

CONFESSIONS of a Former Funder

by Ann O'Brien

Dear Grantees who I used to fund when I had the checkbook,

I'm sorry. Now that I am in the world of operating a nonprofit agency providing early childhood and school-age programs, I'd like to start by saying I'm sorry. While my intentions when I was funding your work were good, I realize better now the impact and burden of some of what I asked of you. I know that our grant applications may have driven you crazy and that the detailed data we requested may have been difficult to gather. I better understand how it feels when funder priorities shift and change. I also realize now that there was probably a cost of doing business with us as your philanthropic partner that I did not fully recognize.

I made the apparently unusual career move of leaving a job where I formerly distributed funds for early childhood and going to one where I am leading an organization that is delivering the services. My new colleagues in the early childhood delivery system don't understand why I would make such a move. I don't understand why I would not. I fell in love with this work while breathing the sometimes rarified air of philanthropy and decided that I wanted to see real parents, children, and teachers every day and not just read about them in grantee reports. That's not to take away from the incredibly important and influential work that my colleagues in philanthropy do to advance our causes. We could not do this work without them and many continue to be amazing partners. Yet I know now that some may be missing much of the real life, complex, and sometimes seemingly impossible work that happens on the ground every day. We all care about young children, yet manifest that care and concern in so many different ways.

What I have learned in the last two years of living on the front lines is that it's easy to lose sight of the challenges of delivering high-quality services to children and families, what it really costs to do it well, and the need to sustain it over time. I know that when I held the checkbook, I sometimes lost sight of the challenges that my grantees faced and the burdens some of my requirements placed on them. And I'm not sure I always did the best job communicating that reality to my board. Boards in philanthropy need to know that their investments make a difference. That's a real and important demand. But if I knew then what I know now, I might have fought a little harder for you.

The work of philanthropy, like our work, has become much more complicated and much more driven by outcomes and data — as it should be. When you are spending other people's money and trying to change people's lives, different rules apply. My advice to my philanthropic colleagues would be to get out into the field as often as you can and to develop relationships with grantees that are authentic. They need a safe space where they can honestly share failures and challenges. Do what you can to streamline your grant making and reporting systems. And perhaps most importantly, continue to recognize the deep commitment and expertise that resides in your grantees.

I encourage all of us to be bold and brave and to develop careers that shift between sectors in the interest in advancing our shared goals and objectives and developing our own selves as professionals and advocates. We are partners in this work and need to understand each other's perspectives and points of view. We have so much to learn from one another. And when we do that, the real winners are the children and families we serve. And those are the people who brought us to these jobs in the first place.



Ann O'Brien is currently the Chief Executive Officer of Montgomery Early Learning Centers (MELC). Since assuming this position in 2014, Ann has focused on ensuring that all of MELC's early childhood and school-age programs meet the highest standards of quality and expanding access to them. Ann was a collaborator in the Early Childhood Education Workforce Transformation Initiative, which studied the current challenges of the Philadelphia ECE workforce and proposed solutions for improvement. She also serves on the boards of directors of the Early Care and Education Consortium, the Pennsylvania Childcare Association, and Graduate! Philadelphia.