

# The Role of Nonprofits in Supporting Public Education

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## ABSTRACT

Nonprofit organizations play a crucial role in enhancing public education in the United States by supplementing government efforts through funding, advocacy, and direct services. These organizations provide critical resources such as school meals, scholarships, and academic support while also influencing policy and driving systemic reforms. This paper examines the historical context of nonprofit involvement in education, categorizes different types of educational nonprofits, and examines their funding mechanisms and impact on student achievement. Additionally, it highlights innovative practices, collaborations with public education systems, and the challenges nonprofits face in securing resources and navigating policy constraints. By analyzing best practices and policy implications, this study underscores the necessity for stronger partnerships between public schools and nonprofits to ensure equitable access to quality education.

**Keywords:** Nonprofits, Public Education, Educational Equity, Advocacy, Funding Mechanisms, Community-Based Organizations.

## INTRODUCTION

Public education in America involves federal, state, and local governments, bolstered by numerous nonprofit organizations. These nonprofits engage with education through various means, including early childhood development, public and charter schools, and higher education institutions. Historically, the voluntary sector has provided health-related services, sometimes funded by the government, but often relying on private donations. Nonprofits contribute to education by offering school meals, and scholarships, and connecting clients with resources. Many foundations fund educational research and programs, build schools to address overcrowding and create coalitions among stakeholders to address educational issues. Currently, nonprofit focus in education is shifting to three main areas: national funding priorities that influence programs in core subjects, effective strategies like tutoring and extended school hours, and policy advocacy. Federal and state education policies shape the relationship between nonprofits and school districts, pushing accountability measures that affect funding and curricula. Reforms in educational structures are crucial, with many believing these characteristics influence outcomes more than resources. The latest nonprofit trend is investing in political challenges to existing educational norms, emphasizing the need for better communication and transparency at the district level. However, challenges remain due to organizational constraints and a general lack of discussion and transparency in the educational field [1, 2].

### Historical Context of Nonprofits in Education

Nonprofit organizations have been vital in enhancing public education since at least the mid-1850s. Their development mirrors broader educational movements, encompassing diverse influences that shape “schooling,” regardless of where learning occurs. Over the years, these nonprofits have evolved, particularly in the U.S., focusing on local, state, and national school-level initiatives, policy advocacy, and systemic reform. They target various stakeholders, including teachers and families, and respond to the external pressures of market forces and technology. Historical analysis reveals that contemporary

nonprofits stem from shifting social movements tied to educational reform, with a significant rise noted in the 1860s and 1870s. The promotion of reading and writing as fundamental to citizenship in a democracy was central to the common schools' mission, leading to reforms even before the Civil War's end. Early nonprofit initiatives often sparked controversy, reflecting the organizations' social advocacy roots and their role in the quest for educational justice. This included using journalism to raise awareness on issues of access and equity, with prominent newspapers aiding in such exposés. Understanding the interplay between societal values and nonprofit missions involves examining how concepts of fairness and market efficiency correlate with these organizations' guiding principles. Recent policy trends may contrast with the missions of 501(c)(3) organizations, which strive for broader equity. By investigating instances where societal values harmonize with nonprofit ideals, one can better comprehend and forecast the role these organizations will play in the ongoing evolution and reform of public education. [3, 4].

### **Types of Nonprofit Organizations in Education**

Nonprofit organizations are playing a growing role in public K-12 public education, but they are a rather diverse lot. Different in structure, intent, and strategy, nonprofits fall into several easily recognizable categories, such as foundations, advocacy groups, and community-based organizations (CSOs) supporting education. A foundation is a legally distinct type of nonprofit that often plays a supporting role, channeling private donations to schools in the form of grants. Advocacy groups do not generally support direct services but often work to influence policy or reform schools. CSOs typically act as "intermediaries," connecting schools with local resources and change efforts, often at the grassroots level. What is especially provocative about these different types is how they are often structured in ways that preclude collaboration with organizations outside their type. For instance, advocacy groups might worry that partnerships with schools look self-serving, or that partnerships with businesses or funders might look like conflicts of interest. Similarly, foundations might prefer not to be burdened with the kinds of social service efforts common to community-based organizations. Such distinctions also intentionally preclude competition, as policy advocacy might more effectively spotlight issues that schools funded by private foundations are prevented from addressing. However, such distinctions are increasingly under scrutiny; scholars and practitioners are interested in the varied funding and impact of different types of nonprofits supporting education. At the same time, these categorizations are drawn less from practitioners themselves, and more from scholarship about nonprofits and public education. To the extent comprehensive, the conversations about stereotypes are also about the "other" type of nonprofit involved in supporting education [5, 6].

#### **Foundations**

Leveraging considerable resources, a subset of well-established education foundations significantly funds various educational initiatives. These mission-driven foundations are complex organizations with staff implementing diverse strategies for systemic change. Private education foundations are a major nonpublic revenue source, second only to federal funds. In 2013, they contributed over \$577M. This paper analyzes 238 education foundations across all 50 states and D.C. Due to an uneven landscape, only 35 states host multiple foundations, creating a dense interstate network of funding that largely originates from just 10 states, benefiting 48 states. The academic literature on education foundations is sparse, yet this study builds on recent findings regarding their structures and strategies. Between 2008 and 2012, nearly 70% of the \$1.77B awarded was in cash grants, with about 81% supporting efforts within traditional public schools. While funding largely comes from 10 states, it is allocated across 13 distinct purpose areas, from professional development to technology. Additionally, 17 foundations allocated \$129M over 4 years to enhance access and equity in education, achieving quicker results than non-targeted funding. However, despite being crucial for long-term program sustainability, private foundations may not meet all funding needs across markets [7,8].

#### **Advocacy Groups**

Advocacy groups aim to enhance public education by ensuring all children have access to quality systems that prepare them for future success. These groups employ policy advocacy to influence educational policy at various levels, particularly in the heavily politicized US Congress. Known collectively as shafts, these innovators impact school boards and government bodies, urging officials to expand their mission. Advocacy tools vary widely, from casual remarks to structured campaigns involving research, publications, and grassroots efforts to change laws. These groups lobby at state levels, collaborate with other organizations, and navigate bureaucratic challenges to achieve both small and significant wins. While the public may overlook many successes, they manifest through articles, press releases, and media coverage of congressional actions. The cumulative impact of these efforts can lead to substantial changes

in education, as seen in the victories achieved by advocates during the early 1970s, which together shaped the educational landscape in profound ways [9, 10].

### **Community-Based Organizations**

Community-based organizations play a crucial role in local initiatives, using a "grasstops" approach to involve families and students by addressing educational needs. This method successfully engages community resources to enhance learning opportunities and hold local providers accountable. Decentralized educational reform efforts can effectively connect schools with broader community resources, although the specific educational programming greatly varies by region. Nevertheless, a core mission often focuses on supporting the "whole" student and their family unit, acknowledging that family circumstances can significantly influence student outcomes. Fostering family engagement is essential for student success, echoing the idea that it takes a village to raise a child. Community organizations seek to answer how to provide this critical support, aiming to offer comprehensive assistance to students. Programs typically include aftercare and school-day offerings featuring arts, music, physical activities, and homework support, sometimes including nutritious meals. Such meals are vital for children's growth and development, as some may lack adequate nutrition. These extracurricular activities adhere to federal standards to ensure quality, focusing on benefiting children directly. Many after-school programs include academic support like tutoring or even cooking classes, though access to these elements can be limited. Research shows these support programs lead to increased student productivity, reduced disciplinary issues, and improved academic performance [11,12].

### **Funding Mechanisms for Nonprofit Support**

In uncertain relations with the federal government, many nonprofits face budget cuts impacting public schools. Educators highlight nonprofits, like parent-teacher organizations (PTOs), as crucial in supplementing limited tax revenues by providing essential resources, including computers and classroom supplies, and sometimes supporting teacher salaries. However, fundraising varies with community economic conditions, intensifying inequalities and raising ethical concerns about equitable educational support. Nonprofit funding comes from government grants and philanthropic donations, with corporations capitalizing on tax benefits through contributions. Foundations provide significant support, but smaller donations remain harder to obtain. For example, a fourth grader locally raised over \$3,500, showcasing alternative funding strategies. Corporate sponsorships are another avenue but can be unstable due to high small business turnover rates. PTOs organize fundraisers like carnivals, though many yields limited returns, creating a false sense of success. Nonprofits face challenges in securing consistent funding and managing societal expectations of philanthropy. Adopting a broader view of funding, including material and in-kind contributions, could improve strategic planning. Some aim to create sustainable endowments, despite their complex financial management. A historical endowment for New England schools has declined recently due to mismanagement. Diversifying funding sources is necessary, as many nonprofits depend too heavily on government grants, posing risks. Innovations like crowdfunding and fee-for-service models emphasize the need for varied revenue sources, which may either diversify funding or concentrate resources among a few powerful entities, increasing political lobbying. The urgency in funding discussions for the future of education nonprofits is evident [13, 14].

### **Impact of Nonprofit Programs on Public Education**

This section assesses how nonprofits are impacting public education through various supports for teachers, staff, and students. Significant improvements in student achievement result from targeted interventions provided by numerous organizations. Evaluative efforts span diverse states and urban areas across the U.S. However, equity and access within education systems have been concerns for much longer. Despite public investments, disparities between well-resourced and under-resourced schools continue to grow. Nonprofits are employing strategies to mitigate these differences, particularly in communities serving marginalized populations often neglected by traditional education entities. Through their interventions, nonprofits introduce innovative practices within schools that can reshape broader systems. Additionally, reforms occurring outside classrooms are highlighted; these efforts aim to enhance the overall culture and climate of schools, positively influencing traditional teaching and learning. There is also a strong emphasis on the need for a more uniform adoption of data best practices, as this is essential to provide firm evidence that supports the transformative potential of nonprofit work in education [15, 16].

### **Student Achievement**

Research increasingly highlights the positive impact of nonprofit programs on student achievement in public education. One study showed that an after-school program improved math test scores, particularly for students eligible for federal poverty assistance. Another study analyzed test scores in Paterson, NJ,

illustrating the program's collaboration with the school district to target students needing counseling. Participants were selected based on low achievement scores on state tests. Several barriers may hinder student performance, including incomplete homework, lack of quiet study spaces, or the need for tutoring. Nonprofits can address these issues directly; tutoring and mentoring have shown significant improvements in test scores. Additionally, many students lack career readiness. Programs like Junior Achievement expose students to various post-graduate pathways, enhancing outcomes in school success, and job readiness, and reducing drug and alcohol use [17, 18].

#### **Equity and Access**

Dismantling barriers that limit students' access to quality education is central to many nonprofit efforts aimed at improving public education. These barriers stem from factors such as funding inequities, housing displacement, and systemic issues related to ability, race, or class. Nonprofits like Knowledge Quest in Memphis have been tackling these challenges for over three decades by offering programs that enrich the lives of students and parents in low-income communities. Knowledge Quest provides in- and after-school activities that support students' learning, ensuring cultural relevance to its diverse student body. Their programs include math, reading, job readiness, tutoring, art, and health initiatives tailored for underserved populations. While many nonprofits focus on specific needs, this specialization may leave gaps in support. Culturally responsive practices and tailored programs are strategies nonprofits use to address inequity. The partnerships formed with local and national educational entities help nonprofits expand their reach and influence. Advocacy allows them to address systemic laws and policies hindering equitable access. By sharing strategies, they aim to foster public discourse on equity in education and build relationships among nonprofits seeking to level the educational playing field. Given the ongoing relevance of this conversation, it is crucial to consider the policy challenges that hinder educational reform and the broader needs of affected children [19, 20].

#### **Innovative Practices**

Innovative nonprofits taking steps to augment public education reform have begun integrating different kinds of technologies. The Odyssey Project based out of Michigan State University is a program that targets underrepresented populations of students encouraging them to better familiarize themselves with, and integrate multiple technologies. The Odyssey Project mentors videotape the students' performances at various institutions on campus, later editing the footage and integrating it into an interactive document. Nonprofits have also experimented with different forms of experiential learning outside the traditional classroom. Students of all ages have attended a week-long retreat in the Blue Ridge Mountains as part of the Audubon Naturalist Society of Washington's program. The 1st-grade teacher elected to have the retreat be a camping trip for her students. Since the camping trip, a strong incentivization clause has shown consistently higher scores beginning with the 3rd-grade BSAP test. As this trend continues, the results are being investigated. Nonprofits have also set up shop in the tangible community itself. The Delta Achievement Corporation of Delta Sigma Theta set up computer learning workshops at public libraries, churches, and community centers in Detroit. Family members would learn together in an orchestrated workshop. After a tutorial about introductory commands, parents and children would play such programs together. It is through programs like these that nonprofits encourage family and community involvement and hope to ultimately help student performance. School reform has, however, needed to take its cue more frequently from the innovative practices of nonprofits [21,22].

#### **Challenges and Opportunities for Nonprofits in Education**

Nonprofit organizations encounter numerous challenges in delivering education. These include increased service demands requiring advanced skills, heightened competition for dwindling resources, a volatile political landscape, and the necessity to demonstrate measurable outcomes. For those serving children and youth, complexities multiply due to federal legislation affecting public schools, local political influences, competition with public schools for funding, and limited discretionary funds for professional development. Under pressure to prove effectiveness, educational programs often face a dilemma where outdated concepts overemphasize quantifiable results, neglecting service quality. Nonetheless, there are emerging opportunities for private nonprofits to impact public education positively, as seen in substantial donations to public schools. Increased collaboration between private nonprofits and public schools raises focus questions—whether on the public school or the nonprofit. The positive impacts of nonprofit educational institutions are recognized, and there is a growing acknowledgment of their essential role in the sector. To respond to renewed demands for effectiveness and efficiency, education nonprofits must reassess their service delivery methods, program designs, and adaptability to the evolving educational landscape [23, 24].

### **Best Practices and Case Studies**

Effective nonprofit programs rely on best practices that enable community-based organizations to create measurable impacts. Sociological research indicates that these effectiveness factors are not random but stem from specific programmatic components like collaboratives and strategic fundraising, applicable across various communities. Utilizing best practices is vital for community groups to strengthen connections and demonstrate commitment. A community advisory board was established to guide projects, drawing on models like dropout prevention and after-school programs. Recent observations highlight the significant role of NGOs in supporting educational development in developing countries, particularly where reforms are advanced. However, concerns arise about the future involvement of NGOs in education due to shifting development paradigms and their effect on policies in sub-Saharan Africa. Despite notable achievements, there remains a pressing demand for externally funded educational services amid limited resources. New policies suggest redirecting developmental priorities toward environmentally sustainable practices and market alignment, reframing education's role in addressing Millennium Development Goals [25,26].

### **Collaborations Between Nonprofits and Public Education Systems**

For decades, nonprofit organizations in the United States have supported local public education by developing after-school programs and assisting homeless students. Some nonprofits maintain 501(c)3 status focused on aiding the public education system, acting as an umbrella for smaller organizations that re-grant resources and funds to public schools. Various business models have emerged, including contracts with local education agencies (LEAs) to manage grant funds. Larger foundations also provide significant funding for public education. While some nonprofits support education indirectly, others collaborate directly with public education systems to deliver programs. These partnerships aim to model, replicate, and enhance proven interventions, improving implementation and outcomes. As student numbers and educational settings expand, so does the need for resources. School-based programs offer community-based organizations (CBOs) opportunities to collaborate and share resources with public education systems. Building the necessary infrastructure for these programs requires time and resources for effective collaboration. Successful examples illustrate the benefits of a collaborative approach in school contexts. Literature highlights the critical role of communication and trust in forming partnerships between CBOs and public education systems. Numerous examples showcase positive outcomes from both large- and small-scale collaborations, while also addressing challenges and outlining a collaborative planning process for implementation success [27,28].

### **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

There are significant policy implications for nonprofit involvement in education, particularly how schools are not monitored to maintain connections with nonprofits and funding gap issues. Current educational policy in the U.S. does not fully provide an environment where nonprofits can most efficiently and effectively involve themselves in public education. Part of the reason for this is that public schools are not incentivized or even monitored to maintain connections with nonprofit organizations. Research indicates that schools often are disconnected from their local environments, therefore they also may not have the needed connections to community organizations. Another part of the issue is funding. Some of the most impactful services that nonprofits can provide, like outside tutoring, personal mentoring to students, etc., have funding gap issues. The majority of educationally related nonprofits operate on a local level where income populations are too poor to support any kind of regular large donations, making their funding incredibly unstable compared to larger scale nonprofits that operate on a national level 2. This is not limited to education. Wide-reaching general social policy in the anti-poverty arena has welcomed the entry of nonprofits. However, policies have not optimized what might be gained with better organizational cooperation. To provide better educational opportunities for all, schools should be incentivized to involve themselves in established partnerships with nonprofits and be equipped with a policy that enables ongoing valuable organizational connections for all. There needs to be a focus on educational-related policy, and instead of monetary investment, there needs to be investment in educational reform. All levels of the system can better adjust to these efforts with the help of nonprofits that bring valuable independent expertise to this work. Public policy should consider how educationally related nonprofits can most effectively be incorporated. In collaboration, public schools and educational nonprofits should work to ensure public policies are in place that are equitable anywhere. Town hall meetings should be held to encourage an understanding of the vital role that educational nonprofits can play in bettering the public educational system. System leaders should adopt the recommended practices; human capital theorists should investigate how different kinds impact student-based educational outcomes [29, 30].

## CONCLUSION

Nonprofit organizations have become indispensable allies in public education, addressing systemic challenges and promoting equity through their diverse roles—including funding, advocacy, and direct student support—nonprofits bridge gaps in educational resources and services that government funding alone cannot fill. However, the sustainability and effectiveness of their contributions depend on stable funding, strategic partnerships, and supportive policy environments. Increased collaboration between public education systems and nonprofit organizations, alongside policy reforms that encourage long-term partnerships, can enhance the effectiveness of educational nonprofits. Future research should focus on optimizing these collaborations and ensuring that nonprofits continue to play a transformative role in fostering equitable and high-quality education for all students.

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