



THE NELLIE MAE EDUCATION FOUNDATION
SEARCH FOR A DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS
Quincy, Massachusetts

“To stimulate transformative change of public education systems across New England by growing a greater variety of higher quality educational opportunities that enable all learners – especially and essentially underserved learners – to obtain the skills, knowledge and supports necessary to become civically engaged, economically self-sufficient life-long learners.” - Mission Statement

THE SEARCH

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF), New England’s largest public charity focused on education, seeks a Director of Communications. Reporting directly to the President and Chief Executive Officer, and working collaboratively with senior managers and staff, this communications executive will broaden public understanding of the Foundation’s policy, research and systemic strategies for educational reform focused on student centered learning. The communications work is integral to the success of the organization’s agenda and viewed as a powerful tool to leverage, support, link, enhance and create opportunities both within the Foundation and with key external constituencies.

This is an exciting opportunity for an accomplished communications executive to develop an integrated communications strategy that will support the NMEF leadership and mission, and disseminate knowledge effectively both within the Foundation and externally to a variety of audiences. The ideal candidate will bring proven experience in developing and implementing a successful communications plan, and experience with branding, advocacy, public relations and the development of critical partnerships to raise the Foundation’s public profile as a leader in transformative education. This individual will join an extraordinarily exciting and dynamic enterprise staffed by a dedicated, creative group of professionals.

Isaacson, Miller has been retained by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation for this important recruitment. This document, which will be shared with candidates and sources in the search, describes the Foundation, the opportunities and challenges for the new Director and the qualifications and experience of an ideal candidate.

CONTEXT

The mission of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation is to stimulate transformative change of public education systems across New England by helping to develop a greater variety of higher quality educational opportunities that enable all learners – especially and essentially underserved learners – to obtain the skills, knowledge and supports necessary to become civically engaged, economically self-sufficient life-long learners.

The Foundation has been led since 2006 by president and chief executive officer, Nicholas Donohue, who came to NMEF from the New Hampshire Department of Education, where he served as Commissioner since 2000. He has worked with schools, districts, and state education agencies across the country to assist them to plan and implement a variety of school improvement strategies with a focus on systemic change and how to manage it well.

The Foundation was created by the Nellie Mae Corporation, a nonprofit education financing company that pioneered philanthropy in the student loan industry with its Fund for Education. Over the Fund's eight-year history, beginning in 1990, it provided \$5 million in grants to support more than 300 education programs aimed at improving educational access, quality and effectiveness for students throughout New England.

In July 1998, Nellie Mae Corporation transitioned its structure to create the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. One year later, in mid-1999, the purchase of Nellie Mae Corporation by SLM Holding Corporation (Sallie Mae) created the endowment for the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. Now a separate entity from the Corporation, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation is New England's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to improving educational attainment and access, especially for underserved populations. That year, the Foundation distributed \$5 million in grants in New England; in 2010 the Foundation will award \$13 million.

The Foundation is currently a leader in advancing the implementation of student-centered learning models and in building public support for those models through education reform in communities throughout New England. Through grant making, research and policy initiatives, and technical assistance the NMEF works with educational institutions and associations, cultural and community organizations, foundations, government agencies and others to encourage, establish, and maintain programs and services that promote student-centered learning education reform for all students, especially and essentially underserved learners.

From 2000 until 2007, the Foundation invested its grant making on student achievement and opportunity within four focused program areas: adult literacy, college preparation, minority high achievement, and after school programs. In 2008, the Foundation realigned its strategic funding priorities. While continuing to provide grants and technical assistance for strategies that support underserved learners, it did so with an additional focus on building knowledge about how to dramatically

improve outcomes. The change in strategic direction led to a re-examining of long-held assumptions about the way students are educated

Current Situation

Based on new research on adolescent development and cognitive science, as well as knowledge obtained from investments in the region, the Foundation's strategic focus has now shifted to where they believe they can best prepare New England for the challenges it will face in the future: the promotion and implementation of developmentally appropriate, rigorous, year-round, student-centered approaches to learning at the middle and high school levels.

Most local education systems are ill-equipped to orchestrate the wider spectrum of student learning opportunities inside and outside of schools, within and beyond the traditional school day and school year, and are not designed to take advantage of promising new educational technologies.

These local systems are seldom proficiency-driven and generally substitute seat time, unit credits, and/or scores on high stakes state tests for a more balanced and authentic demonstration of student learning. Underserved student populations (including certain racial, ethnic, linguistic, socio-economic, and special needs groups) achieve at measurably lower levels than their higher-SES, English-speaking, white peers (leading to pronounced and persistent achievement gaps). And all students (across high performing and low performing groups) are challenged to acquire proficiency on a wide range of critical thinking skills, learning skills, and 21st century content.

While teachers and school administrators are critical agents in student success, they are often constrained by local, state, and federal policies that limit flexibility in curriculum, instruction, and assessment; by funding streams that favor established programs over innovative initiatives; and by lack of (and challenge in acquiring) the knowledge and skills needed to support students in a more flexible and adaptive educational system.

The wider community (of parents and guardians, local businesses and industries, higher education institutions and civic agencies, and reform-oriented political and social groups), though often distressed by these outcomes, is seldom an active advocate or partner in demanding and establishing a more responsive and innovative system.

In short then, the problem is an educational system of dramatically unequal results, locked into traditional models of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, unable to recognize or harness the myriad of learning opportunities outside the traditional structure, and effectively cut off from the wider community that could serve as a valuable resource and partner in improving student outcomes.

The strategic objective then becomes a system of education in which learning is the variable, and where students learn, who teaches them, and when they are taught, are the constants. This objective defines the Foundation's specific, strategic purposes.

The Foundation pursues their strategic objectives through a set of cross-cutting strategies:

- Working with practitioners to develop, enhance, and implement effective, evidence-based models of student centered learning.
- Working with local, state, and federal policy makers to shape policies that allow these approaches to flourish.
- Concentrating on increasing public demand for high-quality student-centered educational experiences for all learners.
- Building knowledge, conducting research and development activities that will contribute to the field and support model development, policy change and increasing public demand.

Beginning in March 2010, grants are being awarded primarily through four strategic initiatives:

- District Level Systems Change, which includes the promotion and integration of student-centered approaches, as well as policy and advocacy work at the district level;
- State Level Systems Change, which focuses on promoting state and federal education policies that support student-centered learning at scale;
- Research and Development, which not only informs our work, but also that of practitioners in the fields of education and philanthropy;
- Public Understanding, which aims to increase both awareness of student-centered learning experiences and the public will to implement them.

Over time, all of the Foundation's program activities, whether program initiatives or traditional grants, will focus on academic achievement and attainment, also referred to as 'educational success.' The Foundation will also expand technical assistance and program evaluation, and will award multi-year grants. NMEF provides technical assistance to grantees to enhance program development and organizational effectiveness.

THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND STAFF

NMEF is governed by an influential and dedicated board of 15 Directors who meet quarterly in committees and as a body of the whole. The Board is diverse in ethnicity and experience representing business, government, academia, healthcare and advocacy.

The Foundation has grown from a staff of four to a staff of 19, and an operating budget of \$19M with net assets of \$424M. An organization-wide retreat of Board and staff is held off-site once a year. This meeting is intended to develop organizational priorities for the coming year, provide a sense of unity for staff, and foster greater collaboration among staff.

DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

Working closely with the President and CEO, and key senior staff, the Director will be responsible for strategically and collaboratively constructing the framework for all communications and public relations functions and for achieving communications objectives, with respect to information and influence, brand recognition and meaning, and public understanding of the need to transform public education. The Director will manage all communications initiatives including strategic media and social networking strategies, and also all print and promotional projects. S/he will work closely with staff to develop all collateral materials, including brochures, press and media releases. The Director will also oversee creation of all materials which promote NMEF and/or the overarching values of transformative educational initiatives. The position calls for a talented communications professional with excellent analytic and creative skills as well as the intellectual capacity to absorb and present complex issues.

The ideal candidate will bring substantial experience in public relations or public affairs, strategic communications, advocacy, social networking, media, and related fields. Excellent and broad knowledge of, and perspective on, education policy, plus the intelligence, drive, and interpersonal skills to be a respected colleague and leader are all highly preferred traits.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation has identified a series of broad strategic objectives which the new Director of Communications, together with the leadership and staff, will play a key role in fulfilling. More specifically, these include:

- Lead the Foundations Public Understanding and Demand Initiative.

The new Director will be expected to influence and manage one of the Foundations four central Initiatives. The desired outcomes of this Initiative include changing public opinion and perspective about the need for fundamental change in public education that is organized and delivered along the lines of the student centered principles that define the Foundation's work. This work is done in conjunction and in support of the Foundation's other three major Initiatives focused on District Level Systems Change, State Level Systems Change and Research and Development.

- Provide communications counsel and support for NMEF initiatives.

The new Director will be expected to provide professional assistance to help NMEF achieve its goal of greater visibility and impact. To this end, s/he will help identify opportunities to advance NMEF's overall communications strategy, utilizing techniques and judgments required to disseminate information and shape programmatic and public policy effectively. The Director may be called upon to help prepare briefing materials for presentation to a legislative committee, provide strategic guidance in gaining greater

media coverage of NMEF's activities, or simply offer practical advice in preparing for interviews with major media representatives. The Director should be seen as a reliable and trusted source for information related to advancing transformative education initiatives.

- Develop a distinctive brand identity strategy for NMEF.

This individual will engage internal and external constituencies (including opinion leaders) in identifying the unique value of NMEF and its potential impact. S/he will leverage all communications as appropriate through print, electronic and online/social media.

- Cultivate and steward external relationships by representing the Foundation to the broader community.

The new Director will explore and establish relationships based on common interests with institutions, policymakers, opinion leaders, professional associations, government officials, school committees, school superintendents, teachers, the media and public at large to insure maximum outreach for NMEF. This individual will work closely with the President and CEO, and the senior staff to broaden the public understanding on how to achieve sustained systemic gains in education reform and how to promote student centered learning designs in particular. S/he will prepare news releases and informational pamphlets in order to state NMEF's views and to inform the public of features of proposed legislation or policy changes. Other activities include planning and coordinating meetings between NMEF staff and elected officials to discuss legislative issues and proposals; attending and representing NMEF at state and national association meetings as appropriate. Additionally, the new Director will collaborate with the President and CEO and other staff on meetings with stakeholders in each New England state for informational/prospecting purposes around student centered learning. S/he will serve as a partner and effective spokesperson with the President/CEO and key senior staff on issues and messages related to educational policy issues.

- Expand and strengthen an integrated communications strategy for NMEF.

The new Director will be expected to proactively work with staff to execute a communications plan that will weave and support all facets of the Foundation including policy, programs, research and advocacy to publicize NMEF's important work, promote improved coverage of the organization's activities as well as highlight its critical contribution to transformative education. S/he will design and execute a comprehensive knowledge plan to capture and disseminate information, research, and outcomes learned through the Foundation's program investments.

- Mentor, build, and support a strong communications team.

As a learning leader, this individual will manage a small staff and direct all aspects of the communications department including assignment and approval of specific projects and delegation of duties and areas of responsibilities.

THE ROLE

NMEF is seen as a prominent regional and national player in the effort to advance the quality of student-centered education, especially to underserved learners. NMEF staff needs to be kept informed of current and planned initiatives through communication which is timely, informative, professional, and sensitive to perspectives represented by this constituency. The new Director must work as a team member with other senior managers, and their respective staffs in programming, research, policy, finance and administration. S/he must act as an advance person, or "scout" when traveling with other Foundation members to ascertain potential venues or avenues for communicating program particulars.

The Director manages a staff of two direct reports, a Communications Manager whose responsibilities include media relations, and a Communications Associate whose work includes the internal communications, and a budget of approximately \$1 million.

This individual must be a savvy communications professional who understands how to deliver nuanced communications to various audiences and is capable of understanding complex policy issues. Personally, s/he should be an effective listener, an eager learner, and an intelligent collaborative partner with the NMEF's senior staff. Strong interpersonal skills, flexibility, resilience, and outstanding judgment are required. Candidates should be willing to invest time and energy learning the issues and the interests of NMEF in detail, and building confidence and credibility among its constituencies.

The new Director may come from a background in one or more fields, including but not limited to public relations, government, journalism, professional associations, or academia. The ideal background would combine demonstrated competence in communications with substantive exposure to public advocacy especially in education.

Qualifications and Experience

Candidates must have:

- Seven to ten years experience in a leadership position preferably managing a communications function, within an organization working with a team of professional staff, and management of outside contractors and consultants.
- A minimum of a bachelor's degree in a related field, masters preferred.
- A demonstrated capacity to develop and execute a broad, organization-wide communications strategy.
- The ability to craft substantive, accurate, and effective messages.

- Excellent communications skills: a strong writer, editor and presenter of ideas.
- Successful branding and strategic communications experience.
- History of building and maintaining strong relationships with contacts in print, electronic and online media.
- Knowledge, interest, and experience with state-of-the-art communications technology, and utilization of social networking.
- A deep commitment to diversity.
- Current driver's license and access to transportation for travel primarily in the New England region.
- Excellent project management and a record of making sound judgments about competing priorities and managing time and resources well. Ability to work independently and meet and adapt to rapidly changing context.
- A proven ability to think strategically, analyze critically, and to translate ideas and insights into action through coherent and viable plans.

Personal Qualifications:

An ideal candidate will also bring the following personal qualities to this important role:

- Commitment to the educational mission of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and a genuine desire to support that mission through the provision of first rate communication services.
- A high degree of awareness of the value and purpose of organized philanthropy.
- The ability to inspire and motivate staff.
- The ability to work effectively with a range of people and to advocate resourcefully, resolutely and persuasively.
- A focus on teamwork. The capacity to keep organizational goals and mission paramount and rise above internal organizational politics.
- A spirit of experimentation and creativity, which fosters innovation welcomes scrutiny and constructive criticism, and learns from mistakes along the way
- Flexibility, energy, self-reliance and a sense of humor.

Compensation

Compensation will be competitive and commensurate with the candidate's experience.

To Apply

Applications including resumes, salary history and a cover letter which responds to the tasks and requirements outlined above should be sent in confidence to:

4087@imsearch.com

Marion Aymie
Isaacson, Miller
334 Boylston Street
Boston, MA 02116
Telephone: 617-262-6500
Fax: 617-262-6509

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