

THE GREATER KANSAS CITY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOCUS ON INNOVATION, 2008-2009

Susan Wally
President and CEO
PREP-KC (Partnership for Regional Education Preparation)



1. What does the word “innovation” mean to you?

At PREP-KC we think of innovation as “bringing about significant change in something that matters.” Most Kansas Citians believe we can’t live up to our full economic or civic potential without solving the long-standing problem of low educational attainment in our urban core. The young people in our urban schools must become well prepared to compete for opportunities in higher education and in the workforce. They also must see themselves as contributors to our city’s future. That’s how we define “something that matters.” “Significant change” is possible through PREP-KC’s partnership with regional school districts to provide both the pressure and support necessary to move the dial on key issues for urban students, such as high school graduation and workforce preparation. PREP-KC creates a new and accountable place for donors and advocates to put their resources together to make change. We believe that is why PREP-KC has an unprecedented circle of funders investing in urban education. Additionally, we strive to provide our stakeholders and investors with objective measures of progress.

2. What about your organization do you consider to be truly innovative?

We work at the intersection of urban education reform and strategic philanthropy. Each of these fields alone is a challenging venue. However, when we take innovative strategies and combine them with strategic and accountable grant making, we have found that important results can be created. Prior to our work at the district-level, much of the field of educational reform was considering how to improve one school at a time, especially schools in low-income neighborhoods. When working with urban public school districts, PREP-KC is committed to collaboration, focused on results. Our partnerships are based on a mutual commitment to strategically apply resources, such as national experts and skilled leadership coaches, to support them in creating better results for their students. PREP-KC’s private funds are only a tiny fraction of a district’s budget, yet through our results-based relationships we’re able to influence and leverage their budget decisions.

3. How has being located in Kansas City made a difference?

Our colleagues in other cities, as well as local leaders who have come to Kansas City from elsewhere, constantly remind us that our city has a culture of generosity and collaboration. Without the efforts of more than 20 investors, as well as the advocacy of the business and civic community, PREP-KC might not exist. Neither would the improving results for our urban students. This is a middle-sized Midwest city that really cares about its young people, regardless of their zip code or family income.

4. What was the tipping point for your organization?

In 2005, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recognized the significant outcomes and progress of our initial work in the Kansas City, Kansas District and granted PREP-KC a five-year, \$6 million grant to advance the innovation of whole-district reform in both KCKPS and KCMSD. That grant essentially created the opportunity for PREP-KC to begin working at scale in both districts. What was truly impressive to The Gates Foundation was when 20 Kansas City business and civic leaders more than matched the Gates grant. That was a powerful statement that our bi-state city not only had a need, but that PREP-KC was seen as an innovative organization whose strategies and stewardship brought confidence to investors, and hope regarding the future of our urban core.

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Susan Wally is the President and CEO of PREP-KC (Partnership for Regional Educational Preparation), an organization founded in 2005 to develop, leverage, and deploy resources to support the improvement of public education in Kansas City. A former high school teacher, principal, and strategic advisor for school and district improvement, she joined the Kauffman Foundation in 1990 as manager of Project Choice, an urban high school dropout prevention and scholarship program that was conceived by Ewing Kauffman and operated by the Foundation. She served for more than 10 years as Vice President for Education at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation where she led a grant portfolio focused on the development and achievement of school-aged children. While at The Kauffman Foundation, Susan developed strategic partnerships with Kansas City's urban school districts, including First Things First in the Kansas City, Kansas School District, and Achievement First in five Kansas City, Missouri high schools. Additionally, she collaborated with The Danforth Foundation in 1997 to launch the Missouri Superintendents Forum; with the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Education to launch the Kauffman/UMKC Principals Institute in 1999; and in 2000, with The Kansas Health Foundation to launch The Kansas Superintendents Forum. She has served on and chaired the Board of Directors for Grantmakers for Education, a national membership organization.

Currently, Susan serves on the Kansas Commission for Educational Leadership, which is charged with the development of new policy recommendations for preparing stronger educational leaders. Formerly, she served on the (Missouri) Governor's Math, Engineering, Technology, and Science Task Force. She also served on the Steering Committee at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, which developed the Institute for Urban Education to focus on the development of well-prepared urban teachers.

Susan holds Bachelor's, Master's and Specialist degrees in education, curriculum and instruction, and education policy and administration. Additionally, Susan serves on the board of Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey, supports the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Kansas City through their RBI (Revive Baseball in the Inner City) project, and serves on the Board of Directors of Wayside Waifs, Kansas City's largest Humane Society and Animal Shelter.

In 2005, the Civic Council of Greater Kansas City, in partnership with the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation, launched PREP-KC to provide the support necessary to continue the positive efforts underway in the Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools and the Kansas City, Missouri School District. Guided by the belief that the quality of education for Kansas City's urban youth impacts the quality of life throughout our region, PREP-KC works with the districts to improve outcomes for Kansas City's urban youth. The result is a partnership where district resources and PREP-KC's private resources come together to create a new, improved framework for education. PREP-KC's goal is to increase college-going and access to high-quality employment for the 40,000, mostly low-income students served by these two Kansas City districts. Working in close partnership with superintendents, school board leaders, principals and teachers, PREP-KC deploys resources to help the districts evaluate the effectiveness of reform strategies, and to share the stories of challenges and progress with Kansas City stakeholders. PREP-KC has received funding from The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and been recognized for its contributions in improving graduation rates and test scores in Kansas City, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri.