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A Policy Advocacy Dissertation to Increase Transparency and Accountability through Social Return on Investment Analysis

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A Policy Advocacy Dissertation to Increase
Transparency and Accountability through Social
Return on Investment Analysis

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

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Abstract

The connection between the funding of public schools and student achievement is complex. Facing dwindling revenue streams, schools and the communities they serve must begin to assess how effectively and efficiently school systems are utilizing federal, state, and local taxpayer resources. As seen in the previous program evaluation and change leadership projects, the Social Return On Investment (SROI) methodology provides a framework that yields a statistically reliable vehicle for doing so that garners trust through transparency. Toward this end, this document advocates for school districts and their boards of education to incorporate the SROI analysis as an essential element of their ongoing district-wide evaluation process.

Preface

As presented in the previous section of this dissertation, the complete Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis methodology follows seven stages. When I learned that the second of these stages is the development of a theory of change based on both qualitative and quantitative data elements, I saw that this step in the methodology inherently lends itself to the Policy Advocacy Document. This then became the focus of this section of the dissertation.

This study gave me the opportunity to get firsthand experience in gathering and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data in the spring of 2012. My hope was that it would provide important financial information in terms of the costs and benefits of our instructional efforts. I furthermore wanted it to provide baseline information to drive our future district program planning efforts. It was a beneficial lesson in learning various publics' expectations of what educational goals were important to them. It also gave me insights into how such financial analyses might help enhance public understanding and faith in what schools are doing and achieving – and the degree of success realized.

I learned through my surveys of recent graduates, educators, parents, and community members their perceptions and beliefs concerning the district's curricular and instructional programs and the effectiveness of the district. I learned the importance of public engagement in these very important schooling and financing issues and how helpful such involvement can be to school district improvement. In essence, it gave me critical insights into how complicated and important critical data-driven decision-making is.

Finally, I feel it is important to note that I left my position in the school district that is the subject of my dissertation to assume my current role as Superintendent of Education in Columbus, Georgia during this part of my doctoral program. Therefore, this section details what I did, what my former district's conditions were at the time, and what I had hoped to achieve while I was there. As a result, this section is based on what was and what might be, in the district where I was. Regardless, my study has important implications as I address similar challenges in my current school district and my policy proposal will focus on it.

Table of Contents

SECTION ONE: VISION STATEMENT.....	1
Introduction to the Problem.....	4
Critical Issues.....	5
Recommended Policy and Envisioned Effect.....	9
SECTION TWO: NEEDS ANALYSIS.....	10
Moral/Ethical Analysis.....	11
Education Analysis.....	12
Social Analysis.....	13
Political Analysis.....	16
Economic Analysis.....	17
SECTION THREE: ADVOCATED POLICY STATEMENT.....	20
Goals and Objectives of the Policy.....	20
Stakeholders Related to the Policy.....	23
Rationale for the Validity of the Policy.....	24
SECTION FOUR: POLICY ARGUMENT.....	29
SECTION FIVE: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION PLAN.....	40
Developing a Theory of Change.....	43
Identifying Inputs.....	43
Valuation.....	44
Identifying Outputs.....	44
Calculating the SROI.....	45
Verification and Reporting	46

SECTION SIX: POLICY ASSESSMENT PLAN.....	51
SECTION SEVEN: SUMMARY IMPACT STATEMENT.....	54
REFERENCES	57

List of Tables and Figures

Table 1. Skill Comparison.....	42
Figure 1.	46

SECTION ONE: VISION STATEMENT

As a long tenured practicing educational administrator and sitting superintendent, I have come to value the pragmatism of job-embedded practices and processes that prove beneficial in enhancing my professional life and work. In my first document, a Program Evaluation Proposal, I identified and studied a new concept for assessing the social return on school investments. My second, a Change Leadership Plan, involved the development of a change plan to put into practice the use of a system to demonstrate in some way the impact of K-12 school investments in terms of societal gains. My third document focuses on policy advocacy.

Whitehead (1929) observed that, “Education is the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge” (p.16). With this in mind, the development of my Policy Advocacy Document affords me the opportunity to meld systems theory with practical administrative procedures and processes relative to instructional delivery models and reflective practices as a means of supporting and promoting reform (Forester, 1981). My policy advocacy proposal is informed by research-based arguments and reflective policy insight as well as analysis of related administrative and legislative requirements germane to the advocated policy. In addition to the need for the advocated policy to be practical and workable, it is imperative that it be socially, economically, and politically substantive as well.

My vision is to advocate a policy “to produce the utilization of knowledge in determining what should be” (Browder, 1995). Toward this end, Wagner (2006) outlines a framework for a systemic change process that helps to identify the “As Is” or current condition to be addressed and methodically leads the process through the change that must be achieved in order for the “To Be” or desired state to be realized. Clearly, the facilitation of this systemic change process serves

as the genesis for educational policy advocacy and subsequently my policy advocacy document that examines the educational, political, social, economic, and moral/ ethical aspects of what I am proposing. This then directs the paradigm shift and policy changes that should occur to realize the enhanced and desired outcomes. This model encourages and promotes moral leadership through reflective practice and is action and outcome oriented rather than passive and theoretical in nature.

For the reasons above, I have elected to use the policy advocacy document framework, as outlined by Browder (1995), as the vehicle for completing this document. It will serve as the framework for my advocacy initiative, which is predicated on the recommended development of local school board policy to include a Social Return On Investment (SROI) analysis as an ongoing component of my the school district's program evaluation process in determining its overall efficiency and effectiveness. In most communities and states, school districts are facing increasing educational challenges and dwindling resources that make the proper assessment of both costs and effectiveness necessary elements of any serious evaluation process. Having completed a baseline SROI analysis as detailed in the Program Evaluation Proposal facet of my dissertation, I have learned first-hand the value and benefits associated with this process which leads me to advocating the incorporation of this analysis in the evaluation of the district where I currently serve as the Superintendent of Education. Furthermore, once validated, this protocol could then serve as the basis for similar policy advocacy efforts at the state and national levels.

Consistent with the Policy Advocacy Document framework, my document is formatted in seven sections. The first sections provides an abstract containing background information and justification for the perceived need for policy development pertaining to the inclusion of an SROI analysis as part of a district's overall evaluation process. I will address the general goals,

questions, and factors associated with conducting an analysis of this type. This section also will include recommendations for the use of the results derived from completing the analysis.

In the second section, the topic and its context are defined more specifically in five disciplines: moral/ethical, education, social, political, and economic. A review of each of these areas will garner additional insight that I will use to shape policy development and advocacy. Likewise, it will clarify further the validation of the analysis methodology.

The third section will provide definition with respect to what the policy is advocating. This will include the specific goals and objectives that it supports such as, whose needs, values, and preferences are represented in the policy. Furthermore, it will establish the basis for determining the goals and objectives the policy aims to achieve.

A policy argumentation section follows. I will present the pros and cons on the merit of the advocated policy, consider research findings, public and professional opinions, and other relevant factors. A policy implementation plan also will be needed to justify that implementation of the advocated policy as being practical and feasible. I will describe how I intend to implement my advocated policy, if adopted by our school board, and provide a detailed plan of activities I will conduct in accordance with Social Return on Investment methodology.

The final sections of my document will include a policy assessment plan and a policy impact statement. I will describe in my assessment plan how the SROI analysis will be validated, how I will hold the district accountable to our constituents, what the theory of change entails, what progress monitoring and evaluation tools I will use to measure outcomes, all of which I will complete in full transparency in accordance with SROI methodology as part of the implemented policy. The policy impact statement will be reflective in nature and contain all aspects of the completed document.

Introduction to the Problem

This policy advocacy facet of my dissertation is the culmination of a three-year effort to study the utilization of Social Return on Investment (SROI), a type of social accounting, as a means of determining the efficiency and effectiveness of public educational programming. In the private sector, efficiency and effectiveness are typically measured by the benefit or profit received in exchange for the effort or money expended. However, the benefit or impact of public entities is not measured easily by revenue and profit. Therefore, the SROI analysis provides a framework that fulfills this void. Relative to public schools and school districts, the academic achievement and related outcomes a school or district produces can be assessed, when controlled for factors beyond their control that are known to have an adverse impact such as students living in poverty.

The topic of efficiency and effectiveness of public education should be more important than ever. Educational leaders and school boards throughout the country are being required to produce better results in the face of stagnant or declining resources. This is evident in the results of a Rasmussen Public Opinion Poll which cited: “Voters overwhelmingly (72%) believe that taxpayers are not getting a good return on what they spend on public education: (April 27, 2011). However, all too often these claims are not based on solid, factual evidence. “At least part of the blame for this situation may reside in the fact that cost evaluation is still not widely understood among policymakers or even among educational evaluators” (Levin & McEwan, 2001, p. xix).

Critical Issues

Public and social sector organizations are routinely faced with foundational questions as to their worth or value to the community or society as a whole: What impact are they having? What is the relationship between their impact and the programming they provide? How well is

the organization achieving its mission? How much value is being created and at what cost? Most certainly, public education is one of the most prominent of all social entrepreneurial organizations. As noted by Baker and LeTendre (2005), public education is one of the largest undertakings by many governments around the world. It is one of the most costly as well. The National Center for Education Statistics (2009) cites that after being adjusted for inflation, spending on education in the United States has nearly tripled over the past four decades. Although not addressed specifically in this published report, it would be important and relevant to determine how the impact of expanded enrollment and new educational commitments to Exceptional Student Education, English language learners, English speakers of other languages, and other such programs contributed to this increased level of spending over this time period. Furthermore, it would be of interest and worthy of further future study to determine the extent to which these expenditures are impacted if they were disaggregated on a per-pupil programmatic basis. Regardless, despite improvement in student outcomes by many districts and states, overall student achievement at the national level remains relatively flat.

This malaise has led to a myriad of educational philosophies, theories, beliefs, and reform efforts that have had a significant influence on American public education over the years. These translated into legislated educational policies and practices at the local, state, and national levels associated with the accountability movement dating back to the mid-1990s that resulted in greater student performance expectations. These increased expectations were then manifested through the development of various norm and criterion - referenced assessments (Popham, 2008). More recently, the national No Child Left Behind Legislation focused a spotlight on student sub-groupings that placed a much-needed emphasis on the performance of all students. This was certainly a noble effort toward ensuring that all students have access to a high quality,

globally competitive education as described by Wagner (2008). However, economic and cultural disparities between students are often summarily dismissed by some politicians and community stakeholders as nothing more than excuses, rather than the significant issues schools and districts must address in order to insure appropriate student learning. For this reason a simplistic state-issued grade or ranking attributable to schools without appropriate consideration and context for those factors known to adversely impact student outcomes often becomes the single metric by which they are judged in the court of public opinion. Mintzberg (1996) noted that that governmental social programming presents unique challenges in measuring performance. He states: “Many activities are in the public sector precisely because of measurement problems. If everything was so crystal clear and every benefit so easily attributable, those activities would have been in the private sector long ago” (p. 76).

As noted previously, there is currently no consistent methodology for the quantitative and qualitative assessment of schools and school districts in the measurement of their efficiency and effectiveness. Therefore, I perceive a demonstrated need to implement Social Return on Investment for doing so. Based on identified inputs and outputs, and after being adjusted for those factors known to impede student performance (Duncombe & Yinger, 2005), an SROI analysis would serve as a means of establishing a statistically valid and reliable method of determining a district’s efficiency and effectiveness.

Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a relatively new conceptual framework dating back to the 1990s dedicated to quantifying the impact of social sector activities and programs. The Cabinet Office of the Third Sector in the United Kingdom is a widely recognized authority on social programming and has published substantive work on the subject of SROI. For the purposes of this document, I will turn to this preeminent body for a working definition of SROI.

In its publication, “Social Return on Investment – an introduction” (2009), it states: “SROI is a framework for understanding, measuring, and managing the outcomes of an organization’s activities. SROI can encompass all types of outcomes – social, economic, and environmental – but it is based on involving stakeholders in determining which outcomes are relevant” (p. 5). The hallmarks of a SROI analysis are based on seven principles pertaining to six areas - stakeholders, scope, financial proxies, social value, benchmarks, and transparency. SROI is distinctly different from other forms of social accounting practices in that it places a monetary value or proxy on outcomes achieved by the entity. Ultimately, a SROI ratio is derived that defines the total benefits (social value) yielded by the organization when compared to total investments made on its behalf.

Co-authors Lawlor, Nietzert, and Nicholls (2008) note that a complete SROI analysis should also include a “story of change” containing both qualitative and quantitative analyses. This theory of change is based upon stakeholder perceptions and beliefs conveyed through a story of how their lives might be changed for the better as a result of an enhanced organization. Keystone (2008) defined this theory of change as:

A specific and measurable description of a social change initiative that forms the basis for strategic planning, ongoing decision-making, and evaluation. It can be seen as a tool to explain (make explicit) the logic of your (development) strategy.

It represents the belief about causal relationships between certain actions and desired outcomes. (p. 4)

In keeping with Social Return On Investment methodology that incorporates a theory of change, the second facet of my dissertation focused on a Change Leadership Plan associated with the transition to and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). I had

originally hoped to use results from the assessments associated with the implementation of the CCSS, along with the National Cohort Graduation Rate, as consistent quantitative outcome metrics in calculating SROI ratios toward determining school district effectiveness. However, fueled by an anti-national education sentiment, there is growing disdain for the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and companion assessments that were developed and originally adopted by forty-five states toward insuring globally competitive college and career readiness of our country's youth. To date, several states have withdrawn from their commitment to implement the CCSS and/or their companion assessments in opposition to a perceived loss of local control and prohibitive costs associated with online assessments. Subsequently, this unforeseen turn of events has led to my decision to limit the quantitative outcome elements of my policy advocacy initiative to the National Cohort Graduation Rate and the documented benefits of high school graduation extrapolated over a statistically typical lifetime.

Recommended Policy and Envisioned Effect

Despite the above referenced ongoing debate and rancor surrounding the implementation of the CCSS and companion assessments, there remains a need to establish a consistent and statistically reliable means of determining a school district's level of efficiency and effectiveness beyond the limited elements currently used for this purpose. While there may be general societal awareness and perception regarding the value of public education, there have been very few attempts by school districts to compare adjusted costs and benefits for taxpayers and beneficiaries in a transparent manner that is easily understood. As indicated by the literature, the SROI process can fulfill this purpose and need.

Therefore, this advocacy initiative is predicated on the completion of a baseline SROI analysis on behalf of the Muscogee County School District of Columbus, Georgia and the

recommended development of local school board policy to include SROI analyses as an ongoing component of its program evaluation process. Toward this end, I will further advocate that an SROI analysis be completed at three-year intervals thereafter to allow reasonable time for the theory of change to be implemented. Thus, the SROI will not only assist in evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of our district, but also to assess its relevance while serving as a basis for future district-wide curricular, instructional and programmatic improvements as well. Moreover, I envision that a strictly implemented SROI analysis has the potential to provide a uniform means by which to compare the efficiency and effectiveness of other school districts using the same metrics and methodology.

SECTION TWO: NEEDS ANALYSIS

The purpose of this section of the dissertation is to provide further context and analysis in support of the need for policy development and advocacy relative to assessing school district efficiency and efficacy. To this end, I will explore five distinct disciplinary areas: moral/ethical, educational, social, economic, and political. As advised by Browder (1995), I will examine these areas individually examined in close detail to trace the unique implications of each. In doing so, I then will be able to consider choices and make decisions in informing and shaping my policy advocacy document.

Moral/Ethical Analysis

While the benefits of a high quality education are well known and documented, improving schools in communities faced with a pattern of educational, economic, and social disparities has proven very difficult. These hardships create a persistent multi-generational cycle of inequality that is further exacerbated by disadvantaged students often attend inferior schools (Augenblick, 2007). Adding to this morass and germane to the topic, is the reality that the least advantaged students are typically enrolled in school districts considered to be inefficient as well.

Based on a study conducted by Boser for The Center for American Progress (2011), “students who participated in the subsidized lunch program were twelve percentage points more likely to be enrolled in the nation’s least-productive districts than the most productive” (p. 29). The study also found that minority students also were likely to be enrolled in highly inefficient

districts. Interestingly, the report noted an important caveat connected to my topic that indicated that in many districts, important information relative to school finance, operations, and outcomes was either not kept or not reported. When states or districts did collect this information, it often was defined inconsistently or they employed weak data collection processes thus making the data unreliable. Clearly, we must address and rectify the disparate allocation of resources, the propensity of disadvantaged students attending inefficient schools, and the lack of data collecting and reporting to facilitate fiscal transparency that represent a host of moral and ethical imperatives.

Education Analysis

There continues to be a long-standing debate between the education community and those it serves as to the causal relationship that exists between school funding and student achievement. Some experts suggest that it is actually possible to improve student achievement while reducing educational funding, and yet others steadfastly argue that the only feasible way to enhance student performance is through increased funding. A substantial body of research provides clarity on this subject.

First, it is important to note that the literature refutes the premise that increased funding equates to better outcomes. But the literature also makes plain that funding in specific areas such as teacher quality and smaller class sizes in the primary grades can have a positive impact on student achievement. The bottom line is that additional funding only makes a positive difference if it is well spent on those inputs that truly matter. Regardless, Odden (2012) posits:

Whether called a new fiscal normal or the era of austerity, the fact is that the twentieth-century pattern of continued rise in education revenues and resultant

spending is over. The fiscal crisis of 2008-2011 is shining a fiscal accountability light on public schools, and neither political leaders nor the public are happy. (p. 2)

The realities of this new era in public education demand that educational leaders rethink all facets of their system. In light of this current reality in which states, districts, and schools will be expected to accomplish more with fewer resources, educational leaders must be concerned with evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of their programming. Levin and McEwan contend that such analysis “should be a topic of concern because it can lead to a more efficient use of educational resources – it can reduce the costs of reaching particular objectives, and it can expand what can be accomplished for any particular budget or other resource constraint” (p. 6).

Despite hefty increases in funding to public education over the past four decades, student performance has remained largely flat and the achievement gaps between this country’s White and Asian students and their African-American and Hispanic peers have not closed significantly. In other words, it could be argued that American taxpayers have little to show for their investment in public education over the past forty years. But within this problem lies opportunity for visionary and forward-thinking leaders. By analyzing the efficiency and effectiveness of their systems, they will be better equipped to make informed programmatic changes and develop smarter approaches that will enhance educational efficiencies and outcomes. This in turn can be transparently promoted to the public at large in hopes of garnering stakeholder trust and confidence.

Social Analysis

Social Return on Investment methodology is predicated on the value that results from the combining of resources, processes, and policies to enhance the quality of life for individuals or the community. “Social Valuation refers to the wider, non-financial impacts of programmes,

organisations and interventions, including the wellbeing of individuals and communities, social capital and the environment” (Smit, 2012, p.24). Examples of Social Value creation occur in the areas of social action such as crime prevention, healthcare and education, and often include such intangibles as the benefit of living in a more just society, anti-racism efforts, or enjoying the aesthetic beauty of art. These are often described as ‘soft’ outcomes due to the difficulty associated with quantifying and measuring their impact. Because these outcomes are hard to quantify, count, evaluate or compare (Mintzberg, 1996; Mulgan, 2010; Wood & Leighton, 2010), they in turn can pose a challenge for those attempting to measure their effectiveness.

It is commonly touted that education has the potential to level the playing field between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in our society. This is certainly true in America. Despite the variations and inequalities of schooling experiences throughout the country, there are countless stories of children who have taken full advantage of the educational opportunities afforded them and broken the cycle of multi-generational destitution.

In the broadest of contexts, the fundamental purpose of education is to pass on to all children the information, skills, traditions, and culture to be happy and productive throughout their lifetime. Grossman (2006) simply states that, “ Education is primarily a way to train children in the skills they need as adults to find good jobs and live productive lives” (p. 4). More specifically, schooling develops and expands students’ knowledge base and abilities. But he further extols education for its broader social value on behalf of families and society at large.

In addition to the potential impact education can have on individuals, a high quality education can particularly influence the overall welfare of a community and the nation as a whole. There is a large body of research that validates the benefits of education beyond individual knowledge and skill acquisition. These benefits are applicable to all citizens whose

relationship with the public school system may only be that of a taxpayer. For example, students gaining the capacity to gather and evaluate new information conduct more research that leads to innovation, which is then shared widely throughout a better-educated society (Wolfe & Haveman, 2002).

From an economic standpoint, all of society benefits from individuals who are well trained with stable employment. As a result, a society that is better educated typically can expect to have a solid tax base leading to less reliance on public assistance programs. Furthermore, it is espoused that high quality education results in lower crime rates, improved public health, and leads to a more informed and engaged citizenry.

As described above, the investment in public education results in billions of dollars of social value for society at large. However, these benefits rarely are articulated or considered when cost analyses are conducted in the interest of determining the efficiency and effectiveness of a public school entity. Given the uniqueness of a Social Return on Investment analysis that does consider a broader concept of value to include social benefits, it is appropriate and beneficial to implement this methodology to provide an accurate picture of the true value of public education to communities and society at large.

Political Analysis

Virtually every incumbent office holder or person running for political office has a platform dealing with public education, which typically outlines their plans to reduce waste and increase performance. Our country's expenditures on public education and performance on international assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and

Trends In International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) are held routinely as examples of our country's poor returns on investment. And yet, attempts to address these important educational issues have gone largely unrealized for political reasons. One only has to look to the Race-to-the-Top initiative, the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, and the once heralded bi-partisan effort to implement college and career readiness standards known as the Common Core State Standards and their companion assessments as examples of attempts that have failed along political and ideological lines related to efficiency and effectiveness of educational programming.

Cost-effectiveness analysis should be more important than ever, particularly in education. At virtually every level of government, politicians and their constituents are demanding better results from educators who face greater challenges than ever before with access to the same or fewer resources. At least rhetorically, this is evident in educational debates that emphasize the "cost effectiveness" or "efficiency" of investments and policies. All too often however, these claims are not based on solid evidence. At least part of the blame for this situation can be attributed to the fact that cost evaluation is still not widely understood among policymakers or even educational leaders.

Clearly more needs to be learned about how well school districts are utilizing their resources. Policymakers must work with federal, state and, local governments to explore measures of educational efficiency and effectiveness. This should include, but not be limited to, adopting a consistent methodology that can be used to determine these metrics based on identified and consistent inputs and outcomes that are adjusted for those factors that adversely impact student achievement and are beyond a school's control. In addition, policymakers must advocate for transparency and push for the development of data systems that can capture and

collect accurate high quality data for analysis and use to track all aspects associated with the aforementioned inputs and outcomes.

Economic Analysis

There can be little doubt that public education is a worthy investment for governments at all levels, with immense social and economic benefits. Multiple studies have shown that individuals who graduate from high school are more apt to be employed, have stability, live healthier lives, and be contributing members of society. Specifically, numerous research studies over decades have documented the value of education relative to employment. In fact, Goldin and Katz (2001) cite that the increase in high school graduates in our country between the years of 1915 and the late 1950s was the primary factor that led to our country's economic dominance in the 20th century.

Despite the known benefits of public education, the question is increasingly being pondered as to whether taxpayers are still receiving a good return on their investment. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2006), the United States contributes five percent of its gross domestic product to public education. The United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2009) cites that after adjusting for inflation, per student spending in this country has almost tripled over the past forty years. Although not specifically addressed, it would be important to consider inflation, pupil growth, growing numbers of children of poverty, expanded numbers of Special Education Students and English Language Learner students, costs associated with new technology, and other changes requiring increased expenditures. Regardless, the costs are significantly higher and are impacting public sentiment and whatever districts do to deal with the issue of cost efficiency and effectiveness that can help create greater public confidence and support. While

some states and school districts have utilized their resources efficiently and effectively by increasing student performance, overall student achievement has largely remained relatively flat. These data would seem to lend credence to those questioning if in fact, contributors to public education (taxpayers) are indeed receiving a good return on their investment in public education.

Regrettably, there is a dearth of research on this topic, although there is increasing interest in the subject. There appears to be a primary and understandable reason for the gap in this literature. As one would expect, any cost-effectiveness analysis requires common criteria for comparison. Many studies focus on improvement in test scores as an indicator of effectiveness but this is problematic from the perspective that states utilize different tests and administer them to different grade levels and different subjects. Each variant make it more difficult to compare results in common terms.

Therefore, it is my intention to propose the high school graduation rate as the primary indicator of a school district's effectiveness in my policy advocacy initiative. I have done so for multiple reasons. First, the United States Department of Education has standardized the calculation of the graduation rate known as the National Cohort Graduation rate, which will allow for a comparison to be made between school districts within and between states. Second, a school district's graduation has come to be recognized as the single most important metric since it is the primary goal of any school system. A student's failure to graduate stymies their further education and typically limits their contributions as a citizen. Third, the economic and societal benefits of a high school graduate over the course of a lifetime are significant when compared to those who fail to graduate.

As noted previously, lagging revenue streams have forced many states to cut education allocations to school districts since the recent recession began in 2008. This increased the

pressure on school districts to rely more heavily on local sources. This has left many communities facing some daunting educational challenges – a growing number of disadvantaged children, higher learning expectations that will likely result initially in more students failing to demonstrate mastery of the higher standards and challenging the public’s understanding, patience and support, as well as insufficient resources where they may be needed the most. These problems threaten the social well-being of our society and call for school districts to rethink all aspects of their system. As Odden (2012) points out, “States, districts, and schools must figure out how to set new strategic directions and align their dollars with programs, strategies, and systems that together boost student learning, whether the overall budget stays the same or must be reduced” (p. 3).

SECTION THREE: ADVOCATED POLICY STATEMENT

The purpose of this section of the dissertation is to clarify definitions and details relative to the policy and advocacy efforts. Specifically, I will further identify the policy’s goals and objectives by delineating the needs, values, and preferences of those stakeholders benefitting from the policy. This section will conclude with a rationale for the policy as framed by the question, “On what basis are the goals and objectives the policy aims to achieve validated as being appropriate and good” (Browder 1995)?

Goals and Objectives of the Policy

Adhering to Browder’s premise (1995), the goals and objectives of my policy proposal aim to validate SROI as good and appropriate for garnering support for education, its agreed upon mission, and the resultant benefits to society as a whole. Apart from being

appropriate is the validation coming from the research documented herein. With this in mind, all social entrepreneurial organizations are faced with basic questions that validate their worth and justify their very existence. What non-financial impact is their organization aiming to achieve? What is the relationship between its impact and the programming or activities it provides? How well is an organization achieving them? How much value is being created for society as a result?

Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a distinctly unique social accounting process based on a broader concept of value. The SROI methodology is now being widely applied to non-profit organizations and other entities whose impact cannot be measured by revenue and profit margins. In the context of educational programming, I believe the SROI process provides both quantitative and qualitative metrics public schools and school districts can utilize to provide both internal and external stakeholders with a more comprehensive perspective from which to evaluate efficiency, effectiveness, and relevance of their programming.

As noted previously in my Program Evaluation Proposal, Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a relatively new concept, which allows non-commercial organizations to quantify the impact of their programming and activities. The SROI methodology takes a mixed method approach. Its foundation is forged in the identification, collection, and analysis of stakeholders' input and historical empirical data elements to assess quantitatively and qualitatively the efficiency, productivity, and effectiveness of a non-profit organization such as a school district. SROI is unique from other types of social accounting because it places a monetary value on outcomes, allowing the outcomes to be compared to investments made on behalf of the organization. Ultimately, organizations are able to define a ratio of total benefits or social value to total investments.

However, SROI also should be a “story of change” with both qualitative and quantitative analyses. Based on the information obtained from selected stakeholders, a theory of change can be developed that tells a story of how their lives might be changed or enhanced. Moreover, it serves as a strategic tool for planning, decision-making and evaluation for the change process as well (Keystone, 2008).

SROI is based on seven principles. These principles, as outlined by the SROI Network (2012), include the objectives to:

- Involve stakeholders: Inform what gets measured and how this is measured and valued by involving stakeholders.
- Understand what changes: Articulate how change is created and evaluate this through evidence gathered, recognizing positive and negative changes as well as those that are intended and unintended.
- Value the things that matter: Use financial proxies in order that value of the outcomes can be recognized. Many outcomes are not traded in markets and as a result their value is not recognized.
- Only include what is material: Determine what information and evidence must be included in the accounts to give a true and fair picture, such that stakeholders can draw reasonable conclusions about impact.
- Do not over-claim: Only claim the value organizations are responsible for creating.
- Be transparent: Demonstrate the basis on which the analysis may be considered accurate and honest and show that it will be reported to and discussed with stakeholders.
- Verify the results: Ensure appropriate independent assurance.

These principles highlight the core terminology of the SROI methodology including: stakeholders, scope, financial proxies, social value, benchmarks, and transparency. The core objective of SROI is the value it creates for the stakeholder. The clarity of the metrics and indicators used to achieve this objective are essential to the process.

While social value has intrinsic merit, it can be difficult to agree upon or quantify. Emerson, Wachowicz, and Chun (2001) cite: “Social value is created when resources, inputs, processes or policies are combined to generate improvements in the lives of individuals or society as a whole. It is in that one has the most difficulty measuring the true value created.” For these reasons, I advocate for a policy that would include the SROI methodology as an integral part of a comprehensive evaluation for the Muscogee County School District going forward.

Stakeholders Related to the Policy

As noted above, the involvement of stakeholders is an integral aspect of the SROI process. The process benefits greatly from involving stakeholders by asking directly about how the organization’s programming impacts them. Thus, internal and external stakeholders’ involvement is dependent upon the extent to which they could influence or benefit from the analysis. Respective of this policy advocacy initiative, internal stakeholders include teachers, administrators, and students. External stakeholders consist of recent graduates of the school district (within four years), parents, representative members of broad-based community-wide organizations, and taxpayers who all invest in and depend on education as a vital aspect of economic development and quality of life

Our district’s Assessment, Accountability and Evaluation Department will design and validate group-specific (e.g. student, recent graduate, educator, parent, community representative, etc.) surveys. The general purpose of these surveys is to determine their relationship with the

Muscogee County School District, their respective current perception of public education in Muscogee County, and their values and beliefs regarding the causal relationships between certain curricular/ instructional programming adjustments and desired outcomes.

Based on the information obtained from the selected stakeholders described above, I will work with staff to formulate a theory of change will ultimately be formulated. This change plan details how stakeholders are or were involved with the organization and their perception and belief of the derived benefit, if any. Although not addressed specifically within the scope of my previous Change Leadership Plan, the work of Kotter and Cohen (2002) will be my recommended framework for executing the theory of change process.

Another important aspect of the SROI process pertains to its potential intrinsic impact on people. Keystone (2008) notes that the concept of social return helps community members view the revenue in a different light. Rather than perceiving it as some type of subsidy or expense, they might perceive it as a worthy investment toward the betterment of the community. In addition, the contributions or inputs by individuals can be determined as adding value, thereby enhancing self-confidence and promoting ownership within the district. “The focus shifts from the creation of value rather than seeing it as a cost” (p. 44).

While SROI is a process and a methodology used to explore a school district’s social impact in which the monetization of inputs and outcomes plays an important role, it should be noted that it is not an exclusive one. SROI should be viewed in a broader context. “After all, there are some benefits that cannot be monetized even though they are very important to the stakeholders, such as increased self-esteem, dignity, improved family relationships, etc.” (Keystone, 2008, p. 44)

Rationale for the Validity of the Policy

In my Program Evaluation Project and Change Leadership Plan, I completed a study involving the SROI in a Florida school district. Since that time, I left the district I was serving and assumed the role of Superintendent of Education for the Muscogee County School District located in Columbus, Georgia. These earlier experiences and their results led me to focus my policy advocacy effort on my new district utilizing and building on these previous experiences.

As noted in Chapter Two, education spending does not necessarily equate to better student achievement. Furthermore, there is a growing sentiment that K-12 public education is not delivering an efficient or effective system of learning for the children of this country. This perception, coupled with the recent economic downturn that resulted in significant budgetary reductions for school districts throughout the State of Georgia and the country, will press educators at all levels to demonstrate that they are using public funds in the most efficient and productive manner possible.

Non-profit organizations and institutions have long struggled with the challenge of measuring the impact and results of their social entrepreneurial activities and programming. Although efforts are ongoing to improve approaches to measurement in these types of organizations, there is a demonstrated need for better methodologies and analytical tools (Tinga, Van der Velden, & Bass, 2006). Social entrepreneurs and governmental entities began to experiment with the conceptual framework of Social Return On Investment (SROI), which is grounded in the field of social enterprise, to evaluate its applicability to such organizations. These experiences led practitioners to the conclusion that SROI is a meaningful process, which not only can be used to determine social impact and added value relative to efficiency and effectiveness, but serve to build capacity within the organization to enhance its future as well. It

is with this premise in mind that it is appropriate to consider applying this methodology to broader segments such as a public school system.

Most states and school districts do not collect data relative to the efficiency and effectiveness of educational programming. This lack of data makes it difficult to isolate and address systemic inefficiencies. It also points to the overall need for accountability to ensure that the resources available to districts deliver anticipated results. As noted previously, the literature would seem to refute the notion that giving more funding to schools will in and of itself insure better outcomes. The funding must be strategically focused to address specific needs. In an interview with *Money Matters* (April 26, 2006) on this topic economist Eric Hanushek stated:

In some places, you put your money in and you get results. In other places, you put money in and you don't get any results. It's not that money can't matter, and it's not that it doesn't matter in some circumstances. It's just that if you do what the courts talk about, what the legislatures talk about, which is a helicopter drop of large amounts of money into districts with no expectations for how well it will be spent, you don't see much coming out the other end.

Boser (2011) cites:

Despite massive increases in expenditures, overall student outcomes have remained largely stagnant, and achievement gaps remain wide in many areas. American taxpayers, in other words, have seen only a small return on the dollars they've invested in the nation's school system over the past 40 years. This can and must change.

Boser continues:

At a time when states are projecting more than \$100 billion in budget gaps, educators need to be able to show that education dollars produce significant

outcomes, or the public might begin to see schools as a bad investment. Put differently, if education systems don't deliver maximum results for the dollar, public trust in public education could eventually evaporate.

However, with budgetary and accountability pressures come opportunities. "These are what we call adaptive challenges, gaps generated by bold aspirations amid challenging realities" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 2). Forward-thinking school systems can utilize them to think differently and explore new options. For example, the Texas comptroller's office has developed the Financial Allocation Study for Texas (FAST) to determine how schools and districts spent the funding they received to improve student achievement. In order for the State of Georgia, and more specifically the Muscogee County School District, to increase significantly its efficiency and effectiveness, it too must integrate new and more meaningful processes for assessing and managing the district's resources and outcomes. Toward this end, an SROI analysis, when conducted with fidelity, entails many facets within the context of its methodology that can prove beneficial in these endeavors.

Given the rationale above, I am promoting the completion of a SROI analysis on behalf of the Muscogee County School District of Columbus, Georgia as prescribed herein to assist in determining the district's efficiency and effectiveness with respect to its educational programming. I am further advocating for the development and implementation of local school board policy that would incorporate a SROI analyses as an ongoing element of its program evaluation process to be conducted at three-year intervals. This interval between SROI analyses will allow a reasonable timeframe for proposed changes identified through the theory of change to be implemented and evaluated for progress. Furthermore, I will advocate that an SROI analysis be completed at three-year intervals thereafter to allow reasonable time for the Theory

of Change to be implemented. This process is vital in order to better inform decisions by those working within the system as well as garnering support on behalf of public education with external stakeholders and by policymakers charged with the responsibility of sustaining it.

SECTION FOUR: POLICY ARGUMENT

When advocating on behalf of the development and implementation of a doctoral policy document, a presentation of both sides of the argument is both logical and necessary in order to justify that the policy is indeed practical and feasible. From both an ethical and moral standpoint, it is incumbent upon me as the author of the policy to present a balanced argument that considers the spectrum of viewpoints affirming the policy as well as those that run counter to the proposed policy. My study of policy development points toward the importance of considering the pros and cons of any proposed policy change. I have determined to think about the pros as benefits (and in some sense aspirations) and the cons more in terms of limitations that, if not addressed adequately, could have negative consequences in the implementation of a policy proposal. In this case, I am looking at the pros and cons of incorporating a Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis as a routine component of the evaluation process of the Muscogee County School District of Columbus, Georgia.

Currently, cost-benefit analyses are either seldom conducted in K-12 education, or their results are not being made available to the public. My research points to the former. Toward this end, an SROI analysis can fulfill many purposes. It can be a tool to assist school districts in identifying its organizational impact, communicating that impact to stakeholders, guiding strategic planning and improvement efforts, and helping district administrators and school boards determine where they should focus their time and resources. It can assist district services and programming by serving to facilitate strategic discussions with internal and external stakeholders that lead to optimizing the social value created by the district through its activities. If a SROI analysis is positive, it can help garner support for the district and its initiatives going forward. If it is not, it can help guide future aims and strategies for improvement. The following paragraphs will provide additional detailed information relative to these essential attributes of SROI.

At the heart of an SROI analysis is its ability to assess and communicate to stakeholders the value of a service or program. The SROI methodology serves as both a tool and a process that has the potential to identify and assess those values and activities that are central to the mission of non-profit organizations such as those of a school district that may prove otherwise difficult to track. As noted previously, it is different from other types of social accounting frameworks in that it places a monetary value on the outcomes of a social organization, which in turn are compared to the inputs or investments. “In spite of its complexity, SROI has become the favored tool of government and a range of policy makers” (Smit, 2012). Wood and Leighton (2010) believe this is directly attributable to its unique selling point of being able to monetize social value. When implemented with fidelity, this methodology ultimately yields a ratio of total benefits or social value produced compared to inputs or investments. With regards to this policy initiative, I will base this ratio on identified inputs and outputs, which after being adjusted for those factors known to adversely impact student performance and the cost of educating students (Duncombe & Yinger, 2005), will yield a statistically valid and reliable method of determining a school district’s efficiency and effectiveness.

A second significant facet of SROI methodology is its commitment to organizational improvement expressed through a “story of change” otherwise known as a theory of change. Through the implementation of a theory of change, SROI enables school districts to create a planning tool for moving forward in its pursuit of continuous improvement and increased social value. This further helps a district to make informed, strategic decisions, to plan timely interventions and corrections, and to ascertain progress toward its desired results. In other words, an SROI analysis serves as both an accountability and effectiveness tool measuring the district’s current reality (as is) that also addresses future systemic improvement (to be) based on Wagner’s

theory of change and the importance of identifying the current status and the future desired state (Wagner et al. 2006).

A third attribute of SROI analysis pertains to its reliance on substantive data collection and analysis. Through robust data collection, SROI enables school districts to demonstrate a commitment to impact measurement and a commercial approach to program evaluation. It is designed in such a way that it includes the collection and utilization of different types of data inclusive of qualitative, quantitative, and financial information. As a result of its commitment to data collection and analysis from multiple sources, SROI helps to promote credibility and transparency on behalf of the process and the district.

A fourth benefit of SROI implementation relates to the focused and strategic deployment of a district's assets. In accordance with the SROI methodology, the theory of change can help a district to target its resources in addressing outcomes, both positive and negative. In addition, it provides a model for improvement, which can be modified and applied to future systemic evaluation endeavors.

Yet another important aspect of SROI is its connection to and with external stakeholders. As one might anticipate, a positive SROI ratio outcome for a district can lead to enhanced perception within the community that makes it more attractive to stakeholders. The confidence a positive SROI can instill in a community's educational delivery system also can promote a compelling case for continued or increased funding for the district. Other possible investments may emanate from a positive SROI analysis such as identifying common areas of interest with and between community organizations and the school district that share similar goals and objectives. This ultimately can forge an ongoing relationship with stakeholders based on value and cooperative work to achieve goals and objectives held to be important by the school district

and the community it serves. As noted previously, even a negative result can have a positive impact by demonstrating to the public the district's willingness to "tell the whole truth" and note its commitment to address the need such a result represents.

The reporting and verification of results is the critical last step in the SROI process. This entails reporting the processes associated with the methodology and the results derived from the analysis. Of particular importance is communicating to stakeholders the data collection process and the method of calculation. This is an ethical imperative. Given the significance of this step in the methodology, it is my recommendation that a school district utilize an independent source to assist in the verification of results. Doing so will further promote confidence, credibility, and transparency with stakeholders. I certainly intend to do that.

In summary, valuating, or affixing a monetary cost-benefit to inputs and outcomes, enhances the monitoring and evaluation capacity of a school district, which consequently allows it to make programmatic adjustments for improvement toward generating the social and intended results desired. This demonstrated commitment to ethical transparency and continuous improvement can help internal and external stakeholders, particularly investors (taxpayers), determine if the school district's current progress toward efficiency and effectiveness are aligned with the community's objectives. SROI is also a method that communicates the district's aspirations, results, and accountability for improvement for improvement with both internal and external stakeholders moving forward.

Further, a SROI analysis can assist a school district in increasing the overall productivity of its endeavors. Additionally, it helps stakeholders assess the programming and interventions of a school district that contributes to its intended social impact. Moreover, the SROI methodology establishes a framework that allows district's to demonstrate social and

economic value that extends beyond the typical fiscal reporting. Using language that is understandable to all stakeholders, improves understanding, increases transparency, and fosters trust. These are vital to better inform decisions by those working within the system as well as for garnering support of public education by external stakeholders and policymakers charged with the responsibility of sustaining it.

Like any other framework or evaluative tool used to assess social impact, SROI has its limitations. This may be due to the context of the analysis, or there may possibly be unique challenges that are inherent in any form of social measurement methodology. I will conclude with some of the main challenges associated with conducting an SROI analysis.

The initial step in the SROI analysis process is defining the scope, boundaries, and objectives of the evaluation. SROI is a time-intensive process so it behooves social organizations aspiring to conduct such an evaluation to clarify first what it is that they are going to measure and why they are attempting to do so. By establishing the boundaries of the analysis upfront, it can be determined what to include or exclude in the measurement as well as the appropriate time and resources to be dedicated to it. Given the ever-increasing expectations placed upon public school districts, Copestake (2007) posits that an organization can drift toward those cover those objectives that are easily quantifiable. For this reason, school districts that undertake this endeavor would be wise to be clear about the relevance of the SROI results and limit the scope to what is feasible and in keeping with its mission.

One of the primary underlying assumptions associated with an SROI analysis lies in the collection of high-quality data and robust information management systems. In some instances, key data elements related to school funding, expenditures, and outcomes are not available. Although the availability of data for school districts is improving throughout the country, it can

be problematic for some with inferior information management systems or systems of questionable reliability. Therefore, the quality and integrity of an SROI analysis is heavily reliant upon the existence of solid data and robust systems to capture and store the data.

The mapping of outcomes entails describing and visualizing the outcomes and expected impact resulting from the implementation of a theory of change. However, embedded within this process are various assumptions and preferences regarding the inputs and strategies for how the change, and ultimately, the desired impact will be achieved. Like all social impact evaluation processes, SROI rightly incorporates the diverse views, opinions, and perspectives of internal and external stakeholders and thus can be viewed as a social construct. While SROI is clearly committed to the involvement of stakeholders, it is not as clear how their biases and divergent viewpoints potentially affect the results and transparency of the process as well as the degree of confidence in it (Burger & Owen, 2010).

Based on the information obtained from stakeholders as described in the previous paragraph, a “story of change” can be articulated through a combination of narrative and qualitative, quantitative, and financial measures (Nicholls et al., 2009). Although the relationship between the inputs, outputs, and outcomes is at the core of SROI, it is the reporting of the overall SROI ratio that often becomes the primary focus of the process (Lyon et al., 2010). So, while SROI may be helpful in providing insight relative to a school district’s efficiency and effectiveness, it could result in a shallow understanding of the other intended purpose of an SROI analysis which focuses on the district’s interventions that are actually leading to improved outcomes.

For any school district contemplating conducting an SROI analysis, identifying the important inputs and outputs to be utilized in its execution is fraught with possible pitfalls. In the

interest of accuracy and transparency, the district must be certain to include all forms of contributions to the district such as state and local tax revenues, grant awards, and the like. Likewise, outputs must be well defined and reliable. For example, in the case of student performance indicators, states differ greatly in the grade levels tested, the subjects tested, and the types of assessment items used on the tests. Therefore, in both inputs and outputs the elements used for these purposes must be relevant and aligned to the scope and design of the analysis to ensure consistency throughout the process and accuracy in terms of calculations at its conclusion. Likewise, any school district undertaking such a venture must guard against the use of variables that are not relevant or stable in order to avoid the ethical pitfall of a flawed analysis.

The valuation stage of an SROI analysis is arguably one of the most essential and critical phases of the process since it deals with monetizing outcomes. However, this is precisely what makes it perhaps the most challenging as well. There are obvious concerns in attributing monetary values on outcomes and impacts.

One means of monetizing these so-called “soft” outcomes is through the use of financial proxies. Financial proxies represent approximations of outcomes in monetary terms. The difficulty lies in how they are derived or calculated. I offer the following as a clear example to illustrate the concept. A school district implements a dropout retrieval program to help students graduate from high school. A long-term outcome could be that they pursue additional post-secondary education or training. In this example, the impact is to consider the increased earning potential that a high school graduate would derive from being a graduate versus that of a dropout over a designated period of time. This projected earning differential serves as the monetary proxy for the outcome used in the SROI calculation. Such quantification begins with identifying clear, concise outcomes, which demand reasonable and reliable metrics on which to base the

evaluation. It would be irresponsible as well as ethically and morally wrong to underestimate or over state financial proxies utilized for this purpose.

Where change is the result of a range of factors that are known to influence the outcome of the evaluation, those factors must be taken into account in the SROI methodology. Examples include the additional funding received by a district to educate students in special programs such as special education, English language learners, or the percentage of students receiving subsidized meal programs. It is imperative that factors known to adversely impact students be taken into consideration and used as the basis of making an adjustment in the SROI analysis. It must be acknowledged that there are inherent problems in using this information in adjusting the analysis. Subsidized meal programs in schools illustrate this point. Qualifying for the program requires parents to self-report their information. Those schools that are aggressive with this process typically realize a greater return rate, despite the fact that they do not necessarily serve greater percentages of disadvantaged students. This example points to the anomalies that exist even with commonly accepted data elements.

From a broader perspective, as social impact measurement like SROI becomes more widely used; I perceive that a SROI analysis has the potential to serve as a uniform means by which to make reasonable comparisons between school districts relative to their efficiency and effectiveness. Any possibility of doing so will likely require a high level of standardization in order to ensure those charged with this responsibility are appropriately trained to execute the methodology with strict fidelity of implementation. In addition, carrying out a comprehensive SROI analysis can have significant implications for a school district pertaining to costs associated with the training and staff time necessary to carry out this endeavor (Leighton &

Wood, 2010). In larger school districts this may be feasible but in smaller ones, it may require additional resources or conducting the implementation through a consortium of districts.

A final but realistic concern related to SROI analysis is that a focus on efficiency and effectiveness could result in unintended consequences. Specifically, some educators fear that a spotlight shined on district productivity (or lack thereof) may cause stakeholders and policymakers to further reduce resources that school districts receive. This is of particular concern for those districts with high numbers of minority and socio-economically disadvantaged students that often don't receive adequate funding given the high costs associated with addressing their special needs that equity demands (for example, lower pupil to teacher ratios).

Since SROI presents both pro and con aspects, I will think of these as aspirations and limitations. As stated earlier, all evaluation and assessment tools are limited to some degree. SROI does leave room for individual judgment that could result in inflated value claims and the misinterpretation of its results. However, the appropriate use of the system has a greater potential to avoid those limitations and lead to the more efficient use of resources in difficult budgetary times like that experienced in the State of Georgia over the past decade.

An SROI analysis can provide a standardized means of assessing the efficiency, effectiveness, and social value of a school district. Although it has been used sparingly to this point, SROI has great potential for becoming a component of a school district's overall evaluation process. SROI is not considered to be comparative tool. However, many organizations appear to use it for that purpose and why they allocate their limited time and resources to this exercise (Lyon et al., 2010; NPC, 2010).

School districts in Georgia and throughout the country are facing increasing pressure to justify their value to the community with a growing "value for money" philosophy. The

increasing competition for dwindling resources is characterizing their relations with new competitors for example charter schools and online delivery systems, as well as to contributors who provide resources. This context, however, does present an incentive for school districts to over claim or over value their programming. As mentioned previously, there are significant risks involved with respect to credibility of the methodology and the district for doing so. To prevent this from occurring and to further enhance credibility and transparency, verification through an outside, independent auditor is recommended.

School districts should educate internal and external stakeholders in comprehending the principles of SROI and its methodology to avoid the possibility of arriving at and comparing ratios calculated in different ways. However, SROI does establish a comprehensive basis for decision-making for the allocation of resources. “As we face tough economic times, it is now more important than ever that we allow for better recognition of those who create social and environmental value, leading to more efficient movement of resources to the right people, in the right place, at the right time” (Nicholls et al., 2009 p. 3).

Some studies (Burger and Owens 2010; Nicholls 2008) suggest that there are concerns pertaining to organizational reporting by public entities. The study by Lyon et al. (2010) indicates that due to a lack of control regarding how SROI results are perceived, some organizations may consider themselves at-risk or vulnerable. This certainly applies to public entities such as school districts. Hence, this may cause some school districts to be reluctant to publicize their results if they if they do not perceive them to portray the district in a favorable light. Nonetheless, the movement towards stronger accountability measures for public entities might eventually require greater transparency that conducting and publishing an analysis of this type has the potential to accomplish.

SECTION FIVE: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The previous sections of this document point out the rationale and benefits of conducting an SROI analysis on behalf of a school district. This section details the policy implementation plan inclusive of the activities associated with integrating an SROI analysis as part of a school district's overall evaluation process. As noted previously, this is a highly committed process that requires developing sufficient SROI capacity among staff responsible for its execution. Second, the district must commit to dedicate the resources necessary to conduct such an analysis successfully. This obviously requires much advance planning, strategic thinking, and buy-in by a district's Board of Education, the senior leadership staff, and the building level leaders within the district. It is important to note here that SROI is a methodology that that can be used to supplement other existing evaluation practices that a district already might be implementing. It is equally important to point out that SROI does not require a district's assessment and evaluation system to be entirely repurposed to accommodate the process. As an additional component of the district's evaluation process, SROI should be viewed as a complementary approach to those already in place. With this in mind, it is incumbent upon me as the Superintendent of Education to advocate for the inclusion of this practice with the nine members of Muscogee County School District Board of Education. Therefore, I will present this governance body with the conceptual framework and supporting research contained herein in individual meetings and official Board Work Sessions hopefully culminating in an affirmative vote by a majority of the board to formalize the addition of this methodology to the district's official policies.

If the policy is adopted formally, it will be essential to ensure that the capacity is developed and the requisite conditions are in place for a successful analysis (IFAD, 2002). In

addition to job-embedded training for district staff charged with executing the process, training is also necessary for facilitating the process with other stakeholders as well.

The SROI process demands skilled and knowledgeable staff that can embrace the linkage between SROI and the assessment and evaluation practices currently in place. This is of paramount importance in determining what data and which sources will be used for the analysis but for interpreting it as well. This is essential for monitoring, learning, and communicating with all stakeholders. From my personal experience in completing my Program Evaluation Proposal and Change Leadership Plan, these are skill sets that must be strengthened going forward.

Although training is typically perceived as the primary way of enhancing capacity, I found that considerable capacity could be developed through job-embedded experience. Given the importance of this initiative, I recommend a combination approach. As suggested by Bouwers, Prins, and Salverda (2010) in Table 1, it is imperative that the SROI analysis process is understood at varying levels within the district dependent upon the skills and understanding associated with job roles and functions. Those that need a thorough knowledge and understanding will receive specific SROI training, while others requiring mid-level or basic knowledge and skills will receive training on the job via concrete experience with the process.

Table 1.

Understanding and Skills at Different Levels of the District

	Objective of SROI (place within strategy of the organization)	Steps of SROI (information gathering and capacity development process)	Technical details (e.g., deadweight, attribution)
Senior management level	***	*	*

Project coordination level (program officers, project officers)	***	**	***
Field staff level	***	***	*

Notes: source is the Social Return on Investment: A Practical Guide for the Cooperation Sector. The key is as follows:

- * = Basic knowledge and understanding required
- ** = Appropriate working knowledge and understanding required
- *** = Thorough knowledge, understanding and working skills required

If the Board formally adopts the policy, then the appropriate internal stakeholders must be trained at the suggested level of knowledge and understanding of the SROI methodology. At this point implementation may commence. Following is a guide offering further explanations of the phases to be utilized in carrying out the SROI process. It must be noted that at the time of this submittal, new insights and practices are emerging relative to the application of SROI methodology that will prove beneficial in the future. Therefore, this should be considered a living and dynamic process.

The first step in the process is divided into two parts that can be completed before the actual analysis. First, the SROI Network publication, “A Guide to Social Return on Investment” (2012), advises organizations to “establish scope” by addressing its purpose, audience, objectives, resources, activities, period of time, and how often SROI will be completed (pp. 18-19). The SROI Network (2012) also defines stakeholders as “people or organizations that experience change, whether positive or negative, as a result of the activity being analyzed” (p. 20). Stakeholders can include employees, students, parents, donors, business and industrial persons as well as individual taxpayers. Stakeholders are then involved in the process by gathering data about how the organization’s programming and activities impacts them.

Developing a Theory of Change

Based on the information derived from stakeholders in the previous step, the organization can establish a theory of change. Keystone (2008) portrays the theory of change as a road map. It is a way for helping to plan the journey (i.e. strategies) leading from the current situation (As-Is) to the one that is desired (To-Be).

Identifying inputs

In this step the district leaders should identify what investments must be made or contributed to achieve certain outputs. I will recommend the utilization of Impact Maps to visualize the process of identifying and valuing inputs. For the purposes of this project and to ensure consistency of application, inputs will be derived from revenue sources provided to the Muscogee County School District during each three-year analysis timeframe. Revenue sources will include a combination of local (Required Local Effort and discretionary property taxes) and state funding sources as expressed through the annual appropriations based on per student full-time equivalent (FTE) and weighted full-time equivalent student counts. Other resources utilized for this purpose are categorical funds, including instructional materials and capital outlay, as well as federal entitlement allocations and grant awards.

Valuation

The identification and valuation of outcomes is the most significant step in the SROI process. The United Kingdom Cabinet Office publication, “Social Return on Investment – an Introduction” (2009) states: “This stage involves finding data to show whether outcomes have happened and then giving them a value” (p. 8). Therefore, it is imperative that the data necessary for this step be based on reliable metrics, solid research, and sound data collection methods. Indicators must be quantifiable, which requires establishing a financial proxy such as student potential earnings and/ or contributions as a taxpayer. By quantifying the benefits in some valid way, our school district can complete its SROI analysis. This likely will require valuations from various internal and external stakeholders or other entities.

Identifying Outputs

Results or outputs are translated as outcomes. In essence, the outcomes are the objectives of the organization – the impact on social value it aims to achieve. In the case of the non-profit sector, Emerson, Wachowicz, and Chun (2001) specify the need to transform society and the world for the better (p. 3). It is reported rightfully that graduation from high school with the requisite skills and knowledge base to be successful in post-secondary education or emerging careers for the twenty-first century are critical. They are the fuel to light up the economic base of our state and country and thus a primary indicator of public education’s viability to provide these important social benefits. In addition and as previously noted, a variety of researchers have sought to determine the return on a high school degree by comparing various outcomes of high school graduates and dropouts. In particular, the literature indicates that overall dropouts earn less, face higher unemployment rates, are more likely to be incarcerated, and incur greater medical costs than high school graduates. It is important to note that graduation from high school

today includes the necessity of passing the state-mandated end-of-course examinations, which adds to the importance of the graduation rate as a sign of academic success. Therefore, for the purposes of this policy advocacy, I am proposing that we define outputs in terms of the Federal Graduation Rate and college and career readiness as measured by the state's newly adopted Georgia Milestones assessment. This is important due to the research information on the greater salary earnings over a lifetime by a college or technical training school. I also propose that we use as data sources the United States Department of Education, the Georgia Department of Education, and the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, as well as validated current and future research studies germane to this topic.

Calculating the SROI

This step sums up the benefits, subtracts any negatives and compares the result to the investments made on behalf of the organization. As reported in my two previous documents on problem identification and the change leadership plan, this process of deriving a ration can be relatively simple or quite involved, dependent upon the level of complexity. Lawlor, Neitzert, and Nicholls (2008) indicate in its most simple form, different types of value being created are added up and then divided by the total contributions of stakeholders in the form of revenue. However, depending on the needs of the organization, a more complex methodology may be necessary known as an adjusted SROI. As the term implies, the analysis may be adjusted for those factors that are known to impact results.

This policy advocacy initiative recognizes that educational costs and benefits are inter-related with characteristics identified by Bradford, Malt, and Oates (1969), which linked the cost of public services to the environment in which they were provided. Many studies since have found this premise to be applicable to education as well. Duncombe and Yinger (2005) suggest

that it is generally recognized that it costs more to educate disadvantaged students than those who are not. They advocate for the use of an education cost index, which is similar in concept to a cost-of-living index. Specifically, this index makes adjustments to account for the difference in what a high needs district spends in comparison to an average district to attain similar levels of student performance. It is in this context that the cost of educating disadvantaged students such as special needs students, English speakers of other languages, and those living in poverty will be used as factors in the calculation of the adjusted SROI for this study as illustrated below.

$$\text{SROI ratio} = \frac{\text{Total (adjusted) value of results}}{\text{Total value of inputs}}$$

Figure 1. Calculation for adjusted SROI.

Verification and Reporting of Results

The vital last step in the SROI process entails verification of the analysis, reporting findings to stakeholders, and incorporating positive outcome processes. The SROI Guide (2012) emphasizes the critical importance of organizations reporting both the process and the results, particularly their data collection and calculation methodologies. In addition, organizations can seize this opportunity of reporting and publishing its first SROI analysis as a “catalyst for change.” In its publication, “Social return on Investment – an introduction” (2009), the United Kingdom Cabinet Office advises:

With the systems in place for evaluation and data collection, organizations now have a tool by which to measure the outcomes of their activities and to make improvements. Organizations should particularly emphasize ongoing

communications with stakeholders to maximize social value in the future according to recommendations from those involved in the process. This also allows stakeholders to see change over time in the ratios. (pp. 8-9)

It is important to list the details relative to the stages and activities associated with conducting the SROI analysis. There are four main stages in the process that categorize each of the phases above as well as the corresponding activities to accomplish them. A suggested timeframe appears beside each stage to assist district staff in keeping the process on track toward a timely and successful completion.

Stage I– Establishing Scope and Identifying Stakeholders (July – September)

Activity 1 – Understand your district’s goals for the analysis

- Determine the district’s internal objectives for conducting the SROI analysis
- Affirm with the district’s stakeholders that the analysis is looking back and based on previous results

Activity 2 – Understand your district

- Review strategic plans and/or accreditation report for the district in order to make explicit how the district aims to create changes for improvement

(immediate or long-term)

Activity 3 – Identify and train district staff in SROI Methodology

Activity 4- Identify the district’s stakeholder groups

- Identify the stakeholder groups affected by the district’s activities and results
- Define the objectives of these groups in relation to expected gains from the district
- Conduct surveys of impacted representative stakeholder groups

Guidance

The involvement of both internal and external stakeholders is critical to the SROI methodology. It is recommended that the district develop a formal system for understanding stakeholder value and identifying their important objectives.

Activity 5 - Determine the scope of the analysis

- Determine whether the SROI analysis will focus on all or only some specific activities of the district (this particular SROI analysis pertains holistically to the district's efficiency and effectiveness).

- Determine which stakeholder issues will be included in the analysis

Guidance

It may be necessary to limit the scope to a particular focus or program of the district due to time, capacity, and data availability.

Activity 6 – Develop theory of change

Stage II– Planning for Implementation (October – February)

Activity 7 – Develop Impact Map

- Document stakeholder contribution (input) to the activity, if applicable
- Assign inputs a value
- Identify inputs and outputs for stakeholders
- Describe outcomes in detail
- Include both intended / unintended and positive / negative changes
- Complete columns on the Impact Map for inputs, outputs, and outcomes

Activity 8 – Valuate outcomes

- Identify indicators for the outcomes
- Establish duration of the outcomes

- Identify existing internal / external sources of information for each indicator
- As necessary, identify a financial proxy and source for outcomes lacking explicit monetization

Stage III – Implementation (March – May)

Activity 9 – Calculate SROI

- Finalize and validate financial values of indicators and inputs
- Complete calculation of SROI ratio
- Conduct sensitivity analysis
- Validate and verify results

Guidance

It is recommended that the validation process be conducted by an external entity with credentials and expertise that would lend further credibility to the process and its results.

Stage IV – Reporting Results and Embedding (June – Ongoing)

Activity 10 – Summarizing and planning

- Summarize changes to the district’s systems, practices, or activities for improvement
- Prepare plan for changes

Activity 11 – Reporting and presenting results

- Prepare formal report and presentation to the Board of Education that outline the process and results, as well as the underlying assumptions and limitations of the analysis
- Modify a similar presentation for various audiences throughout the community
- Ensure audience feedback loops in order to determine the effectiveness of the presentations relative to content and format

Activity 12 – Embed changes for systemic improvement and SROI analysis

- Infuse identified changes for systemic improvement into the district’s Strategic Plan and other guiding documents
- Formally propose to Board of Education the integration of SROI analysis as an ongoing element of program evaluation for the district (optional)

SECTION SIX: POLICY ASSESSMENT PLAN

Central to both Social Return on Investment (SROI) methodology and advocacy efforts on behalf of this policy is a focus on assessment. Once a school district has determined that SROI analysis is an appropriate methodology for evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of its educational programming, it must ensure that the requisite capacities and conditions are in place (IFAD, 2002). Inherent in these is the linkage between the SROI process and the district’s commitment to monitoring, evaluation, and accountability.

A key aspect of integrating SROI with the appropriate level of fidelity is building the sufficient capacity among district staff. It is important to note that as a complement to other evaluation practices, SROI does not require the district's Accountability and Evaluation Department to be redesigned but rather, the process can actually be utilized to strategically supplement other evaluative approaches in terms of planning, monitoring, and gathering and interpreting information. However, as noted in the previous section and as I can attest from personal experience, the skill sets necessary for the successful integration of SROI in a large organization such as a school district will intersect many departments and likely require honing. With this in mind, I will expound upon the policy assessment plan and those responsible for its execution.

As the Superintendent of Education, I personally will advocate on behalf of the policy proposal to complete a baseline SROI analysis as a tentative element of our district's comprehensive evaluation process. As noted previously, I will present the Muscogee County School District Board of Education with the conceptual framework and supporting research contained herein in individual meetings and official Board Work Sessions hopefully culminating in an affirmative vote by a majority of the board to formalize the addition of this methodology to the district's official policies.

Once approved, a detailed action plan will be developed in coordination with the twelve members of the Superintendent's Cabinet. Operational structure and SROI responsibilities and functions must be clear and understood. Planning and monitoring will be a routine task for everyone involved. The plan will specify the activity to be completed, the person(s) responsible, resources needed to accomplish the task, possible pitfalls, and an anticipated completion date. The plan then will be reviewed, revised, and disseminated by July 1, 2015. Weekly updates will

be provided during Cabinet Meetings, while departments will meet as necessary beyond regularly scheduled meetings. Bi-monthly team meetings will be held to ensure that all members are fully apprised of progress and impending benchmark deadlines.

It will be essential to ensure that highly qualified district staff charged with executing the SROI analysis as well as partners and primary stakeholders receive the external and on-the-job training required to guide the implementation of the SROI analysis. As specified in the previous section, it is crucial that employees with varying levels of skills and knowledge that engage with the methodology as part of their daily work receive appropriate training. Toward this end, the Chief Financial Officer and Title 2 Director will coordinate the budgeting and allocation of funding for this purpose. The Chief Human Resources Officer will be responsible for all travel and accommodations related to this training.

As is the case with most evaluation processes, SROI incorporates the collection, storage, compilation, and processing of large quantities of data. Data documentation serves as the foundation for the SROI process. It is imperative that districts identify the types of data needed and for what purpose, who and how it will be used, and how it will be processed and by whom. Therefore, the Chief Information Officer will be responsible for addressing these areas and planning for any necessary modifications prior to implementation.

The Chief Finance Officer also will be responsible for accommodating other costs associated with the SROI analysis. In addition to the costs of the aforementioned training of staff and partner stakeholders, anticipated expenditures include supporting any modifications to the information system, overtime, publications, consultative services agreement for the external evaluator to validate results, etc. IFAD (2002) cites that for general A&E budgeting purposes, the range is typically between 2 -15 % of all costs reserved.

SROI inextricably links inputs, the activities that result, the outputs of the activities, and the broader outcomes, which then translate to impact. From a programmatic standpoint, all activities should be goal and vision oriented. Each step is in turn linked to a data element that will be documented to indicate the results of each step. Ultimately, a properly conducted SROI analysis that yields results that subsequently are verified and validated by an independent expert serves as an additional evaluative tool that school districts can employ to foster trust, transparency, and accountability.

SECTION SEVEN: SUMMARY IMPACT STATEMENT

Directly as a student, parent, or employee, or indirectly as a contributing taxpaying citizen, virtually everyone is impacted by the quality and efficiency of public schools within their community. There can be little doubt that public education in the past has been a worthy investment for governments at all levels, with immense social and economic benefits. Multiple studies have shown that individuals who graduate from high school are more apt to be employed, enjoy a reasonable sense of stability, are generally healthier, and are contributing members of society. In fact, as noted earlier, Goldin and Katz (2001) have determined that the key factor leading to our country becoming the economic giant of the 20th century can be traced back to the growth of high school education between 1915 and the late 1950s. Despite the known benefits of public education, the question is increasingly being pondered as to whether taxpayers still are receiving a good return on their investment.

Policymakers, parents, and stakeholders are demanding improvements in public education through raised expectations of academic success, legislating reform efforts to address struggling schools, and raising the bar on teacher, leader, and district effectiveness. However, earlier declines in the national economy have had profound impacts on student access and equity when it comes to public education. Differences in funding formulas, allocations, revenue, and other resources have resulted in significant disparities between schools, districts, and states. These widespread variations in resource allocations far too often result in diminished and disparate educational opportunities for those who face the greatest challenges. Consequently, the adverse impact of under-resourced schools has a severe effect on student achievement, which worsens over time (Bahr, 2010; Condrón, 2001; Mechanic, 2002).

The correlation between the level of school funding and academic achievement continues to be a subject of much debate. There are many who believe that the only realistic means of improving student achievement is to increase funding for schools, while others support the notion that it is possible to do so while reducing educational funding. Odden (2012) suggests that additional funding only makes a positive difference if it is well spent on those inputs that truly matter such as class size in the primary grades.

Public education stands as the largest initiative undertaken by many governments around the world (Baker & LeTendre, 2005). The national importance of education lies in the positive difference it can have in the lives of individuals, on the general welfare of communities and, the security of our country. For these reasons, it is incumbent upon policymakers and educators to ensure that American students receive the highest quality education in the most efficient manner possible.

As indicated above, the past investment in public education has resulted in billions of dollars of social value for our country. Unfortunately, these benefits are rarely considered when assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of public schooling. Social Return on Investment does, however, consider a unique, broader concept of value that includes social benefits, and makes it an appropriate and beneficial vehicle for revealing an accurate picture of the true value of public education to the communities they serve.

Public education today and for the foreseeable future, will require its leaders to examine all facets of their system through new lenses. In light of this current reality in which states, districts, and schools will be expected to accomplish more with fewer resources, educational leaders must be concerned with evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of their programming. Therefore, it is imperative that policymakers work with federal, state and, local governments to assess how school districts are utilizing taxpayer resources and ways to improve the social return on that investment. Toward this end, a uniform methodology should be adopted and implemented based on identified and consistent inputs and outcomes. To ensure accurate comparability, these metrics must be adjusted for those factors known to adversely impact student achievement and beyond a school's control. Furthermore, policymakers must continue to promote transparency through the development of and funding for sophisticated data systems capable of capturing, storing, and analyzing high-quality data associated with the aforementioned inputs and outcomes, to include social value.

My proposed policy to incorporate a SROI analysis as an added element to a comprehensive evaluation of the Muscogee County School District, bridges moral and ethical imperatives with practicality and pragmatism. Only when we can assure a high-quality and efficient public education for all students, regardless of demographic characteristics, background,

or locale, can we hope to ensure that our next generation of students is prepared for college and career readiness in the 21st Century. Furthermore, by completing the process in three-year intervals thereafter, the district will be afforded the time to implement and monitor the district's theory of and approach to change in its ongoing commitment to continuous improvement. Moreover, the process will lead to better informed decisions in terms of systemic efficiency and effectiveness that will likely enhance support for public education with stakeholders and policymakers alike.

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