

Connected to the Community

An Interview with Ridgway H. White,
President, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE *Ridgway White began his career at the Mott Foundation as an intern in 2002 and was hired as a program assistant two years later. After working his way up through the program ranks, he served as the Foundation's Vice President for Special Projects and Chair of its management working group from 2011 until he became President in January 2015. He is a graduate of Hobart College, where he studied architecture, economics and urban planning.*



Ridgway H. White

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *Established in 1926, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation (mott.org) is a private philanthropy committed to supporting projects that promote a just, equitable and sustainable society. Grantmaking is focused in four programs: Civil Society, Education, Environment and Flint Area. In addition to Flint, offices are located in metropolitan Detroit, Johannesburg and London.*

Will you discuss the history of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and how the Foundation has evolved?

The Foundation was established a little over 90 years ago by Charles Stewart Mott, who was an early automotive pioneer. Mr. Mott had a core belief that every person exists in an informal partnership with his or her community. That concept has two powerful underpinnings.

The first can be thought of as a virtuous cycle. When individuals succeed and give back, their community flourishes. When a community is strong and prosperous, it creates opportunity for the individuals who live and work there. The success of each strengthens the other.

The second relates to the power to make change. When people become engaged and work in partnership with their communities, they can bridge social, cultural and economic divides to make progress on big problems.

Mr. Mott's belief still drives the way we approach a lot of our grantmaking today.

Our foundation was created to exist in perpetuity. We have \$3 billion in assets, and we've given away more than \$3 billion since our inception, including \$1 billion in our home community alone. We've grown from a primarily local foundation to one that also works regionally, nationally and internationally.

What are the focus areas for the Foundation's giving?

We make grants in four program areas: Civil Society, Education, Environment and the Flint Area. Because Mr. Mott wanted to give back to his home community, Flint has always been a big focus for us. Two of our other flagship issues are after-school programs and the Great Lakes.

Our after-school work grew out of a community education initiative that we first began funding in Flint in the mid-1930s. Six decades later, that led

to a partnership with the federal government on the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative, which currently provides after-school services to 1.7 million children across the country. We also aim to increase access to and improve the quality of after-school programs for all children in our country.



Mott Foundation President Ridgway White visits with students at Flint's Durant-Tuuri-Mott Elementary School as they learn about pollination.

We're also focused on protecting and restoring the Great Lakes, which contain 20 percent of the world's freshwater supply. Our experience with the Flint water crisis taught us that we need to focus on a "one water" solution, meaning that we need to think about protecting not only source water, but also the last mile – and even the last 10 feet – of a water system.

Why hasn't there been more reform and true change within the K-12 system and is the right dialogue taking place to address this issue?

At Mott, we believe there's a need to focus on the entire education continuum, from cradle through college and career. That's what we're trying

to do in Flint. For a long time, we were primarily focused on a community education approach delivered through the K-12 schools and on higher education. In the wake of the water crisis, we found that one of our big gaps was in early childhood education. We recently funded two new early childhood schools, and we're also supporting a collaborative effort to help improve the quality of all early childhood care across the city, whether it's provided in a home, church, school or other location. We hope the work that's happening here will drive more dialogue and inform better policies in our state and nation.

How does the Mott Foundation focus on supporting civic engagement?

It all goes back to the concept of partnering with communities. We fund organizations that help people get involved with their communities in meaningful ways. We also provide the kind of support that helps those organizations strengthen their capacity.

The Flint water crisis provided a good example of why this is important. When government and the private sector failed the community, it was the nonprofit organizations that were the first responders in the water crisis. They were the ones who knew what the community needed, and they were the ones who were able to lessen the struggles of people in Flint.

There's also a lot of power in the old concept of, "Think globally. Act locally." As one example of that, a new area of work for Mott's Civil Society team is encouraging community foundations around the world to make progress toward achieving the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals.

What do you tell people about the transformation taking place in Flint?

First, I want to remind people that what has happened in Flint in recent years could happen in any post-industrial city where there's been chronic disinvestment and where government ignored an entire population raising an alarm. I then want to tell them not to count Flint out.

Flint has the fortitude to recover and rise, and there are good things happening here. We have a vibrant arts and culture scene. We have outstanding colleges and universities. Efforts are underway to redevelop the city's waterfront and bring new businesses to town. Most of all, there's a wonderful sense of partnership – of people working together for the common good – that would make Mr. Mott proud. I would encourage everyone to come to Flint and see that for themselves. ●