Education Reform Initiative
The National Chamber Foundation (NCF), a non-profit affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, is dedicated to identifying and fostering public debate on emerging critical issues. We provide business and government leaders with insight and resources to address tomorrow's challenges.

The Institute for a Competitive Workforce (ICW) is the non-profit, non-partisan, 501(c)3 affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. ICW promotes the rigorous educational standards and effective job training systems needed to preserve the strength of America's greatest economic resource, its workforce.

Through its events, publications, and policy initiatives—and drawing upon the Chamber's extensive network of 3 million members—ICW connects the best minds in American business with the most innovative thinkers in American education, helping them work together to ensure the nation's continued prosperity.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is the world's largest business federation representing the interests of more than 3 million businesses of all sizes, sectors, and regions, as well as state and local chambers and industry associations.

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In early 2011, U.S. Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Tom Donohue stated in his annual State of American Business address, "Rebuilding America’s economic foundation is about more than the physical infrastructure. It is fundamentally about people—developing the talents of our children and workers, and ensuring that our country continues to lead the world in innovation." However, America is failing. Among 34 developed countries, American students rank 14th in reading, 17th in science, and 25th in mathematics, and an American high school student drops out every 27 seconds.

To increase American competitiveness and strengthen our economy, the business community must actively engage on issues related to our nation’s education system.

Over the past 14 months, the National Chamber Foundation (NCF), Institute for a Competitive Workforce (ICW), and U.S. Chamber of Commerce (USCC) have worked with key partners in the business community to highlight the extent of the crisis in our schools, identify forces standing in the way of needed change, and promote positive solutions such as competition, accountability, and choice to provide America’s children with the education they deserve and employers with the workers they need.

Through their partnership, NCF, ICW and USCC reached business, opinion, and local leaders around the country by screening the documentary Waiting for “Superman,” creating and distributing materials and resources to state and local chambers of commerce, and engaging local and state business leaders to host follow-up forums and events to invigorate our grassroots network.
In September 2010, the partnership announced a 12-city tour to promote and discuss the groundbreaking documentary *Waiting for “Superman,”* which tells the story of five children as they make their way through America’s failing public education system.

In screenings from Albany to San Diego, employers, teachers, parents, and community leaders agreed that they are done waiting and ready to take action to support public education reform. In each city, the partnership worked with the state or local chamber of commerce to screen the film and host a panel of business leaders, education officials, and state and local policymakers, spurring vigorous debate on education reform.

Over 11 weeks, the partnership screened the film for more than 2,200 people in the following cities:

- Albany, New York
- Atlanta, Georgia
- Austin, Texas
- Denver, Colorado
- Durham, North Carolina
- Indianapolis, Indiana
- Newark, New Jersey
- Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
- Salt Lake City, Utah
- San Diego, California
- St. Louis, Missouri
- Tallahassee, Florida
To complement the screenings, the partnership produced a variety of materials arming business leaders with the tools and resources needed to effect change in their communities.

**The “Superman” Approach: A Business Leader’s Guide to Effective Education Reform**

For many years, business has invested in education by funding projects that have little effect on student achievement—the “Clark Kent” approach. The “Superman” approach encourages business leaders to reevaluate their current investments and start asking whether they are getting a return on their investment. This toolkit illustrates how business leaders can take a “Superman” approach and make a real difference in three key areas: great teachers and leaders, more innovation, and better data.

**Education in Your State: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly**

To inform business leaders of the chilling reality about student achievement in their state, fact sheets for every state and the District of Columbia were developed to compare the condition of K–12 public education across nine categories. The fact sheets give business leaders, parents, community leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders a snapshot of the education landscape in each state—what’s good, what’s bad, and what’s downright ugly. The fact sheets are meant to arm leaders with basic facts and spur them to learn more about what’s really happening in their schools and statehouses with respect to K–12 public education.

**“Reel” Resources for Education Reform**

In the spring of 2011, outreach continued around the film. The partnership developed and distributed the “Reel” Resources for Education Reform toolkit to more than 2,500 associations and state and local chambers of commerce. The toolkit contained the aforementioned publications, The “Superman” Approach and Education in Your State fact sheets, a copy of the film, and other materials designed to encourage engagement in local education policies and programs.
To encourage action and engagement, the partnership targeted key stakeholders by hosting screenings and arming them with materials to host their own screenings in their community.

In early 2011, the partnership held a screening for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's and NCF's Board of Directors, and the Chamber of Commerce Committee of 100, an elite group of chamber executives that represents the perspectives and needs of chambers and their members to the U.S. Chamber. Before the screening, former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings stressed that employer engagement must be vigorous in order to address some of the greatest challenges facing education in this country.

In March, the partnership hosted a call with Michelle Rhee, former District of Columbia public school chancellor and founder of StudentsFirst, and Secretary Spellings for U.S. Chamber members including businesses, local and state chambers, and industry associations. Ms. Rhee and Secretary Spellings spoke to the importance of the business community's involvement in education reform. Spellings also encouraged participants to utilize the “Reel” Resources for Education Reform toolkits to host a screening of their own and learn more about education in their state.

Following the call, “Reel” Resources toolkits were sent to all Federation members—more than 2,200 state and local chambers of commerce and associations. More than 20 organizations screened the documentary—some held multiple screenings—and distributed state fact sheets to their audiences. These screenings gave community leaders the opportunity to engage the local business community in education reform efforts.

The partnership sent “Reel” Resources toolkits to members of the United States House of Representatives Education and Workforce Committee to share with them the partnership’s reform efforts with the state and local chambers.
In the summer and fall of 2011, the partnership collaborated with chambers in Kentucky, Alabama, Texas, Colorado, Missouri, Tennessee, and Utah to discuss reforms and promote the business community’s active engagement in education. In July, Secretary Spellings was joined by international education consultant Sir Michael Barber and Kentucky Commissioner of Education Terry Holliday at the Kentucky Chamber’s Business Summit to discuss the future of education in the state. Also in July, the Business Council of Alabama held its annual government affairs conference at which Secretary Spellings gave a keynote address to more than 500 of Alabama's top business, education, and government leaders.

In early September, the partnership hosted a VIP dinner in Austin, Texas, where business leaders from major industries discussed the impact of education on their workforce. The discussion, moderated by Secretary Spellings, focused on what has worked in Texas and where additional reforms are needed. Individual industries and businesses need to define what types of approaches and results would ultimately lead to a stronger workforce, ranging from a focus on fundamental skills such as mathematics and science to the need for strong vocational training.

More than 250 business and community leaders came to the Get Educated! event on September 13 in Denver, Colorado. The Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce with support from the partnership hosted the event, at which Rhee and Spellings answered questions on what the business community must do to help improve Colorado schools. The Denver Metro Chamber counts education, along with transportation and health care, as one of three pillars that support a healthy and thriving economy in Colorado.

In St. Louis, Missouri, the partnership joined the Business Civic Leadership Center in a forum on community investment in education. The St. Louis forum brought together businesses, associations, and community leaders to discuss education priorities, challenges, and opportunities to help sustain competitiveness and long-term development of their communities. The discussion focused on local coordination issues in education, what role businesses and government should play, and the definition of an effective educational system in the community.

The partnership worked with the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce to host a luncheon in Nashville, Tennessee, in mid-October. Secretary Spellings spoke to business and education leaders about the importance of business involvement in education in the keynote address. The event drew more than 250 people interested in learning more about how business partnerships create tangible change in local communities.

In late October, the Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce joined the partnership for a breakfast event to discuss the importance of education in future economic prosperity. Nearly 100 local business executives and education leaders met in conjunction with the Salt Lake Chamber’s efforts surrounding Prosperity 2020—a movement aimed at advancing educational investment and innovation that has galvanized Utah’s business and community leaders.
In response to grassroots outreach, there were many requests for additional anecdotal and qualitative evidence in support of education reform efforts. NCF and ICW subsequently commissioned several pieces of research and repurposed existing data and findings.

**School Board Candidate Questionnaire and Case Studies**

School boards play a unique role in school district governance and provide a venue for communities to have democratic input into local education decisions. However, little attention is paid to the work of these bodies and the important decisions they make. To inform business leaders and voters, the partnership developed a list of nonpartisan questions that anyone can use to gauge the views and knowledge of school board candidates and sitting members. These questions, developed in consultation with national education governance and policy experts and school board veterans, can be included in a written questionnaire or asked at public forums. They are designed to be customizable for individual districts and communities, regardless of size or geography.

In addition to the Candidate Questionnaire, the partnership commissioned case studies of three urban school districts: Austin, Texas; Denver, Colorado; and Los Angeles, California. The case studies examine the circumstances of each district and the how each attempts to make gains on student achievement through governance. Business leaders can use this anecdotal evidence to promote reform in their communities.

**The Ugly Truth: A State-by-State Snapshot of Education in America**

There is a need for a comprehensive look at the condition of K–12 education across the country. Reform advocates must have reliable and comparable data at their disposal. *The Ugly Truth* is a compendium of the *Education in Your State* fact sheets that includes an analysis of how to use the data and what they mean for the nation as a whole.
Press and Media

Over the course of the initiative, the partnership has engaged in a robust communications and outreach strategy through events, screenings, publications, and earned and paid media. Twenty-six news stories, opinion editorials, blogs, and television hits were placed in strategic and influential publications, including The Denver Post, The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, The Oklahoman, and The Salt Lake City Tribune.

Online advertisements were created to drive citizens to a website that features The Ugly Truth…the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. These ads were targeted to specific cities as part of the follow-up activities. Each ad was placed in the online platform of the market’s largest newspaper in order to raise the profile of the need for education reform and drive traffic to the partnership’s site. The results of the ad campaigns exceeded expectations.

As a result of the ad buys, thousands of people were educated on their state’s performance in comparison with the rest of the nation. This comprehensive communications strategy has moved the topic of education reform to the forefront of the public consciousness.

Conclusion

The Daniels Fund grant allowed NCF and ICW to go into communities around the country to find the “who, what, and how” of state and local education reform efforts. Leadership by the business community is key to solving the crisis in our schools, and now is the time to keep the momentum going. Through the events, publications, research, and outreach, business and community leaders are armed to continue to communicate, engage, motivate, and follow up with the associations and local and state chambers of commerce to ensure that each child is educated, prepared, and given a chance to succeed in this country.