

How billionaire donors harm public education^[1]

Author: Strauss, Valerie

Source: Washington Post

Format: Article

Publication Date: 31 Oct 2010

EXCERPTS

Today the foundation set up by billionaires Eli and Edythe Broad is giving away \$2 million to urban school districts that have pursued education reform that they like. On Friday a Florida teacher is running 50 miles to raise money so that he and his fellow teachers don't have to spend their own money to buy paper and pencils, binders (1- and 2-inch), spiral notebooks, composition books and printer ink.

Together the two events show the perverted way schools are funded in 2010.

Very wealthy people are donating big private money to their own pet projects: charter schools, charter school management companies, teacher assessment systems. (The latest example is Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's \$100 million donation to the Newark public schools, given with the provision that Zuckerberg, apparently an education reform expert, play a big role in determining success.)

What this means is that these philanthropists -- and not local communities -- are determining the course of the country's school reform efforts and which education research projects get funded. As Buffalo Public Schools Superintendent James A. Williams said in an interview: "They should come out and tell the truth. If they want to privatize public education, they should say so."

That none of their projects is grounded in any research seems not to be a hindrance to these big donors. And they never try to explain why it is acceptable for them to donate to other causes -- the arts, medicine, etc. -- without telling doctors and artists what to do with the money. Only educators do they tell what to do.

Alongside this private money stream is the great inequity in the public funding of traditional schools. A new report that shows that only six states are positioned relatively well to provide equality of educational opportunity for all children.

Many traditional public schools are so starved for funds that teachers spend some of their own money for supplies; the National Education Association estimates that teachers spend \$1,000 out-of-pocket annually on essential classroom supplies. To bring attention to this ugliness, Rafael Martin, a high school math and history teacher for students with disabilities, will run 50 miles on Friday from Lakeland to Orlando, Fla., to raise funds for school supplies for Tenoroc High School, where most of the children live in poverty.

He'll likely earn some thousands of dollars.

The \$2 million being given to the 2010 Broad Prize winner is a mere drop in the bucket in the ocean of cash being given away by the super-rich to education.

Coincidentally, it is the same amount of money that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation gave away earlier this year to a company simply to market the education film "Waiting for Superman," which portrays a distorted idea of the root causes of the problems facing urban school districts as well as the solutions. [Disclosure: Melinda French Gates is a member of the Board of Directors of The Washington Post Co.]

There are a lot of foundations out there handing out money for education initiatives -- some you've probably heard of, like the Walton Foundation, and some you haven't -- but Gates is the big money man when it comes to funding education, with his tally into the billions.

A look at one of his education investments is revealing. About a decade ago, Gates decided that small schools were the answer to the high school dropout problem. From 2000-2009 he poured in about \$2 billion to help reform high schools and improve graduation rates of minority students -- with most of the money going to create small schools out of large drop-out factories. But when standardized test scores didn't go up, Gates pulled out his money.

He wrote last year in the foundation's annual letter (excerpts of which were published in The Washington Post): "Many of the small schools that we invested in did not improve students' achievement in any significant way."

He was wrong to believe that small schools were a silver bullet, and, actually, he was wrong to say that the initiative was a total failure, as Tom Toch notes in this piece).

...

Now Gates is investing hundreds of millions in efforts to create teacher assessment systems that are based on student standardized test scores. He's wasting money again; several research studies have been released recently show that the results of such schemes are unreliable and unfair, and the scheme, tried periodically over decades, has never been shown to be especially effective.

Surely these philanthropists think they are helping. But they don't understand education and have been somehow led to believe that "the answer" is specific and around the corner: a longer school day; a longer school year; charter schools; technology; standardized tests in every subject; assessing teachers by standardized test scores; for-profit education; training new college graduates for five or six weeks as

teachers and then sending them into the toughest schools in America.

The fact is that there is no strong research to show that any of those elements will do much to help education by themselves, and even together, and some will hurt. Take charter schools, the pet project of many of Wall Street's wealthy hedge fund founders, who have ignored the largest research study on charters that shows most of them are no better or worse than traditional public schools.

The strong link, born out by research over years, between educational attainment and poverty is ignored by these donors. These financial wizards believe that the public education, the nation's proudest civic institution, should be run like a business.

...

-reprinted from the Washington Post

Region: United States ^[2]

Tags: poverty ^[3]

privatization ^[4]

school system ^[5]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/10/11/how-billionare-donors-harm-public-education>
Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/10/11/how-billionare-donors-harm-public-education> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/poverty> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/privatization> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/school-system>