



Funding Systemic Change An Interview with the Golisano Foundation

“There are two very different worlds involved in transition: the world where students with developmental disabilities are “entitled” to an education that meets their needs, [and] the world where adults with developmental disabilities may be “eligible” for programs and services.”
-- In the Balance: Successfully Transitioning to a Meaningful Adult Life, a report funded by the B. Thomas Golisano Foundation.

In a recent conversation with Ann Costello at the Golisano Foundation, she told the Grantmakers Forum about the foundation’s recent investment in transition planning for students with developmental disabilities and the Foundation’s interaction with state agencies that oversee the process.

Q. Tell us how the Golisano Foundation become involved in the transition issue?

A. We asked our grantees (local service providers who primarily service adults) how young people were receiving services. The answer was through the schools. Few of our grantee organizations provided programs outside the schools for youth and their families, even though these students are their future customers. On the other hand, school personnel -who may not know about community services available to these students and their families - were responsible for designing the transition plans for graduates. We discovered that the Office of Mental Retardation and Development Disabilities (OMRDD) and the New York State Education Dept. (SED) have no formalized relationship that would smooth this transition. In order to gain their attention, the Golisano Foundation funded a study using focus groups of adult service providers, educators, parents and individuals in transition to understand and describe their issues.

Q. And how did the study get state attention?

A. With the help of Duffy Palmer, Director of Educational Policy, we were able to present the study to both OMRDD and SED. We believe there is a role in this area for private funders, but our board didn’ t want to move ahead unless we had the attention and commitment of state agencies and educators.

Q. Now that you have their attention, what’s the next step?

A. We took a proposal for a Phase II project to the Golisano board using Alliance for Justice lobbying materials that we obtained through the Grantmakers Forum to generate a discussion about our role in seeking solutions to these transition issues. That discussion resulted in a contracted partnership with the Warner School at University of Rochester to extend our research and develop funding and community organizing strategies to improve the service transition for individuals with developmental disabilities. Once that study is completed, the board will have the opportunity to further define the Golisano Foundation’s role in implementing those strategies.



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A. What about the state agencies?

A. We met with them recently to discuss preliminary Phase II findings and to open the dialogue between the agencies around actions they can take to improve the situation. Now that they are talking, the gaps are becoming more obvious.

A. What advice do you have for funders who want to be involved in this type of activity?

A. Be prepared to stick with it. This is a nonlinear and dynamic process. It's about connecting to the right people, not always right away. It requires the board and staff to think very strategically and to build coalitions. It has required us to identify and build relationships with centers of excellence in our field and to rely on experts to help deliver the work. Our board of directors has made a multi-year commitment to this work.

Q. Isn't this type of work expensive?

A. Actually, we have only spent approximately 15% of our total grantmaking budget each year on a problem that we consider to be key to our ultimate goal: improving educational and social outcomes for students with developmental disabilities, and providing a continuum of service as they become adults.

Q. Do you have any last words about this work?

A. The board of the Golisano Foundation has discovered that policy work is not always about influencing legislation, but more often involves bringing issues to the attention of the agencies that oversee government programs and services. We have defined our role to produce influential studies and evidence to help those agencies focus on their services more effectively. We got here by asking a lot of questions of our grantees and many others in the community who are involved with the services and population we fund. We consider this activity to be a critical part of our role to fund the creation and delivery of important services to the developmentally disabled individuals in our community.
