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## Foundations fill the gap

*Districts rely on dollars raised by parents, alumni, community*

**Tom Kleckner**

**Special to the Business Press**

### FOUNDATIONS: FACT FILE

#### Foundation for Allen Schools

In the almost two decades since the McKinney Education Foundation's inception, John Valencia still comes across people in McKinney who have not yet heard about the MEF.

School district size: 18,000 students/\$137 million budget.

Organized: 1998; 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

Purpose: Support teachers and students, enrich and expand Allen ISD's educational goals.

He still, as he puts it, has to "peddle" the foundation's story. Not that he minds, mind you.

Results: Funded almost \$395,000 in educational grants in Allen ISD since 2001; began endowment fund with more than \$200,000.

"We have to keep the energy going, we have to keep knocking on doors, we have to keep telling our story," said Valencia, a founding member of the MEF's board of trustees and now a trustee emeritus. "If everybody knew about us, it would be different, but they don't."

#### Frisco Education Foundation

School district size: 37,000 students/\$241 million budget.

Organized: 1998; 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

Purpose: Provide financial resources to maximize student potential in the Frisco ISD through educational programs, student scholarships and grants for innovative educators.

Fortunately, Valencia never tires of relating the MEF story, which dates back to 1991. Valencia, general manager of Primo Microphones in his spare time, said, "Anything we can do to provide kids with financial resources and further their educations is what it's all about."

Results: Awarded \$1.85 million worth of scholarship funds since 1999, gave more than \$150,000 in grant money to educators.

#### McKinney Education Foundation

The MEF story is a good one. McKinney businesses and philanthropists pooling their contributions to fund scholarships – more than \$304,600 last year alone – for the town's high school graduates. More than 400 McKinney Independent School District graduates currently receive financial assistance, thanks to the MEF's \$4.3 million endowment fund.

School district size: 24,000 students/\$184 million budget.

Organized: 1991; 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

Purpose: Enrich education and encourage and assist McKinney students to achieve higher education.

And while the MEF story still may not be a last-page twist to some in McKinney, its success is well known within the world of education foundations – both locally and nationally.

Results: Endowment fund of \$4.3 million; awarded \$304,600 in scholarships to MISD seniors in 2010; more than 400 MISD graduates currently

receive financial assistance.

#### Plano ISD Education Foundation

The MEF's early success and high profile – Texas Gov. George W. Bush helped kick off its endowment campaign – spurred the formation of other foundations in Collin County, including those in Allen, Frisco and Wylie. The Plano ISD Education Foundation, originally an advisory group, became a formal fundraising group around the same time.

School district size: 54,000 students/\$450 million budget.

Organized: 1993; 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

Purpose: Address gaps in tax revenue by generating private support for priority projects identified by PISD.

Results: Raises \$1million a year, almost \$6 million gifted to PISD since 2000 for programs, services of importance to district

The MEF is focused on inspiring students and teachers to reach excellence, and does so through five programs: scholarships, classroom grants, professional-development grants, the McKinney Ex-Students Association and the MEF Advisors.

MEF Executive Director Melanie Perkins said the foundation's Advisors program is one example of how the MEF has adapted to changing times. The MEF places an adviser – or higher education admission specialist – at each of McKinney's three high schools, to help students in seeking financial aid and moving through the college admissions process. In the six years since the program began, the

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advisers have counseled hundreds of families and helped find more than \$35 million in additional financial assistance.

"We realized that there are also millions of dollars in scholarships, grants and loans available from myriad outside sources," Perkins said. "Very few public schools have individuals dedicated exclusively to assisting students in finding financial aid, grants and scholarships for post-high school education. McKinney has been one of the fastest-growing cities in America since 2000; additional students mean an increasing need for scholarships and financial aid, making the MEF Advisors an even more essential service."

It's innovations like these that have attracted national notice. The MEF's operations director, Margaret Harsch, is a frequent speaker at national conferences, and MEF staff are accustomed to being asked for counsel and advice whenever they venture out into industry circles.

"It's pretty exciting when they say, 'Oh, you're with the MEF,' " Valencia said. "Can we talk?"

And like all the education foundations in Collin County, the MEF willingly shares its lessons learned and best practices.

"I have never worked in a professional environment where everyone was so willing to share ideas, suggestions, strategies," said Regina Taylor, executive director of The Foundation for Allen Schools. "Maybe it is because we all have the same long-term goal - to raise well-educated children who will reach their full potential and become engaged, positive citizens."

The Allen foundation gears part of its program to strengthening its teachers' skills with grants for graduate school or additional teaching certificates. The foundation has awarded more than \$60,000 from its Advanced Academic Fund.

"Assisting teachers with the cost of graduate school or training helps make our district more competitive in the North Texas market," Taylor said. "We are helping Allen ISD hire and retain the best educators."

Taylor's foundation, like the others in Collin County, also is dealing with today's economic realities. Grants have become smaller, in order to stretch the dollars and reach more beneficiaries. Meanwhile, student populations continue to rise, especially in Frisco and McKinney.

The Frisco Education Foundation was originally charged with supporting six campuses and one high school graduating class. It now raises funds and runs programs for six graduating classes and 52 additional campuses.

"We are very fortunate to be in a community and school district that has rallied around our mission in the name of youth," said FEF Executive Director Allison Miller. "As Fisd grows, so does ... the number of funding requests we receive. Meeting this challenge can only mean we have made a greater impact on a larger number of students."

Of course, school budget limitations are beginning to force some foundations to pick up more of the basic educational costs. The Plano ISD Education Foundation, which currently raises about \$1 million a year and has handed out \$6 million to Plano ISD programs and services since 2000, has plans to begin an endowment campaign as part of its aggressive growth and development.

"We are looking to expand our base of large corporate and philanthropic foundation partners and increase support from Plano ISD alumni, parents, community and employees," said Lesley Range-Stanton, Plano ISD's director of communications.

But the student numbers keep rising, putting an increased strain on the funds available. Last year, the MEF awarded scholarships to 230 of the about 450 applicants, out of a class of 1,200.

"It's heartbreaking ... you can't give them all scholarships," Valencia said. "You do what you can do with what you've got, and that's why we're still at it."

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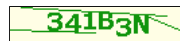
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