Rebecca Hamilton led the effort to develop the teacher training program, designated Literacy Plus. The Literacy Plus program called for the hiring of a team of coaches to train 1,600 elementary school teachers in reading-instruction techniques. The school board voted unanimously to devote more than $12 million to Literacy Plus, with Hamilton at the helm.

Impressed by Thompson’s and the board’s commitment, the Heinz Endowments and the Grable Foundation awarded grants in support of Literacy Plus totaling $2 million and $1.45 million respectively. The Pittsburgh Foundation committed $100,000 to the program.

As a condition of their support for Literacy Plus, the foundations stated that a joint committee must be formed to provide reports on financial information as well as on performance indicators such as student achievement, teacher participation and training, and parent involvement. The committee would also monitor program management, forge connections with preschools, and develop an external evaluation plan. In addition to these conventional oversight measures, the foundations attached an additional condition to the grants. Concerned by the school board’s long history of dysfunction, the foundations stipulated that the Literacy Plus program must demonstrate “continuity of leadership” in order to receive support.

**Further Developments**

In June, a group of parents filed a class-action lawsuit against the school system, claiming that the school board had failed to hold a public hearing 90 days before voting to close a school, as required by law. Thompson admitted that the board “broke the law” but argued that the spirit of the law had been upheld. He said he hoped the courts would not halt the closings.

A couple of weeks later, Thompson asked the school board to approve the purchase of a $31,000 Lincoln Towne Car to replace the five-year-old car the previous superintendent had used. Thompson’s two most vocal opponents, Jean Fink and Darlene Harris, objected to the purchase, which Thompson withdrew. Undaunted, Thompson’s allies on the board proposed the purchase of 22 laptop computers, at a cost of $72,158, for use by the board and by district administrators. The laptops were to replace computers that were only a year old. The measure passed over the objections of Fink and her allies.

In July, while still fighting the class-action lawsuit over the failure to provide 90-day public notice, the board held a public meeting to discuss the closings. After the meeting, the board received a special waiver from the state department of education regarding the timing of a proposed revote on the school-closings issue; the waiver allowed the board to hold the revote in August (i.e., less than 90 days after the July public meeting), so that the closings could occur before the start of the new school year. On August 16, the board voted to close seven underenrolled schools, effective immediately.

Two months later, in October, the board voted to close the remaining four schools that had previously been slated for closure. At that same meeting, the board hired, at Thompson’s urging, a technology consulting company, for 75 days at cost of up to $180,000, to assess the district’s technology needs. The lead consultant was a former colleague of Thompson’s from Tulsa.

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23 Maxwell and Oliphant, op. cit., p. 19.
24 Maxwell and Oliphant, op. cit., p. 19.
A New Alignment in the School Board

In November 2001, with the support of Mayor Tom Murphy, City Councilman Gene Ricciardi, and the Allegheny County Democratic Party leadership, two new closings foes, Theresa Colaizzi and Floyd “Skip” McCrea, won election to the Pittsburgh board of education, replacing Neiser and Schmidt. Colaizzi and McCrea joined Fink, Harris, and Wood to form a five-member board majority. The pro-closings board minority consisted of Matthews, Brentley, Taylor, and Isler.

A week later, Thompson asked the school board to spend another $164,000 on technology consultants. The new board turned him down.

In early December, the school board’s anti-closings majority elected Jean Fink as president. Every member of the former majority abstained from the vote. Fulfilling her vow of a year before, Fink immediately announced that the new majority intended to reopen three of the seven elementary schools that had already closed and prevent the closing of two of the four schools slated for closure in 2002.

At a fractious meeting a week later, the minority board members argued that Fink’s proposal would heighten racial tension, because all the schools she wanted to save were located in white neighborhoods, whereas the ones she was willing to see closed were in black neighborhoods. Mark Brentley was especially emphatic in his denunciation of the plan. In response to Brentley’s contention that her proposal unfairly favored white neighborhoods, Fink stated, “I fought for my people, but you didn’t fight for yours.” Fink’s inflammatory remark served only to widen the rift on the board. (Fink later contended that “my people” referred to her constituents both black and white, and not just to white people.)

At the next meeting the school board voted, 5-4, to pass a $485.7 million budget, $3.3 million less than the amount Thompson had requested. Made available to Thompson and the minority board faction only on the evening of the vote, the hastily passed budget included a list of ill-considered cuts in various programs. Money for such seemingly necessary activities as mailing out brochures and other information, facilitating parent councils, and administering and scoring standardized tests appeared nowhere in the budget. When asked to explain the cuts, Fink and her allies spoke of eliminating “fat” but were unable to justify specifics.

Some of the cutbacks seemed aimed directly at Thompson. The salaries of the newly hired chief of human resources and chief of operations, both of whom reported to Thompson, were reduced. Funds to improve school technology, a pet concern of Thompson, were trimmed by almost $1.2 million. In contrast to these cuts, a new “reserve fund,” of $1 million, was allocated for school board services. When asked what the $1 million was for, Colaizzi replied, “Anything we want.”

The cuts in funding for standardized testing were particularly controversial. Fink’s critics pointed out that, because the cuts would prevent schools from documenting student performance, the system would lose $4 million in local grants and $5 million from the National Science Foundation.

An editorial in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette called the school board’s actions “shocking, divisive and inexcusable.” The editorial continued: “Years of toil to build harmonious relations,
a solid funding base and a respected academic program will be lost in a flash if the board is not careful. And the children of Pittsburgh will pay the price.”

Pittsburgh Mayor Tom Murphy, while neglecting to mention that he’d been instrumental in engineering the realignment of the board, pleaded that he’d tried and failed to act as peacemaker between the factions. Comparing board members to squabbling adolescents—a comparison many would make over the coming months—Murphy remarked, “It doesn’t help the city or the board if they look like a group of high schoolers arguing about where to get a hamburger.” City Councilman Bob O’Connor, who had threatened previous incarnations of the board that he would support changes in the structure of the board if it couldn’t get its act together, also commented on the counterproductive nature of the board’s infighting.

The new year arrived and tensions continued unabated, as Fink complained publicly that Thompson and other administration staff deliberately and habitually withheld information requested by the board. Elsie Hillman, a longtime Pennsylvania Republican Party leader and a board member of the Hillman and Henry L. Hillman foundations, joined Mayor Murphy in calling for Thompson and members of the school board to attend a day-long retreat facilitated by a respected former state legislator, Ron Cowell. Cowell headed up the Education Policy and Leadership Center (EPLC), which received funding from the Heinz Endowments and the Grable and Pittsburgh foundations. All the invitees except Mark Brentley attended the retreat. A series of follow-up workshops, closed to the public, was agreed to.

In late January, the board majority agreed to consider reinstating much of the funding that had been cut from Thompson’s proposed $489 million budget. Two weeks later, Fink was caught up in a mini-scandal, as it emerged that she had asked the district’s human resources department to provide her with a list of applicants for a job her husband was seeking. Thompson took the opportunity to pay Fink back for the Lincoln Towne Car incident by scolding her in the press. For her part, Fink downplayed the indiscretion, stating, “I was just nebby-nosing. . . . If I started a fuss, I’m sorry. It was a very innocent question.”

The bickering continued, as Fink accused members of the board of “going out of their way to try to antagonize and sabotage” her, and Thompson lamented that the January retreat had failed to produce anything “constructive and positive.”

Cowell’s report of the retreat excoriated both Thompson and the board:

This is a board that is prone to operate an annual half-billion dollar enterprise based upon anecdote and emotion, rather than on facts and best-practice. . . . It is a board that has behaved sometimes in the most undignified manner. . . . This is a board comprised of members who think largely in terms of their election district rather than the school district as a whole and have great trouble reconciling these different interests. . . . The superintendent . . . needs to develop a better appreciation for the culture of Pittsburgh, a culture that values a sense of neighborhood as an asset rather than a liability, even as we promote the interests of the larger community or school district.

34 Mickens, op. cit.
Cowell went on to suggest some practical measures the board could take, including adopting a code of conduct, developing a governance and management compact, establishing criteria for holding board members accountable, and reaching agreement on the budget.

Meanwhile, Fink announced that she would be putting off, for the time being, the budget reinstatements she’d agreed to consider only a few weeks before. Instead the board would conduct an audit of district spending—an action obviously aimed at Thompson and the administration. Predictably, these decisions were met with consternation by Fink’s opponents.

Nevertheless, two months later the board managed to reach agreement on a compromise budget that restored much of Thompson’s proposed budget but preserved the $1 million board reserve fund. The three schools that Fink had vowed to save would indeed reopen, at a cost of over $1.7 million. But there was still a problem. The compromise budget, which superseded the budget passed the previous December, included the transfer of about $3.5 million from various departments within the district. State law required a six-person majority to pass any revised budget that included interdepartmental transfers. The existence of two competing transfer plans—one devised by district administrators working for Thompson and supported by the board minority, and one devised by Fink’s majority—ensured that neither could pass with a six-person majority. Patience was wearing thin all around. “I’m fed up with the antagonistic feelings,” Thompson said, and Fink confessed, “I’ve talked enough about this damn budget to last me the rest of my life.”

“One Thing. Just One Thing”

Days and weeks went by, and the board, unable to pass a new budget, was paralyzed. The $180,000 technology consultant, hired at Thompson’s urging by the previous board, came, issued a recommendation for an upgrade the district couldn’t afford, and left. Because the consultant hadn’t provided the administration with a useful plan, the district used the previous year’s proposal in applying for the next year’s federal technology funds. “Because of the open rift between the superintendent and the school board majority, it’s as if the district stacked $180,000 in crisp bills on a windowsill, to be blown into oblivion,” the Post-Gazette complained.

The Literacy Plus program, which the board had unanimously supported the year before, was languishing due to the inability of the board to move forward. The Literacy Plus joint oversight committee had met only once, data collection was inconsistent, training programs were nonexistent, connections between elementary schools and preschools were never established, and the evaluation plan was never executed. With the exception of “stable leadership”—Literacy Plus was still headed by Hamilton—none of the conditions the foundations had set for the program had been met.

When it appeared likely that the school board might manage to agree on something—the hiring of 12 remedial high school math teachers—two hundred citizens attended a public meeting and chanted, “One thing. Just one thing.” But it was not to be. The meeting devolved into an argument surrounding Fink’s school reopenings proposal, and nothing was agreed to.

Using a clause in state law that allowed schools superintendents unilaterally to transfer funds from a given category in one department to the same category in another department, Thompson circumvented the board stalemate and filled in critical gaps in the budget. As a result of this maneuvering, the district would be able to conduct standardized tests and thereby retain

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millions of dollars in local and federal funding. Though disaster was averted, Thompson was unhappy with having to resort to such budgetary shenanigans, saying:

> We can’t sit here and allow the district to be held hostage. We did what we had to do to keep the district afloat. But we’ve just moved the crisis from now to later this year. It’s not the way to do business in a large corporation. We’re becoming like Enron.39

When the question of hiring remedial math teachers came up again, it was defeated a second time. Though Fink had helped craft the hiring proposal, in the end she voted against it, stating that the proposal represented a roundabout attempt on the part of the board minority to introduce a new math curriculum of which she and her allies didn’t approve. Fink’s actions infuriated observers and the board minority. Former board president Matthews denounced Fink for wasting everyone’s time. “You owe this community an apology because you lied,” Matthews told her. “You’re a liar. You’re an outright liar, a pathological liar.”40

Public disgust with the behavior of the board was mounting. The Post-Gazette opined:

> This . . . is a good urban school system, the envy of most big cities (and not-so big cities). Its only troubles come from the top. We should give Fink, Thompson and the other members of the board three months to get their act together—and move to replace them if they cannot. The stakes are too high and the impediments too petty to demand anything less.41

In May 2002, the Heinz Endowments awarded a $200,000 grant42 to the nonprofit Pittsburgh Council on Public Education (PCPE) to conduct an examination of whether the city would be best served by an elected school board, an appointed board, or a board composed of some combination of the two. PCPE’s first project would be to issue a report card on the superintendent and each school board member. The report cards were to be released later in the year and on a bimonthly basis thereafter.

Several days after Heinz announced its initiative, City Council President Gene Ricciardi promised that, if the school board’s behavior didn’t improve, he would urge the council to petition the state legislature to change the laws governing the school system. Ricciardi threatened to have the mayor appoint the school board. Alternatively, he said, the school board might remain elected, but the mayor would control the budget; or the school board might remain elected, but with four at-large members and five district-based members.

Two days later, the board came together long enough to agree to hire the 12 remedial math teachers.

The Crisis Comes to a Head
The board’s fragile détente was short-lived. In early June, it was revealed that Superintendent Thompson had used a district-issued debit card to purchase $1,701 worth of clothing. Though Thompson had reimbursed the district before the purchase came to light, nevertheless the transaction looked bad. The administration looked worse when it was revealed that Thompson’s second in command, Deputy Superintendent Paula Butterfield, had put more than $13,000 on her

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district-issued card to pay for lodgings for an out-of-town reading consultant. Butterfield had presented the $13,000 bill as expenses of her own. Her accounting indiscretion had been uncovered by an ally of Fink, board finance chair Darlene Harris, who had been conducting an audit of administration accounts. When confronted, Butterfield explained that the reading consultant had been paid with a $50,000 Grable Foundation grant that was supposed to cover all expenses, but the consultant had run out of money before completing the job. Butterfield conceded that she shouldn’t have misrepresented the bill, but she denied any personal gain and offered to pay back the district the $13,000. Unswayed by Butterfield’s explanation and offer, the school board placed her on paid administrative leave, revoked her debit card, and filed suit to recover the $13,000. Thompson voluntarily turned in his debit card.

Fink implied in public statements that Butterfield should be fired, while Thompson’s ally Matthews sought to downplay the seriousness of Butterfield’s transgression. Meanwhile, City Councilman O’Connor suggested that the school board should be expanded to include four at-large members in addition to the nine district-based members.

In mid June, fed up with the debit card mess, the Reverend Johnnie Monroe, leader of a group called Clergy and Citizens United for Quality Education, called for a general boycott of the Pittsburgh public schools. “Here they are,” Monroe said, in reference to the majority faction of the school board, “making a big deal about $1,700 when they want to spend $1.8 million to open three schools that would [each] serve less than 200 white students. It doesn’t make any sense.” Monroe urged parents to send their children to classes at churches, mosques, and synagogues until the board stopped acting like children themselves.

Charges of racism, cronyism, and corruption marked the next school board meeting, during which the majority voted to hire two certified public accountants—one to audit the district’s finances and the other to help review the audit and evaluate the next year’s budget. Observers understood the audits as weapons deployed to harm the administration. The $235,000 to pay the accountants would be drawn from the board’s $1 million reserve fund.

The threats of two white city councilman, Ricciardi and O’Connor, to reform the board led some in the African-American community to believe that an effort was underway to disenfranchise Pittsburgh’s black population. Because whites made up approximately two thirds of the city’s population, any school board members elected at large would probably be white. Tim Stevens, president of the Pittsburgh chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), charged that the majority board members were acting in a deliberately “disruptive, bizarre and racially divisive” manner so that pressure would mount to have the state grant the (white) mayor the power to appoint the board.

On June 8, frustrated by Literacy Plus’s lack of progress and disgusted by the behavior of the school board, Rebecca Hamilton resigned. In a letter addressed to Thompson, Hamilton wrote:

Frankly, certain board members make working for this district demoralizing at best and embarrassing at worst. In their attitudes and manners, they represent the antithesis of everything education stands for. Their language is often vulgar, their attitudes provincial and racist, their body language offensive and their anti-intellectualism crude.

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45 Lee, “‘Literacy Plus’ Chief Resigns,” op. cit.
Hamilton went on to accuse a faction within the school board of conducting a campaign to discredit Thompson and Butterfield. When informed of Hamilton’s letter, Fink responded, “I don’t know what she’s talking about.”

A Decision for the Three Foundations

The Heinz Endowments, the Grable Foundation, and the Pittsburgh Foundation had supported the Pittsburgh public schools through good times and bad. From 1997 to 2001, the three foundations awarded over $11.6 million in grants to the Pittsburgh public schools (see Exhibit A). The summer of 2002 was shaping up to be one of the bad times.

The district had clearly failed to meet the conditions set by the foundations for their support of the Literacy Plus program. The $2 million pledged by the Heinz Endowments, the $1.45 million pledged by the Grable Foundation, and the $100,000 pledged by the Pittsburgh Foundation had yet to be paid out. A denial of funds would certainly be justifiable—but would it be the right thing to do?

Susan Brownlee, of the Grable Foundation, Maxwell King, of the Heinz Endowments, and William Trueheart, of the Pittsburgh Foundation, agreed that the dysfunction of the school board had reached an acute phase. In supporting Cowell’s retreat and the series of follow-up workshops, the foundations had tried to mediate the dispute among members of the board and the administration. The effort had failed. A citizens group had called for parents to boycott the public schools, members of the city council had threatened to go to the state legislature to have the board restructured, high-ranking administrators had quit or been driven out. Numerous newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, and spectators at board meetings had scolded members of the board, pleaded with them, attempted to appeal to their better natures. All to no avail. The board would not reform itself.

The three foundations had a long history of funding conventional public school initiatives such as arts projects and science programs. Those initiatives, valuable as they were, in no way addressed the problem currently plaguing the school system. While countless individuals had expressed disgust with the board, and various civic and religious groups had spoken out, the community as a whole had been unable to solve the board problem. No single, unified, powerful entity had emerged to represent the interests of Pittsburgh’s schoolchildren. The foundation leaders believed that such an entity could help district schools function more effectively despite the presence of an ineffective board. The question was: How could the foundations assist the public in creating such an entity?

In the spring of 2002, the heads of the three foundations met with Mayor Murphy. Murphy believed the root cause of the school board’s dysfunction lay in a political process that rewarded board members who promoted the interests of a small number of highly motivated voters over the interests of the city’s children as a whole. The surest way to solve the problem, Murphy believed, was to turn over control of the board to the mayor’s office.

In order to make what might appear to be a naked power grab palatable to the public, the mayor wanted to appoint an independent commission to study the city’s education governance structure. If the commission concluded that an appointed school board would function more effectively than the present board, there might be sufficient political momentum to persuade the state legislature to make the necessary change in law.
The problem was that a commission, if appointed by the mayor for seemingly no other reason than to criticize the school board, would command little respect, and its recommendations would be ignored. To appoint a commission, the mayor needed a pretext—a catalyzing event that would demonstrate conclusively the need for a reassessment of Pittsburgh’s education governance structure.  

How could the foundations foster the creation of a unified, powerful entity to represent the interests of Pittsburgh’s schoolchildren? Secondarily, was there any way for the foundations to orchestrate the catalyzing event the mayor was looking for? Could they reform a political process over which they had no direct control? What tools did the foundations possess that, if used effectively, might lead to real change?

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50 Brownlee interview, October 2006, op. cit.
Exhibit A

Grants Made Directly to the Pittsburgh Public Schools, 1997-2001

Heinz Endowments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>$512,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>$735,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>$1,100,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>$1,719,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
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Total $6,241,000
Unpaid balance $2,075,000

Grable Foundation

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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>$552,406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>$1,878,758</td>
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Total $3,957,324
Unpaid balance $1,000,000

Pittsburgh Foundation

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<td>1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>$239,800</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
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Total $1,462,298
Unpaid balance $481,414

Totals grants made directly to Pittsburgh public schools by the three foundations

<table>
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<td>$2,095,437</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>$2,511,206</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>$4,903,329</td>
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</table>

Total for 5 years $11,660,622
Unpaid balance $3,556,414

Three Foundations and the Pittsburgh Public Schools

Part B

“We should suspend funding to the district,” Susan Brownlee said. “And we should do so publicly.”

Maxwell King and William Trueheart listened carefully as Brownlee made the case. She had come to believe that a dramatic gesture on the part of the foundations might spur the citizens of Pittsburgh to come together, organize themselves, and form the alliance needed to balance out the ineffectual school board.

Brownlee believed the gesture would work only if all three foundations made it together. Each foundation possessed unique qualities. Heinz was the single largest nongovernmental financial supporter of the schools and had a sophisticated public-relations staff that would be able to handle the inevitable backlash. Grable, known for its longtime commitment to the public schools, brought powerful local connections that would help legitimate the foundations’ actions in the eyes of the citizenry. And Pittsburgh, as a community foundation, brought further legitimacy to the idea that the foundations were acting for the good of the whole city.51

Independent of Brownlee, King and Trueheart had come to similar conclusions. The three foundation leaders agreed. They would take the idea back to their staffs and to their boards. Only if all three foundations concurred would any go through with it.

Trueheart’s staff, being personally invested in many of the Foundation’s programs, disagreed with the decision.52 Trueheart listened sympathetically to the staff’s objections, but he decided to go forward. He made his case before the board, which voted to support the suspension of funds.

“It wasn’t an easy decision for any of us—for the leaders of the foundations, for Pittsburgh Foundation staff, for our board,” Trueheart recalled.53

Brownlee’s and King’s staffs and boards also agreed, if hesitantly and regrettfully. The three foundation leaders informed Mayor Murphy of their plan. The mayor saw in the foundation leaders’ plan to suspend funding the “catalyzing event” he’d been looking for—the necessary pretext for calling a mayor’s commission to study school governance. Likewise, the idea of a mayor’s commission appealed to the foundation leaders. If the commission was diverse enough (in terms of race, gender, class, geographical neighborhood, and so on), it might serve as the unifying entity the foundation leaders were primarily interested in creating.54

In the late spring and early summer the four met repeatedly to devise a coordinated strategy, which came to include several other local foundations. That strategy consisted of some carefully crafted political theater.

On July 9, 2002, Brownlee, King, and Trueheart called a joint press conference. They announced that they had delivered a letter to Superintendent Thompson and all nine members of the Pittsburgh board of education. The letter stated: “We are writing to inform you that, effective

51 Brownlee interview, October 2006, op. cit.
52 Interview with William Trueheart, October 2006.
53 Trueheart interview, October 2006, op. cit.
54 Brownlee interview, March 2007, op. cit.
immediately, our organizations, which together provide a majority of foundation support to the Pittsburgh Public Schools, are suspending all funding to the district indefinitely.55 The letter laid out the reasons for the suspension of funding:

In our work to support education, we have learned repeatedly that the single best indicator of whether an organization will succeed is the extent to which its board and administration share clear goals and are able to provide strong, committed and consistent leadership in pursuit of those goals.

The conditions for that sort of effective leadership are clearly absent in the district today. . . .

As investors, we can no longer be confident that any funds we put into the district will be used wisely and to the maximum benefit of students. Therefore, it would be irresponsible for us to continue support for the district at this time.56

The Hillman Foundation announced that it too would be withholding some funds from the school district, and three other local foundations that made no grants to the schools released statements in support of Heinz, Grable, and Pittsburgh.57

Reaction to the foundations’ action was swift and clamorous. “Wow, yikes, holy mackerel and caramba. As votes of no confidence go, this one is a doozy,” read one columnist’s lead in the next day’s paper.58 The suspension of funding dominated local headlines for days afterward, and letters poured into the papers, some denouncing the school board, some the superintendent, some the foundations, and some all three.

David Bergholz, executive director of the George Gund Foundation in Cleveland and a former resident of Pittsburgh, wrote, in an opinion piece for the Post-Gazette, that “[w]hat Heinz, Grable and Pittsburgh have done, frankly, is to cut and run.”59 Bergholz continued:

A hard-to-repress arrogance or, more accurately, a know-it-allness, comes on occasion to all with a foundation leadership assignment, myself included. Though issues of governance and leadership in the Pittsburgh schools are vitally important, it could be that this moment is also a wake-up call to the foundation community: New structures for building productive, lasting relationships with the Pittsburgh Public Schools need to be established.60

The contretemps made national news, with the New York Times characterizing it as “a stunning and rare example of philanthropy publicly flexing its muscles.”61

The foundations’ deliberately provocative, very public action was the “catalyzing event” Mayor Murphy had been looking for. After waiting six days, Murphy announced that he would ask the “best and brightest”62 to form a task force to study Pittsburgh’s education governance

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55 Brownlee, King, and Trueheart, op. cit.
56 Brownlee, King, and Trueheart, op. cit.
60 Bergholz, op. cit.
structure. The next day, the three foundations released letters to the press commending Murphy for his venture. The press fell in line, praising, or at least accepting, the idea of a nonpartisan task force. Eight days later, Murphy announced that the task force would be led by downtown developer David Matter and by William Trueheart of the Pittsburgh Foundation.

The task force, called the Mayor’s Commission on Public Education, comprised 38 civic and business leaders, parents, religious leaders, and university educators (see Exhibit B). The task force included members from neighborhoods all over Pittsburgh and from a broad range of income levels. Women and African-Americans were well represented. (Notably, no teachers from the public schools were included.)

Though the Commission promised to deliver its assessment the following April, its report, entitled Keeping the Promise: The Case for Reform in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, was not released until September 2003.

Keeping the Promise called for school consolidation (i.e., the closing of underenrolled schools) to free up money for a substantial property-tax reduction; a reduction in the staff-to-student ratio; the offering of financial incentives to the most experienced and successful teachers to work at low-performing schools; and, just as the mayor had hoped, a change in governance to an appointed board of education.

According to the report:

> The current elected-board governance structure contributes to high costs, high taxes, and the neglect of poor student performance and widespread inequity. . . . As long as board members are elected by geographic areas—and by small numbers of voters concerned mostly about narrow issues—a leadership crisis will likely . . . undermine the schools.

Specifically, the report recommended that the school board be appointed by the mayor from a pool of applicants presented by a nominating commission also appointed by the mayor. School board appointees would be confirmed by the city council. The appointed school board would no longer have the power to set taxes; that power would be assumed by the city council.

The report also recommended that leaders of the school system “should send a clear, unified message of their dedication to improving student performance,” and that “[a]n independent alliance for school improvement should be recruited to monitor the progress of reform, regularly report back to the public, and engage a range of community partners in efforts to improve the educational outcomes of students.”

Keeping the Promise’s advocacy of an appointed school board was opposed by members of the school board, representatives of the teachers’ union, and the NAACP, among others. The mayor’s office, unsurprisingly, expressed support for the report. Superintendent Thompson offered a guarded response, noting that his office had already implemented some of the curricular and career-development programs recommended by the report.

The September 2003 timing of the report’s release was unfortunate. News had just broken of a financial crisis in city government, requiring bailout from the state. Critics of the report doubted the wisdom of granting the mayor and city council, who had difficulty enough in running other aspects of the city, power over the school system as well. Changing the governance structure of the school board required the state legislature’s changing the law, and by the time the report was released, the mayor had few friends in the state legislature.

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65 Fraser, op. cit., p. 8.
In November 2003, Darlene Harris, who had succeeded Jean Fink as school board president, lost her bid for reelection to the board and was replaced by Patrick Dowd. Dowd, who won the seat by promising to reduce bickering on the board, was viewed by the foundation leaders as a tremendous improvement over his predecessor on the board.66 Daniel Romaniello took over the seat previously held by Jean Wood, who had declined to seek reelection. With the election of Romaniello and Dowd, the pro-closings faction of the board gained a clear majority.

In December 2003, by a nearly unanimous vote of 8-0 (Mark Brentley abstained), William Isler was elected president of the school board. Isler, though a staunch member of the pro-closings faction, was a conciliatory figure. Long-time opponents Randall Taylor and Jean Fink each expressed satisfaction with the civilized conduct of the board on election night.

Two weeks later, the board passed a budget that included a modest property tax reduction. The board promised that it would soon tackle once again the thorny issue of school closings.

Meanwhile, spurred by the example of the Mayor’s Commission, an independent alliance of parents, educators, and civic leaders, including Susan Brownlee of the Grable Foundation, was forming an organization that would work to improve the schools by ensuring effective oversight, supporting school improvement initiatives, and reporting back to the public on student outcomes.

With the publication of Keeping the Promise, a new school board that seemed to function relatively smoothly, and the formation of a citizens’ alliance, governance of the Pittsburgh school system appeared to be stronger than it had been in years. Yet the law governing the school board hadn’t changed, and the state legislature appeared unlikely to act on it any time soon.

Had the Heinz Endowments and the Grable and Pittsburgh foundations accomplished what they’d set out to do in suspending funding? What sort of leverage would the foundations gain by continuing to withhold funding? What might be gained by reinstating funding?

Should the three foundations stay the course, or should they resume funding?

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66 Trueheart interview, October 2006, op. cit.


Exhibit B

Mayor’s Commission on Public Education

Co-chair: David Matter, Oxford Development Co. president
Co-chair: William Trueheart, The Pittsburgh Foundation president

Mayor Murphy identified three areas of concern within the Pittsburgh Public Schools, and the task force has been divided accordingly into three committees:

**Studying finances**
Chair: Louis L. Testoni, Pricewaterhouse-Coopers office managing partner
Donald Burrell, Alcoa facilities director
Esther Bush, Urban League President
David Donahoe, Regional Asset District director
Carey Harris, South Side Local Development Co. director
John Henne, Shadyside jeweler
Maxwell King, Heinz Endowments, executive director
Richard King, district justice
Stephen Schillo, Duquesne University vice president of management and business
Gregory Spencer, Equitable Resources vice president
Richard Stanizzo, Pittsburgh Building and Construction Trades Council president
Garth Taylor, Allegheny Department of Human Services contract monitor, Garfield Youth Football Program director

**Studying governance**
Chair: Mark Nordenberg, University of Pittsburgh chancellor
Bonita Allen, schools activist
Raymond Baum, attorney
Mary Conturo, Sports & Exhibition Authority lawyer (and former city solicitor)
The Rev. Dr. William Curtis, Mt. Ararat Baptist Church pastor
Rosalyn Guy-McCorkle, Urban Youth Action chair
Frances Hanlon, Overbrook Elementary parent volunteer
Harry Litman, former U.S. Attorney
Sean McDonald, Precision Therapeutics president
Thomas McGough, attorney
Sherry Niepp, retired Pittsburgh Public Schools principal
Estella Smith, former Duquesne Light Co. public affairs manager

**Studying student performance**
Chair: Rev. Dr. Harold Lewis, Calvary Episcopal Church pastor
Esther Barazzone, Chatham College president
John Bellisario of the Frank Fuhrer Wholesale Co.
Roberta Bowra, of the Manchester Citizens Corp. and M&V Hair Salon
Susan H. Brownlee, Grable Foundation executive director
John Chalovich, Electricians Local No. 5 business manager
Nikki Durnil, Liberty Pittsburgh Systems designer
Ray Meyer, Northside Leadership Conference president
Ronald E. Peters, Metro-Urban Institute director, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary urban ministry professor
Lauren Resnick, University of Pittsburgh psychology professor and Learning Research and Development Corp. director
Lansing Taylor, Cellomics Inc. president
Jerome Taylor, Center for Family Excellence and Pitt psychology and Africana studies professor

Three Foundations and the Pittsburgh Public Schools

Part C

Not everyone in the philanthropic community agreed with David Bergholz’s dim view of the decision of the three foundations to suspend funding to the Pittsburgh public schools. Ralph Smith, senior vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, praised the foundations for having displayed “muscular philanthropy,” which he defined as “the intentional and unapologetic use of a foundation’s money, position, prestige and influence to propel change in the face of otherwise effective resistance.” Smith lauded the foundations for their “direct approach” and “unprecedented teamwork,” observing:

In many respects, the Pittsburgh Three abandoned the traditional foundation practices that have contributed to the checkered history of philanthropic promotion of school improvement and education reform. Where foundations generally mumble, the Pittsburgh Three chose to speak clearly and bluntly. Where foundations generally go it alone, the Pittsburgh Three acted together. Where foundations generally pursue bilateral transactions with boards of education, the Pittsburgh Three invited the political establishment to step up and take on responsible roles.

Now that the “shock therapy” of suspending funding had been delivered, if the three foundations wanted to stay involved in the schools, they would have to work with the district again. Though nothing had changed regarding how the school board was elected, by early 2004, enough had happened elsewhere that King, Brownlee, and Trueheart began to feel hopeful about the schools again. On February 10, 2004, nineteen months after announcing the suspension of funds, the Heinz Endowments and Grable and Pittsburgh foundations declared that they would resume funding.

In March, the citizens’ alliance formed an organization called A+ Schools. A+ Schools described itself as “a community advocate for improving student achievement by supporting an action agenda shaped by the issues of high standards, quality teaching, leadership accountability, financial responsibility and community involvement.”

In January 2005, the board voted 5-4 to buy out the final five months of Superintendent Thompson’s contract. Patrick Dowd, who 14 months before had won his seat by running on a platform of reducing contentiousness within the board, cast the deciding vote.

68 Smith, op. cit.
69 Brownlee interview, October 2006, op. cit.
70 Truehart interview, October 2006, op. cit.
In November 2005, the newly hired superintendent, Mark Roosevelt, released his School Reorganization Plan and created the Fund for Excellence as a means for foundations to invest in the reform agenda. In early 2006, Roosevelt established the Campaign for Proficiency, a multiyear initiative to promote a “culture of achievement” in the city. Meanwhile, the now-functioning school board approved Roosevelt’s plan to shut down a total of 22 schools and renovate the 65 that remained. Eight poor-performing elementary and middle schools were reprogrammed as “accelerated learning academies” emphasizing academic rigor. During the spring and summer of 2006, Roosevelt announced a series of further initiatives and reform proposals: cutting costs by reducing the size of central staff by 188 positions; strengthening instruction by adding 101 curriculum coaches; creating an instructional leadership academy; announcing the Excellence for All four-year strategic plan to improve academic performance among all students and narrow the racial achievement gap; and creating a task force charged with crafting a comprehensive high school reform plan.72

By summer 2006, local foundations had contributed $6.6 million to the Fund for Excellence. Among the foundations were Heinz, Grable, and Pittsburgh, as well as several organizations that had never given money to the public schools before, including the Richard King Mellon and DSF Charitable foundations.73

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Exhibit C

A+ Schools Board of Directors

Chair — Esther L. Bush, Executive Director, Urban League of Pittsburgh
Susan Brownlee, Executive Director, The Grable Foundation
Robert Germany, Parent
Saleem Ghubril, Executive Director, The Pittsburgh Project
Wanda Henderson, Parent Activist, Chairperson of the Region III Association of the National Coalition of Title I Chapter 1 Parents
Karris M. Jackson, Executive Director, Urban Youth Action
Nancy M. Israel, Ph.D., Executive Director, Institute for Learning, University of Pittsburgh
Honorable Richard G. King, parent and Carrick District Justice
Michael Lamb, Prothonotary, Allegheny County
Dr. Alan M. Lesgold, Dean, School of Education, University of Pittsburgh
The Reverend Johnnie Monroe, Pastor, Grace Memorial Presbyterian Church
Julia Morris, Grandparent
Edith L. Shapira, MD, psychiatrist in private practice and clinical assistant professor of Psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh
Gregory Spencer, President and CEO, Randall Enterprises, LLC
Celeste Taylor, Parent and Project Director, Pittsburghers for Open Government
Frederick W. Thieman, Former U.S. attorney in private practice, Mentoring Partnership of Southwestern Pennsylvania
Jim Turner, Director, Partnership for School District Improvement, School of Education, University of Pittsburgh
Sala Udin, Former City Councilperson
Amy Van Horn, Parent and Pittsburgh Urban Magnet Project (PUMP) member
Jean E. Wood, Grandparent and former Pittsburgh Public Schools Board member