



INSIGHT

Lessons learned from our grantmaking programs

# Midcourse Corrections to a Major Initiative

*A Report on The James Irvine Foundation's  
CORAL Experience*

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## Foreword

By the very nature of their work, foundations enjoy privileged access to knowledge. Our offices overflow with tangible manifestations of this knowledge in the form of grant reports, evaluations, assessments, and research studies. This information is complemented by the knowledge gleaned by our staff given their daily work in the field. And yet, for all of this, most of what foundations learn rarely gets captured and shared in any formal way. Moreover, foundations are often criticized for focusing solely on the good news and positive results on those rare occasions when they do share their knowledge. This is not such a report.

In 1999, The James Irvine Foundation launched a major initiative, called Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning (CORAL), to improve the educational performance of low-achieving students in California by focusing on five sites. Envisioned as an eight-year, \$60 million initiative, it would be the largest undertaking by Irvine in the Foundation's history. While we do not yet have final evaluation results (and we intend to share those early in 2008), we do have a story to tell about our need to change the course of the initiative midstream. It is a complicated and difficult story, for it reveals numerous shortcomings on our Foundation's part. We felt compelled to share these lessons in the hope that others might benefit from this experience and avoid similar pitfalls.

In order to glean what specific lessons might be applicable to others, we asked Gary Walker, the former President of Public/Private Ventures, to reflect on that question and to share his observations. His firm was a key partner for us in reorienting the focus of CORAL, as you will read in this report, so he is not a dispassionate observer. At the same time, he and his colleagues brought a necessary rigor to the midcourse correction, and he participated actively in the process of implementing it. He was provided access to numerous internal documents, he interviewed key Board and staff, and this published product reflects his findings and observations, not ours, which is as we wanted it.

Finally, it bears noting that while there has been much change at Irvine since 1999, I served as Vice President at the time and was an active part of the leadership team that formulated and launched this initiative. I note this fact because it is often much easier for foundations to reflect upon (and criticize) the work of their predecessors, but that is not the case here. I assume my share of the responsibility for how this initiative unfolded, and I sought to help in its reorientation a few years ago. We are certainly committed to learning from this experience at Irvine, and I hope the lessons captured here might shed light for others in the future.



**James E. Canales**  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
The James Irvine Foundation  
May 2007

## Author's Note

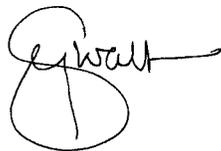
The James Irvine Foundation asked me to document and draw lessons from the midcourse assessment and change that it undertook on its CORAL initiative, both for the Foundation's internal reflection and in the hope that the findings would be useful to the broader philanthropic community.

I was part of the CORAL assessment and change, serving as president of Public/Private Ventures when the organization was awarded a grant through a competitive process to assist the Foundation in the effort. I have intimate direct knowledge of the midcourse change process. I also admittedly have a bias — that it was a useful process. The reader will draw his or her own conclusions.

The Foundation was completely open to my inspection of internal documents; interviews with Foundation staff and Board were very frank; and I was encouraged to come to my own judgments. In addition to Foundation interviews and documents, I drew heavily on Public/Private Ventures' experience with the five CORAL cities and Foundation staff in my analysis. In arriving at lessons, I am also influenced by my own three decades of experience with major philanthropic initiatives while working at MDRC and Public/Private Ventures, and by my experience serving on the boards of directors of various foundations.

The lessons and recommendations I present in this report emerged from this CORAL experience and from my broader experience with large initiatives and philanthropy. Though some foundations, including The James Irvine Foundation, have already implemented some or all of these recommendations, my experience is that they are not common practice. Yet over the past two decades, multiyear, multisite, multimillion dollar philanthropic initiatives have become increasingly common, and history reveals that the challenges many face are not unlike those encountered by CORAL.

I hope this report is helpful in addressing an accompanying issue: How can a foundation best prepare to decide if major, midcourse change is necessary? None of my recommendations guarantees ultimate success; they are meant to increase the odds of success. None is meant to stifle the ambition, vision, and entrepreneurialism that are critical to mounting and carrying out major social initiatives; they are intended, instead, to channel and focus these intentions on genuine accomplishment.



**Gary Walker**  
President Emeritus  
Public/Private Ventures

## Executive Summary

At the midpoint of its CORAL initiative, The James Irvine Foundation gathered lessons about the pitfalls of planning and adjusting large-scale philanthropic programs — lessons it wishes to share with peer foundations and others who pursue ambitious social change objectives. Using the example of the CORAL initiative, this report describes the context and motivations behind the inception of major programming, pinpoints the grantmaker inclinations that help and hinder program design and implementation, and recommends strategies for overcoming the inherent challenges to honest midcourse assessments and improved program results.

**Key Findings: The CORAL Initiative Surfaced a Set of Inherent Challenges that in Turn Led to Significant Lessons Learned with Regard to the Design, Assessment, and Correction of Major Philanthropic Initiatives**

### Inherent challenges

- Foundations are pressured to address critical social issues and take risks; change in an initiative may be perceived as a lack of willingness to maintain a commitment
- Ongoing program reviews merit lower priority than new grant work
- Major social initiatives address difficult-to-measure social issues
- Foundation staff primarily devoted to an initiative face conflicts of interest between personal promotion and surfacing needs for major change
- Grantees instinctively do not want major change in an initiative
- Grantee performance (or underperformance) has no relationship to the amount of assets a foundation has available to distribute

### Lessons learned

- Do not commit to a major initiative without a well-vetted theory of change, clear interim outcomes, and a field-tested information system that produces reliable outcome data
- Think critically about the facts on which the initiative is based
- Think equally critically about grantee and staff capacities and their alignment with initiative priorities
- Make external, midcourse review a planned event in large-scale initiatives
- Establish ongoing and structural internal oversight of initiative performance
- Be cautious about calls for more time, more resources, and more assistance

**The Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning (CORAL) Initiative**

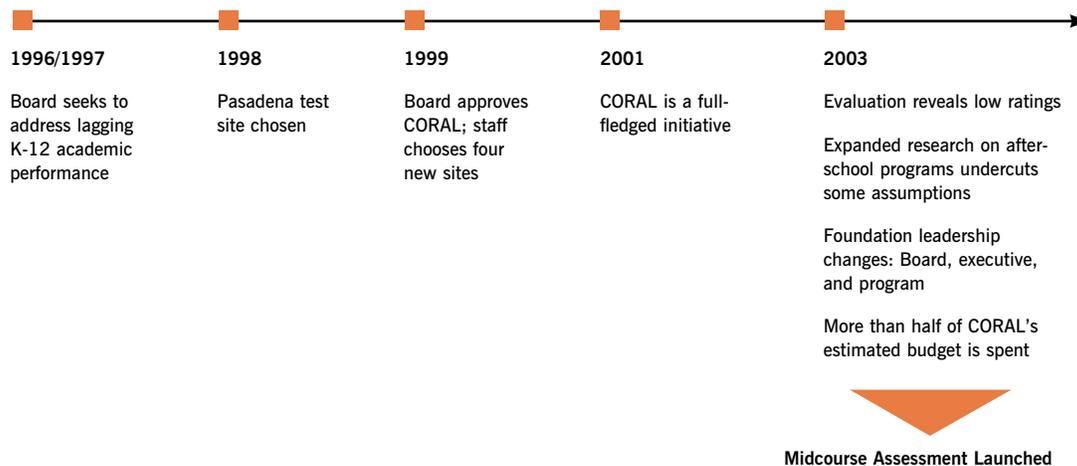
The James Irvine Foundation launched the eight-year CORAL initiative in 1999 with the goal of helping to improve the academic achievement of children in the lowest-performing schools in five California cities: Pasadena, Long Beach, Fresno, San Jose, and Sacramento. CORAL is based on the premise that education is a community-wide responsibility, and not just the province of public schools, and therefore involves students, families, schools, and community-based organizations in high-quality out-of-school learning opportunities.

As a result of the Foundation’s efforts, 37 program sites in these cities served approximately 5,000 youth from low-income, low-performing schools. Most of the youth were of elementary-school age, primarily first- to fifth-graders, with a small proportion in middle-school grades. The Foundation provided implementation support in all of the cities, with the objective of funding the initiative for five to six years in each site. To date, the Foundation has committed \$58 million to CORAL, making it the most significant and ambitious initiative undertaken by Irvine.

In January 2004, the Foundation selected Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) to serve as both the intermediary organization and evaluator to assist in leading the CORAL Initiative in its remaining years. An extensive review of the initiative revealed that, while all the CORAL sites shared the goal of improving the academic achievement of youths, programming in the early years of implementation varied greatly from city to city in its educational content. The educational content typically consisted of homework help and enrichment activities, offering youth opportunities to develop social skills, participate in sports, and explore expressive arts in a safe and supervised environment. In some cases, the enrichment activities had academic content specifically related to the school-day curriculum, but this aspect was not implemented consistently from city to city.

In 2006-2007, the final years of the initiative, P/PV staff is working closely with the lead organizations in the five CORAL cities. This work focuses on the quality and effectiveness of the sites’ after-school programming in order to enhance their capacity to improve student academic performance and ensure that lessons from the CORAL experience are documented and disseminated to the out-of-school field.

**CORAL Initiative Timeline**



## Genesis of the Initiative

In June 1999, the Board of Directors of The James Irvine Foundation voted to undertake what ultimately would be the largest initiative in the Foundation's history: an eight-year, \$58 million effort to improve the educational performance of low-achieving students in California. The initiative, called Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning (CORAL), had two major goals:

- Plan and fund after-school programs through a community organizing and nonprofit collaboration process that would improve in-school performance of youth in five demonstration cities in California
- Mobilize a shared sense of responsibility among families, schools, and communities to support and educate children in CORAL cities and beyond and to advocate for statewide education reforms

### Compelling Need

The Foundation's decision to undertake CORAL was the product of extensive Board-staff interaction over a two-year period. The impetus came in 1996–97 from several Board members who called attention to the critical nature of California's lagging performance at the K-12 level and perceived a necessity for the Foundation to get involved.

Almost two decades after the well-known Kerner Commission report, data on educational achievement indicated a lack of substantial or widespread progress in California. The number of non-English-speaking immigrant children entering California was rising. And the federal Department of Education had recently increased its investment in after-school programming from \$50 million to \$1 billion, creating an opportunity to influence the use of federal as well as state, local, and private dollars.

**Staff consulted with a number of educational leaders and academics who had experience with non-school, community organization-based educational programming.**

### Inquiry and Debate

Due to restrictions of its trust concerning the support of public entities, the Foundation had little direct experience in K-12 public education. Still, inspired by the Board's interest and motivated by the compelling need, the Foundation's staff was determined to find some way to become involved in improving academic performance — particularly that of economically disadvantaged youth already behind in school. Senior staff envisioned a multi-site demonstration program where community organizations, families, and community leaders would work together to create an agenda of shared

educational goals, advanced through after-school activities delivered via the coordinated efforts of local youth service providers.

By focusing on after-school programs, the Foundation would avoid a direct engagement with the complex world of public education, where it had limited experience given its trust restriction. By requiring a community organizing and collaboration process in each of five demonstration cities and providing support to youth-serving organizations, the Foundation would draw on its own relevant experience.

Early staff and Board discussions surfaced a dilemma: How could the effort make more than a marginal positive difference in the lives of students without directly engaging public school

institutions? Several Board members wondered if funding advocacy directly might be the better course. It would ensure involvement with key issues, and would avoid the operational complexity of a multisite demonstration of locally coordinated after-school programming. Board members were also concerned about how to effectively transfer to other California cities the operational lessons from the demonstration sites.

**“We need not demonstrate whether community-learning supports can improve academic performance since research and practice strongly support the efficacy of community education. Rather, what needs demonstrating is whether we can do this at scale.”**

*Staff presentation as documented in minutes of June 1998 Board Meeting*

Staff consulted with a number of educational leaders and academics who had experience with non-school, community organization-based educational programming. They arranged for several of these experts to share their knowledge at a Foundation Board retreat. After almost two years of discussions and planning, the Board formally approved proceeding with CORAL.

The factors that ultimately led to the Foundation’s decision included:

- Both Board and staff’s desire to address a critical social issue, in this case lagging student achievement
- Staff’s follow-up planning work, which was affirmed by outside experts and resulted in building momentum and reinforcing internal enthusiasm for undertaking the project
- Staff assurance that the aspect of the project where the Foundation had the least experience — specifically, the content of after-school programming that would produce educational results — could be guided by solid evidence and the experience of others
- A belief that the initiative was structured to have influence beyond the demonstration sites

## Early Implementation Experience

### Test Site

CORAL planning papers recommended neither a competitive process to select the demonstration sites nor any local financial contribution to each site's operation. The Foundation would fund the entire initiative, and it would handpick the localities involved.

The planners called for a test site — one city that would undertake CORAL and generate lessons useful to the decision to proceed with the larger initiative, applicable to the work of possible future sites, and informative to the work of the Foundation. Based on a set of criteria for site selection, Pasadena was chosen as this test site in late 1998. In Pasadena's first year of work, the challenges of widespread community organizing, nonprofit collaboration, school involvement, and program creation emerged. Progress was slower than planned or hoped for. Getting key players in the community to meet, agree on an educational agenda, and establish roles for working together on an after-school program — all of these activities proved staff- and time-consuming.

Three challenges called into question the Foundation's intention for an inclusive process. First, a former YMCA facility became available early in the planning stages, and the Foundation supported, both in principle and financially, the local lead agency's desire to purchase the property. The deal was conducted quickly to secure the property, and other participants in the community planning process objected because they were not consulted and because the location of the property presented transportation challenges for students from poorer areas. Second, many of the participants were under the impression that funding decisions would derive from the community planning process and were unaware that the lead agency would be a re-granting authority for Foundation funds. Third, the community organizations involved in the planning process did not want to target specific age groups or "gateway" markers as the Foundation had planned. Foundation staff had identified a set of key developmental gateways, such as the ability to read at grade level by fourth grade, that have been linked with continued academic success and that might, therefore, serve as leverage points for programmatic intervention.

**Progress was slower than planned or hoped for.**

Internal memos documented these difficulties in Pasadena and reflected increasing staff concern about the challenges inherent to CORAL. Already very much engaged in and enthusiastic about the initiative, staff did not interpret these difficulties as reasons to slow down or reconsider the CORAL initiative, but rather as challenges that could be addressed by applying additional Foundation staff and technical assistance and by providing more planning time at future sites.

## Planning to Move Forward

At their inception, initiatives like CORAL are typically planned at foundation headquarters and endorsed by outside experts. Often, early operational experience is much rockier than anticipated, posing significant questions: What should be done? By whom? When?

In the case of CORAL, a national advisory group was being formed, composed mostly of the experts who had enthusiastically endorsed the effort's community organizing and collaboration approach. But even if this group had been fully functioning, and even if it had expressed concern, it lacked formal oversight authority.

The Foundation had recently hired a program director to direct and oversee its Children, Youth and Families program, of which CORAL was the major initiative. That director shared the perspective of Foundation staff involved in CORAL's planning that Pasadena's issues were a source of lessons, and recommended that the Board devote additional Foundation resources to technical assistance and proceed to select several new sites.

### Decision-Making Factors: The Foundation Recognized Several Potential Challenges to Proceeding with CORAL, but Compelling Forces Prevailed

#### Compelling forces

- California's lagging K-12 performance
- Achievement gap between general population and economically disadvantaged students
- Increasing federal investment in after-school programs
- Board and staff interest
- Affirmation and support of experts
- Community organizing expertise within the Foundation

#### Causes for concern

- Little prior Foundation experience in K-12 public education
- Ability to transfer lessons to other California cities in question
- Test site surfaces planning and alignment issues



## Initiative Launch

Though meeting minutes reflect several Board members' concerns about CORAL's early "test experience," staff enthusiasm and recommendations prevailed. Challenges emerged in areas where the Foundation had experience, and staff did not think them insoluble. More resources were dedicated; more staff members were hired; more consultants were brought on. Over the next 18 months, staff chose four new cities for extended pre-planning and organizing work. A research firm was selected and began to design a formal outcomes evaluation and a management information system to guide the evaluation and ongoing local management of CORAL.

By 2001, CORAL was a full-fledged major initiative of The James Irvine Foundation. Based on the early experiences in Pasadena and at the other selected sites, and on Foundation staff's response to those experiences, CORAL evolved to provide technical consultants assisting each participant site with six major components:

- Community-wide organizing and planning based on educational goals and issues
- Nonprofit collaboration in the design and implementation of an array of after-school programs managed by the lead agency
- Family outreach and training to improve parental involvement in individual youth and community education issues
- A summer work/learning institute for older youth
- A Web-based communication system for cross-site and Foundation-site communication
- Evaluation and information systems

**Challenges emerged in areas where the Foundation had experience, and staff did not think them insoluble.**

Foundation staff told each of the five demonstration sites and their Foundation-selected lead agencies that, to meet their ambitious organizing, coordinating and programmatic goals, each would be granted \$2 million a year, for six years. Four full-time Foundation staff members worked primarily on CORAL and its five demonstration cities, and 15 consultants were engaged to assist the cities in their organizing, coordinating, and programmatic efforts.

## Midpoint Assessment and Correction

### Forces of Change

The Foundation's intention was that, by 2003, CORAL's five sites would be in full operation. Organizing and coordinating work had consumed much of this period's time and resources, and the number of youth enrolled in a CORAL after-school program was much smaller than expected. It proved challenging to develop and implement a system to collect CORAL participant registration

**New themes cast serious doubt on previous assertions that had served as CORAL's foundation.**

and attendance information. These challenges delayed analysis of the links between participation of youth and documented outcomes, hampering the ability of evaluators to produce timely data. In May 2003, the evaluation firm's first major report to the Foundation gave, with a few exceptions, low ratings to the quality of programming in the five cities. Aside from "homework help," the report indicated that none of the programming had a direct educational component, instead offering students opportunities to enjoy new, enriching activities through their participation in art, music and sports. The evaluators also reported that the involvement of public schools and the alignment of programming with classroom teaching were, at best, inconsistent.

Foundation staff and Board members were very concerned, not only because of the lagging performance of CORAL sites, but because a stock market decline had decreased Foundation assets by 20 percent. CORAL was the Foundation's most expensive project. Its low performance made it an obvious target for spending cuts.

In addition, the body of knowledge about after-school programming had increased during the 1997–2003 period, undercutting some previous assumptions about the relationship between after-school programming and educational performance. Three general themes emerged from the expanded research literature: 1) It is very difficult to change educational performance through after-school programming — some scholars said that, given the modest hours involved compared to in-school time, it is nearly impossible; 2) it is likely to be especially difficult to change educational performance without direct connections to the skills or knowledge tested by schools; and 3) those students with the poorest school performance and greatest need for help are likely to lack basic literacy skills, rendering approaches like homework help largely ineffective.

These new themes emerged from a selection of rigorous studies and earlier scholarly work that had become more visible as the public sector's interest and investment in after-school programming grew dramatically in the 1997–2003 period. The new themes cast serious doubt on previous assertions about the positive potential of after-school programming to improve in-school performance — assertions that had served as CORAL's foundation.

Equally important, The James Irvine Foundation had new executive and program leadership and new Board members. Aware of this emerging knowledge and faced with reports indicating weakness in almost every aspect of CORAL's operation, the Foundation's new leaders decided that an external perspective was needed.

The Board agreed with the staff's recommendation. More than half of CORAL's ultimate \$58 million cost had been spent, with little to show. The original concerns of some Board members surfaced more strongly, and new members were anxious to establish firm standards of accountability.

**Precursors: Challenges at many levels precipitated CORAL's midcourse review**



**Midcourse Review and Recommendation**

Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) won separate competitions to serve as the initiative's intermediary manager and evaluator. P/PV's first job was to carry out a midcourse assessment helping Foundation staff and Board determine if CORAL should be continued, and if so, what form it should take.

P/PV's assessment, based on examination of all data and documents produced, and on the results of structured observations and interviews by P/PV staff teams at each of the five CORAL sites, echoed and expanded the quality concerns of the original evaluator. Based on enrollment numbers, the assessment calculated CORAL's cost per youth to be well beyond the \$1,000 to \$2,000 range that public and private funders around the nation would typically provide for after-school programs.

Given the results of recent studies about the low potential of after-school programming for improving in-school performance, the assessment also found that, in most of the cities, direct educational content was minimal or absent. Where it did occur, it was likely to be homework help of little use to students lacking basic literacy skills. The problem was larger than weak implementation. Even if improved, it was highly unlikely to meet CORAL's original goal of improving student performance without substantial change in the basic program design.

P/PV's major recommendation was to focus CORAL's work on providing after-school programming that contained a structured literacy component to improve the basic reading and writing skills of third- and fourth-graders performing below grade level. P/PV would have to approve this new literacy component and also provide assistance in design, training, and assessing implementation. P/PV had substantial experience in designing and testing literacy models, and in after-school programming of this nature.

P/PV also recommended that the organizing, family outreach, summer institute, and communication technology components would have to be cut back substantially — not solely because of the Foundation's funding reductions (from \$2 million to \$1.6 million per year, per CORAL site in 2003; further reduced in 2004 to \$1.2 million per year, per site) — but also because these components were distracting participating cities from their significant, critical goal: to implement an after-school program that had a reasonable chance of improving basic skills and school performance.

### Managing Change

The recommendation signified, in many respects, a fresh start for the CORAL sites. They would no longer be funded to operate a summer institute for older youth. The emphasis on community organizing was greatly reduced. Requirements for a communication linkage among the sites and branding of the CORAL name were downscaled or abandoned. Instead, the sites

were to focus on upgrading the quality of their enrichment programming, adding a high-quality literacy component, and reducing their cost per student.

**Major mid-course recommendation: focus on after-school programming containing a structured literacy component to improve basic reading and writing skills of third- and fourth-graders performing below grade level.**

The Foundation's new leaders supported these recommendations. Their own judgments were affirmed by this rigorous assessment of CORAL's design and implementation. The recommendations afforded hope that CORAL's original goal could be met without terminating the initiative and seriously undercutting the reputations and capacities of the lead organizations in the five cities — or

destroying the hope for young people that the initiative had stimulated among many local institutions and leaders.

The Foundation's Board also supported these recommendations, but asserted that it would not extend the initiative's original projected length: six years for each city. These changes, and the evaluation of their outcomes, would take place within the approximately three years remaining in the initiative.

Participants at all five demonstration cities decided to remain involved, though they vocalized concerns about the changes. They had to adjust to working with an intermediary rather than directly

with the original Foundation staff, taking on new and unfamiliar literacy work, dismantling CORAL components they had focused on for several years — with further funding reductions if the changes did not go well. Not surprisingly, all of these adjustments were upsetting.

The Foundation had concluded that this major initiative needed a midcourse assessment by an independent agency. It had then made the difficult decision to keep the initiative alive, but to change it significantly. And, the Foundation had shifted the locus of responsibility for managing these changes from an internal staff team to an outside intermediary, with continued involvement by Irvine’s senior program staff in oversight, grantmaking decisions, reporting, and evaluation.

Two years later, the midcourse correction has been accomplished in four of the original five sites. Each city has a good to high-quality literacy component coupled with enrichment activities, such as art or sports. Each CORAL city provides a good model for integrating youth development and educational activities, and each has maintained its distinct identity.

**All participants at the five demonstration sites decided to remain involved, though they vocalized concerns about the changes.**

These changes required extensive hands-on training and onsite observation and feedback. P/PV literacy staff often spent weeks in individual cities working with local staff. The change process incorporated several written performance reviews each year, as well as annual reviews with each city at the Foundation’s offices. The “correction” work required approximately \$500,000 of P/PV staff time each year — over \$100,000 per city. Throughout, it was not always clear that change would take place with the level of quality desired by all parties.

### **Awaiting Results**

CORAL’s final evaluation results are not yet in, so the initiative’s ultimate implications are unknown. Interim findings indicate a clear connection between a youth’s literacy progress and the quality of programming he or she receives, as assessed by a CORAL-wide instrument devised by P/PV. These findings also show that the youths furthest behind make the most significant literacy advances.

It is also accepted that, whatever the final results, they will be the product of a clear, well-implemented idea. The CORAL initiative of today is expected to advance understanding of what educational gains can be accomplished by after-school programming, which groups of youth are likely to receive the greatest benefit from the programming, the relationship of results to varying levels of program quality, and the costs of these accomplishments, while also yielding a more concrete definition of “quality.” It is anticipated that this knowledge will be useful to policymakers, administrators, and program operators. And through the capture and dissemination of this knowledge, the basic purpose of a multisite research demonstration will have been met. Whether CORAL will

provide a model for widespread replication or some fundamental principles for broader adaptation remains to be seen.

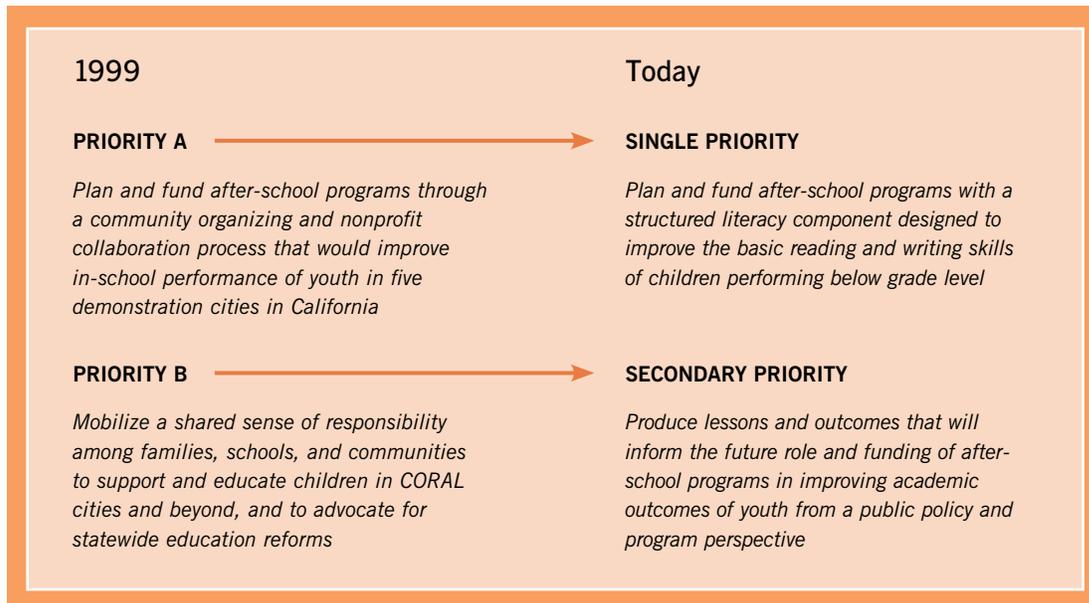
The second of CORAL’s two original goals — to build advocacy strength for educational issues — will not be accomplished, at least certainly not in the ambitious way originally envisioned.

**Whether CORAL will provide a model for widespread replication or some fundamental principles for broader adaptation remains to be seen.**

The CORAL cities have produced advocates, some of whom sit on committees devising the rules for California’s state funding of after-school programs under Proposition 49.\* Others are members or leaders of advocacy groups for after-school programming. They advocate strongly for literacy programming as a critical component of any local or statewide after-school effort that aims to increase the educational performance of youth lacking basic skills. But they are individuals, and while they represent the lead agencies in the CORAL cities, they do not represent broad coalitions, as originally hoped. Nor do they, for the most part, focus on issues beyond the funding and operation of after-school programs.

The question posed for this report was less about CORAL’s ultimate strengths and weaknesses than about the midcourse change itself. Did the experience reveal any lessons worthy of future action by The James Irvine Foundation or other foundations?

**Evolving focus: A midcourse review led the Foundation to revisit and narrow CORAL’s priorities**



\*Proposition 49 is a ballot measure approved by California voters in 2002 to expand state support for after-school programs serving California’s elementary and middle school students, basing the state’s annual contribution on the status of California’s general fund.

## Lessons

### Weighing Risks

Multiyear, multisite, multimillion-dollar initiatives like CORAL are not unusual. In fact, they have become increasingly common in philanthropy over the past two decades. These initiatives, like CORAL, address difficult social issues. Each carries a considerable and unavoidable risk that its core ideas are not sufficient or well-crafted enough to produce positive outcomes. Successful mitigation of that risk is only assured when the final results are in.

Early implementation problems such as those experienced at the CORAL sites are not unusual in large-scale initiatives. No formula exists to resolve the hard questions: Should anything be done? By whom? When? Answers are particular to the initiative. It is tempting to assert that arriving at the answers is a simple matter of continuous staff diligence. When implementation issues arise, an organization's best bet is to have enlisted enough capable, experienced staff, and to have incorporated a regular executive and Board review.

**Early implementation problems such as those experienced at the CORAL sites are not unusual in large-scale initiatives.**

But the CORAL initiative had all of these elements: smart, capable staff, and regular executive and Board reviews. Yet at its midpoint — four years and over \$30 million invested — it was experiencing serious implementation problems. The number of participants fell far short of agreed-upon goals. Cost per participant was more than double that which could be supported by public funding streams. The observed quality of programming was poor to moderate. Programming aimed specifically at the initiative's fundamental goal — increasing educational performance — was either weak or nonexistent. Further, recent studies cast serious doubt on the likelihood that CORAL's approach, even if well implemented, would produce educational progress.

### Inherent Challenges

Yet even with this seemingly clear-cut case of a major initiative in deep trouble, it took an unrelated set of external circumstances to force change. The problems outlined in this report happened to coincide with a decline in the Foundation's assets due to the poor economic environment that all foundations faced from 2000 to 2003. During this time period, The James Irvine Foundation was also undergoing a change in executive and program leadership and the initiation of a Foundation-wide strategic planning process. If it were not for these forces external to CORAL, organizational inertia might have prevailed. Why? To put it most directly, the forces, structure, and incentives of the philanthropic world are geared toward staying the course — or expanding the course. The call for more time, resources, and technical assistance is not an unusual large-foundation response to an initiative's early or midcourse problems.

Several inherent challenges work in combination against change:

Foundations are pressured to address critical social issues and take risks. But these very pressures also make it difficult to make major midcourse changes. No philanthropic official wants to be accused of walking away from a tough social issue or being unwilling to take big risks. The risk of failure is sometimes more palatable than the accusation that one has not tried hard enough. This position, in many cases, ultimately prevails over major midcourse change.

***Ongoing program reviews merit lower priority than new grant work.*** For many large foundations, preparing for new grants is a board and staff priority. This is particularly the case at the Board level where, over time, trust is extended to staff working on prior grants, and time and attention are naturally focused on new grants and new areas of work.

***Major social initiatives address difficult-to-measure social issues.*** The issues are complex and the metrics of success are challenging to create — and almost never have a bottom line as direct as a profit/loss statement. The pressure to act and to create major change rarely has a definitive or certain quality to it. It always includes more guesswork than anyone would prefer.

***Foundation staff primarily devoted to an initiative — as was the case with CORAL — face conflicts of interest between personal promotion and surfacing needs for major change.*** Staff members' continued employment and opportunity for advancement are tied to the initiative's longevity and

**Major social initiatives address difficult-to-measure social issues. The issues are complex and the metrics of success are challenging to create — and almost never have a bottom line as direct as a profit/loss statement.**

perceived effectiveness. In addition, initiative-devoted staff members tend, over time, to sympathize and identify with their grantees. They believe, deeply and intently, in what they are doing. In short, staff's incentives, sympathies, and beliefs work against an internally-generated call for major change. These are normal human responses, but they can affect judgment. And because the philanthropic world has a deep commitment to noble aspirations, it has greater difficulty than the commercial sector in discerning when a course change is needed as well as instituting the proper

checkpoints along the way. Initiative-devoted staff members, when confronted with serious problems, are likely to do what Irvine's CORAL staff did: plead for more resources, more time, and increased technical assistance for the grantees. Staff vigilance is not sufficient.

***Grantees instinctively do not want major change in an initiative.*** For grantees, change means more work (most likely, as in this case, unfamiliar work) and perhaps less funding. It is not surprising that they are usually emotionally and practically committed to what they are accustomed to doing. Even if they acknowledge that things are not going well, they are likely to prescribe the same solution as foundation staff: more time, more resources, more assistance. Grantees' resistance to change can place a formidable pressure on foundation leadership, especially when, as in CORAL, a broad array of local organizations and leaders has become involved and a considerable sum of money is at stake. Letters to a president, to board members, and even to the media, are not unusual. Philanthropic organizations have come to expect grantee praise as a side effect of having money to give.

Also expected is criticism from organizations doing the “hard work on the ground.” This feedback is not taken lightly at the executive or Board level. It is always tempting to still this criticism by staying the course.

***Grantee performance (or underperformance) has no relationship to the amount of assets a foundation has available to distribute.*** Unlike the business sector, poor performance poses no ultimate threat. The need for foundations to meet payout goals simply increases the force of the pressures outlined above.

## Lessons Learned

None of the inherent challenges described above is intended to question the commitment, competence, or sincerity of foundation or grantee personnel. Nor is it intended to imply that many, if not most, foundation officials are unaware of these challenges. This summary is an acknowledgement that the incentives and pressures inherent to philanthropic organizations make it less likely that a carefully considered midcourse assessment and change will occur simply because things aren’t going well. Awareness of these pressures and incentives is not enough. Large-scale initiatives like CORAL — because of the size of their investment and the possibility (in many cases, the objective) that their results will affect policy and funding decisions at other foundations and in the public sector — need special consideration in staffing, governance, and review processes. This is CORAL’s major lesson. Following are specific recommendations foundation leaders may consider in carrying out this lesson.

**Large-scale initiatives like CORAL need special consideration in staffing, governance, and review processes.**

***Lesson One: Do not commit to a major initiative without a well-vetted theory of change, clear interim outcomes, and a field-tested information system that produces reliable outcome data.*** Ambitious ideas to solve tough social problems are the lifeblood of most foundations. But ambitious idealism should not exclude sound strategies for implementation and reliable ways to track progress. These are its rudder. Often the tasks of developing a theory of change, interim outcomes, and an information system — if they are undertaken at all — are left to the evaluation portion of a major initiative. The predictable outcome of this timing is that the activities serve the evaluation, and the evaluation’s needs are not congruent with those of operators, managers, and overseers. Rather, these tasks help ensure that ambitious ideas are implemented effectively. When they are not accomplished, breakdowns are evident to all concerned. Ambitious visions and goals are the easiest aspect of philanthropy; accomplishment and implementation are the hard jobs. Evaluators can help in creating a theory of change, interim outcomes, and an information system, but their ultimate usefulness is the responsibility of initiative operators and foundation managers and overseers.

***Lesson Two: Think critically about the facts on which the initiative is based.*** Foundations should not be afraid to take risks or confront tough issues. And doing so necessarily means going beyond the bounds of what is known with any certainty. This recommendation is, therefore, not about playing it safe. It is about playing it smart: knowing the extent of the risk being taken and the number of boundaries to be breached.

In the CORAL case, early planning and Board briefing materials assert that it was an established fact, without controversy, that after-school programs can improve school performance. This “fact” was the cornerstone on which the entire initiative was built. But the fact was not quite a fact. It was an assertion, backed by correlational evidence, strong advocacy, and many inspiring stories. The assertion was presented without a body of scientifically reliable evidence to back it up. Further, even less evidence indicated if any particular program content was necessary to achieve educational improvement. No one knew whether any after-school program would suffice or whether success required a particular content and dosage. A lack of evidence and particular content guidance may not merit curtailing an initiative. But they might, if more clearly acknowledged, have guided CORAL to gain more understanding of those unknowns.

Without this acknowledgement, the CORAL initiative proceeded to focus on a host of other issues — community organizing, organizational collaboration, and advanced use of technology — without an equal focus on the offerings’ content and likelihood for producing educational gains. As one Trustee noted, some Board members were concerned about the repeated, unverified assurances of the general efficacy of after-school programming. But politeness prevailed — they did not pursue their concerns with the same doggedness they would have employed in a for-profit organization. This Trustee said that, in the future, it will be important to maintain politeness and civility, but to not let those virtues dampen tough-minded examination — the process of distinguishing fact from hope.

**In the future, it will be important to maintain politeness and civility, but to not let those virtues dampen tough-minded examination — the process of distinguishing fact from hope.**

***Lesson Three: Think equally critically about grantee and staff capacities and their alignment with initiative priorities.*** Two conditions important to carrying out large, ambitious initiatives are well known in the world of philanthropy: 1) nonprofit capacities are uneven, generally modest, and strongest in the content areas where organizations have experience; and 2) the means for increasing those capacities to carry out new and innovative initiatives have not been established with any consensus.

The CORAL initiative asked its grantees to undertake a number of tasks, many of which were not part of their skill sets or experience. Nor were many of those tasks part of The James Irvine Foundation staff’s experience or skill sets. In fact, the primary goal — increasing educational performance through after-school programming — was new to both Foundation staff and grantees. The tasks were amply funded, and the Foundation provided consultants in all the task areas. But so many new tasks simply overloaded grantees; they performed almost none of them well. And both staff and grantees had a natural response to such overload:

They focused their efforts on the tasks they had confidence and comfort in performing — or on those that presented the most obvious problem. The community organizing task met all of these criteria, robbing critical attention from the initiative’s crucial task of creating the program content most likely to produce educational impact.

***Lesson Four: Make external, midcourse review a planned event in large-scale initiatives.***

Midcourse assessments by external parties should be a planned and expected component of major philanthropic initiatives. This would emphasize to foundation staff and grantees that the foundation’s commitment is to the ultimate social goal — not to staff and grantees, their enthusiasm, ideals, or camaraderie. The review would add a perspective — and perhaps even some useful ideas — unlimited by the focus and bonds that are forged in intense work on hard issues. It would acknowledge the uncertainty behind chosen metrics of measurement. Knowing such a review would take place would most likely also affect the pragmatism of early planning, the concreteness of goals set for the initiative, and the ongoing work of staff. In short, midcourse review as a planned element of an initiative offers benefits not only in program execution, but in the form of checks on natural forces from initiative outset.

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***Lesson Five: Establish ongoing and structural internal oversight of initiative performance.***

The James Irvine Foundation’s CORAL staff members were not only dedicated to the CORAL initiative; they also controlled all aspects of the initiative, including its evaluation. Foundation documents indicate that several key Foundation staff and several Board members had serious concerns about the CORAL initiative as it was being planned. But without any special, formal oversight structure in place, those concerns were not explored rigorously. Other staff went about their jobs; Board members went away until the next Board meeting.

For some boards, the most prudent response would be to create a Board subcommittee. Some will object that this is too time-consuming for a foundation’s Board members, that it intrudes too much on management’s role, or that it assigns greater responsibility for one aspect of a foundation’s operations to a select group of Board members. But the size and potential impact of initiatives like CORAL would seem to diminish those objections from a “good governance” perspective. Dominant themes in the history of such initiatives over the past several decades — modest results and weak implementation — underscore the prudence of such oversight. Another powerful reason is that forming a Board subcommittee would add strong, non-expert oversight from the beginning. The dominance of “experts” is a mixed blessing in initiatives where, in fact, little expertise exists, especially around practical issues involved in implementation.

Another option is to create a staff review team, with regular meetings and recorded minutes. While peers may fear retribution on their own initiatives, an executive committed to this option can make it a culture-shaping practice — a dose of tough professionalism in institutions where being

committed and trying hard too easily become substitutes for actual accomplishment. It can also temper staff identification with initiatives and grantees and increase their commitment to the foundation's goals and improvement.

Experience indicates that the external advisory committee is the weakest response. Such committees rarely have or feel governance responsibility, and they meet too infrequently to make

**Without any special, formal oversight structure, concerns were not explored rigorously.**

major change recommendations. CORAL's national advisory committee met once or, at most, twice a year, and its discussions were based on specially planned and structured staff presentations and site visits. Conversations with several committee members during the midcourse

assessment revealed little awareness of the extent or severity of CORAL's implementation issues, its failure to meet agreed-upon goals, or its very high unit costs

***Lesson Six: Be cautious about calls for more time, more resources, and more assistance.***

Sometimes, of course, "more" is the right response. But it is too easy to assume that because something is difficult to do, "more" is needed to get it done. This is especially true with regard to the coordination of local institutions and resources, and recovery from early implementation problems. The history of major initiatives offers little evidence that extended time and increased external resources produce better results in either of these areas.

In fact, difficulties in these areas often signal weak capacity or deep divisive forces that time is as likely to prolong as to solve. Increased funds can muffle community discord temporarily, but that is poor preparation for sustainability after the initiative ends and the philanthropic partner exits.

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In CORAL's case, early problems in the test site led Foundation staff to recommend adding time for community planning and coordination for that site—and for all future sites. Yet, the highest performing sites did not need extended time; performance was not empirically connected to increases in time and money. Given that the ultimate goal of a demonstration is to produce a model or lessons for policymakers and funders, at some point, the cost and time it takes to achieve success undercut the project's usefulness and viability.

## Conclusion

When foundations work at the largest scale on social change initiatives that channel millions of dollars and engage vast human resources across multiple communities, the risk of inefficiency and ineffectiveness may undermine the enormous potential for good. Operating at a large scale, therefore, requires a special level of strategic planning, careful oversight, and a system of checks and balances that mitigates the inertia described in this report.

In the case of the CORAL initiative, a set of programmatic, organizational, and external conditions forced a midcourse assessment that revealed the need for dramatic change to achieve the initiative's fundamental goal. The initiative was retooled and, as a result, those involved have renewed hope for its success. But the success of initiatives of CORAL's magnitude should not rely on happenstance. Instead, candid assessment should be integral to initiative design, and the real possibility of a change in course should remain on the table throughout implementation.

Some of the recommendations noted in this report add cost and structure to already complex and costly initiatives, and thus are intuitively unappealing. They ring of bureaucracy. But in fact, the cost and structures of philanthropic governance and oversight have not always kept up over the past several decades with the magnitude and aspirations of the initiatives undertaken. Keeping administrative costs low and maintaining high spirits among entrepreneurial staff are worthy goals — but not at the expense of weak performance and the inability to overcome inertial forces.

Once a need for change is surfaced, accepting it and doing the right things to address it is a process likely to challenge programmatic precedence, organizational reputations, and individual passions. Honest criticism can be difficult to receive, and the resulting recommendations, difficult to follow. And, it is not easy to shift off of a path of multiyear investment partway through the journey. But when an effort, however large and complex, is not generating the benefits for which it was conceived, a change of course is the only conscionable action to take. If the adage that “anything worth doing is worth doing right” applies in any case, it certainly applies to endeavors that draw on the greatest financial and human resources and deal with the most serious of social needs.

## 2008 Update: The Rest of the Story

In 2007, Public/Private Ventures completed its evaluation of the CORAL initiative. The James Irvine Foundation and P/PV are pleased to share CORAL findings and lessons learned in a series of publications released in early 2008.

### The CORAL Series: Lessons learned from a major after-school initiative

Visit [www.irvine.org](http://www.irvine.org) or [www.ppv.org](http://www.ppv.org) to download these publications based on The James Irvine Foundation's CORAL initiative.



#### Launching Literacy In After-School Programs

Early Lessons from the CORAL Initiative

*Presents interim findings from CORAL, with a focus on reading gains for participating youth. Offers insights for after-school funders, researchers, advocates, intermediary organizations and practitioners regarding the key components of quality in literacy programming.*



#### Midcourse Corrections to a Major Initiative

A Report on The James Irvine Foundation's CORAL Experience

*Reports circumstances and challenges related to midpoint change in the multiyear CORAL initiative. Informs grantmakers involved in major initiatives of the need to include midcourse assessment as a critical component in initiative design.*



#### Advancing Achievement

Findings from an Independent Evaluation of a Major After-School Initiative

*Presents findings from independent research on CORAL. Demonstrates the relationship between high-quality literacy programming and academic gains. Informs the after-school field of the potential role of quality programs in the ongoing drive to improve academic achievement. Includes executive summary.*



#### What Matters, What Works

Advancing Achievement After School

*Highlights findings from independent research on CORAL. Informs those who seek to fund, design, implement and otherwise advance effective after-school programs.*



#### Supporting Success

Why and How to Improve Quality in After-School Programs

*Examines strategies used to promote quality academic programming in CORAL. Makes the case for after-school funders, advocates, intermediary organizations and practitioners to support investment in continuous program improvement.*



#### After-School Toolkit

Tips, Techniques and Templates for Improving Program Quality

*Provides a practical, hands-on guide for implementing high-quality after-school literacy programming. Supplies program managers with tested tools and techniques employed in CORAL.*



#### Gaining Ground

Supporting English Learners Through After-School Literacy Programming

*Demonstrates a relationship between key CORAL approaches and the academic progress of English learners. Makes the case for action by policymakers and funders interested in boosting the achievement of this growing student population.*

INSIGHT MIDCOURSE CORRECTIONS

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