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# The Creativity Conundrum In Educational Leadership

## The Creativity Conundrum in Public Education Leadership

Many of the men and women who shaped the world over the course of history, from Mozart to Albert Einstein to Steve Jobs, have done so by thinking well outside the sphere of traditional education. Famously, each of these men had some issues with authority, and it's hard to imagine any of them sitting placidly in a classroom and copying facts and figures from a chalkboard. In the end, their genius was not simply in their ability to understand complex systems, although that was certainly an important part of it. What set them apart was their creativity—that is, their ability to use previously held knowledge to produce something that no one had ever thought to make before; whether a symphony, a scientific theory or a personal computer.

The passing of Steve Jobs in 2011 rekindled an age-old discussion about the [relationship of creativity and innovation](#) to traditional notions of intelligence. (Jobs often credited the creative classes he audited after dropping out of college with influencing some of his later decisions at Apple.) Not everything about this relationship is completely understood, but most people involved in education and public policy agree: creativity will be a crucial characteristic possessed by anyone hoping to succeed in the twenty-first-century

economy. And yet, the education system in its current state is not set up to foster this sort of out-of-the-box thinking. One solution currently gaining momentum is the use of community-driven non-profit organizations known as local education funds (LEFs) and public education funds (PEFs), which are committed to improving access to quality education for all members of society. While not the complete answer, these reform-minded organizations might be the key to injecting creativity back into public schools.

## Fostering Creative Intelligence in the American Classroom

It is ten years after the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which was enacted in order to help American schools compete with their foreign counterparts, and their foreign counterparts [are still outscoring them](#) in just about every subject. This might be partially due to NCLB's use of standardized testing to measure school performance. As many teachers will [attest](#) to, this emphasis on test scores leave schools [little room](#) to focus on anything besides "teaching to the test." The United States has gone backwards, then, to a so-called "drill-and-kill" system of rote learning and memorization, while many of the rest of the world's schools, especially those in Europe and Asia, have evolved to place emphasis on big picture concepts, problem solving, and encouraging innovation.

According to a 2010 [study](#) by The College of William & Mary education professor Kyung-Hee Kim, creativity has been on the decline among American students since 1990. Using the results of the [Torrance Test](#) measuring creative thinking, she analyzed decades' worth of data and found that, while traditional IQ scores have actually gone up steadily each decade, creativity is on the decline. She also used the results to identify three types of students: those with high intelligence and high creativity, those with high intelligence and low creativity, and those with low intelligence and high creativity. What does this tell us? One theory is that creativity and intelligence, while related, are not exactly the same thing, and placing too much stress on more traditional standards of intelligence might result in stifling creativity in those who possess that quality. As Kim notes, "If we neglect creative students in school because of the structure and the testing movement—creative students cannot breathe, they are suffocated in school—then they become underachievers." While there are several factors that might be resulting in this "[creativity crisis](#)," Kim [puts](#) at least some of the blame for lower Torrance test scores on the culture of standardized testing encouraged by NCLB.

This decline in creativity does not bode well for the future of the country. According to John M. Eger, professor of communications and public policy and director of the Creative Economy Initiative at San Diego State University, creativity is essential to building an economy to compete with the rest of the world in coming decades. In a Huffington Post [article](#) from 2011, Eger points out that, while the word "creative" is often associated with the arts, the concept of creativity is just as important for the [STEM](#) subjects that have received so much attention from education leaders and government officials in recent years. In fact, a recent [IBM poll](#) of 1,500 CEOs around the world identified creativity as the top quality needed for future success in the global economy.

## Is Public Investment the Solution?

As our schools struggle to keep up with the standards set forth by NCLB, they also grapple with staggering [budget cuts](#), with fine art and music programs [especially vulnerable](#) to the axe. Recently, however, a number of organizations collectively known as public education support organizations, or ESOs, have been created within communities to supply capital for public schools through fundraising. Funds are then appropriated through grants to finance things like teacher training, afterschool programs, community-based projects, and school supplies. There are many types of ESOs, and they vary greatly in both scope and size. LEFs are specifically associated with the [Public Education Network](#), while PEFs are a much broader group of education-related foundations. The Urban Institute [reports](#) that between 1997 and 2007, the number of ESOs

doubled to more than 19,000, collectively spending \$4.3 billion dollars on improving education.

The [Decatur Public Schools Foundation](#) (DPSF) out of Decatur, Illinois, is an organization that's representative of the possibilities for PEFs to create opportunities rewarding creative thinking and innovation. Decatur Science Investigations, funded by the foundation, is a partnership with [Millikin University](#) that brings undergraduate science students into Decatur elementary schools to set up science stations and perform science demonstrations at school assemblies. The goal of the program is to encourage young students to use their imaginations and gain enthusiasm for science, and 100% of teachers [polled](#) in the district felt that the program increased critical thinking and problem solving skills. Another DPSF program is the musical instrument library, which provides band and orchestra instruments to low-income students who might not have otherwise been able to afford them. After the program started in 2009, participation in music programs increased by 15%.

Compared to some of the larger LEFs operating with multi-million dollar budgets, DPSF is a relatively small organization, but it's easy to see how these small-scale efforts can really make a difference to students who benefit from them, and how they might be used to fill in the creativity gap that currently exists in public education. As to whether these organizations will continue to expand and become an important part of education funding in the future, there is no clear answer. What does seem clear is that creative thinking will be the only solution to the myriad complex problems facing coming generations. And, appropriately enough, one of those problems might just be how we're going to fix education.