

# MIGHT THE NEW GATES EDUCATION INITIATIVE CLOSE OPPORTUNITY GAPS?



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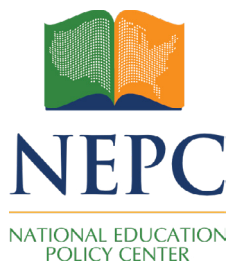
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*In this Policy Memo, Kevin Welner considers the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's newest effort, focused on "Networks for School Improvement," and how this initiative can learn from the Foundation's own past initiatives as well as from research evidence more generally.*

A program officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation once told me that their internal discussions often use "mosquito nets" as a unit of measurement. For example, if a grant of \$6,000 will purchase a thousand mosquito nets (or \$6 per net) toward the Foundation's efforts to combat malaria, then a program officer might speak of a different potential grant of \$6,000 as a trade-off against a thousand nets. It's a way, I was told, of keeping each granting decision grounded in real-life repercussions. Each dollar granted has solemn value; every two minutes, one [child still dies](#) of malaria.

The Gates Foundation deserves praise for their altruistic efforts in many areas as well as for its willingness to evaluate the effectiveness of those efforts. Long-running initiatives like the Gates Millennium Scholars Program, which will soon be entering its third decade of granting college scholarships combined with leadership programs for students of color, also deserve praise. As do some of the Foundation's lesser-known investments in areas such as early-childhood education. At the same time, I worry that in K-12 education, the Foundation has repeated fundamental errors.

In this policy memo, I describe those errors and consider whether the Gates Foundation's newest effort, focused on "[Networks for School Improvement](#)," can learn from experience—from the Foundation's own past initiatives as well as from research evidence more generally.

In January of 2018, the Foundation will issue an RFP to fund about 30 such networks, "[defined as](#) a group of secondary schools working both collectively and individually with an intermediary to use a continuous improvement process to improve student outcomes through tackling problems that are common across the network." The intermediary organizations

here can take on various tasks, but they generally work across schools, assisting with school design and supports. In the [speech](#) that Bill Gates gave to the Council of Great City Schools announcing this new endeavor, he cited Chicago's Network for College Success, Summit Public [charter] Schools, the California CORE districts, and LIFT Tennessee, as well as reforms associated with a new data system in Fresno. The initiative is also apparently modeled on Gates-funded [work done by New Visions for Public Schools](#) in New York City.

At the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) an array of experts has weighed in with concerns about some of the Gates Foundation's efforts over the past dozen years. For instance, the initiative to promote the Common Core State Standards was too top-down, as was the small-schools reform initiative.<sup>1</sup> Each of those efforts was grounded in some high-quality research, and each generated some worthwhile outcomes. Unfortunately, the small-schools reform effort was tied to [unrealistically high expectations](#) and was abandoned out of apparent frustration with what was considered [limited progress](#). And the Common Core effort was met with an unusual combination of right-left resistance linked, in part, to populist push-back against the top-down pressures of the initiative. Reforms are less likely to take hold when they are imposed on communities rather than developed locally with knowledgeable people inside those communities. Critics also pointed to the [lack of sufficient capacity-building](#) to go along with the raised expectations, as well as the role of the standards in perpetuating the nation's high-stakes accountability apparatus.

The Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project yielded [exceptional data](#) but was undermined by its [advocacy of value-added modeling](#) of students' test scores to evaluate teachers in invalid ways. Test scores will always come up short if utilized to capture the essence of good teaching. Yet the design of the project unwisely [subordinated](#) classroom observation data to these test-score data, as part of the Foundation's broader push for "data-driven" teacher evaluation systems.

The Gates Foundation has also invested heavily in what it sees as scalable charter school models—essentially betting on CMOs to work out school-development or school-improvement approaches that can be expanded by the CMOs and also adopted elsewhere. This promotion of CMO-operated charter schools has been [extensively critiqued](#). Here, I'll simply note that the Gates Foundation shut down the small-schools project based on results that were more impressive than the charter school project has thus far yielded—and with far fewer negative, unintended consequences.

All of these efforts share a strong focus on test-score outcomes. In some cases, such as the work on teacher-evaluation systems and the Common Core initiative, these outcomes were front and center. In other cases, such as the small-schools and charter-schools initiatives, these outcomes have played a key role in the background. This overarching focus on test-score is one of the key obstacles to the Gates Foundation moving forward. While test scores can be a valuable part of an evaluative feedback loop, too often they have been a [siren's song luring the Foundation and policy makers onto the rocks](#).

1 This is an obvious risk for the Foundation, given that it is an undeniably powerful and influential actor. It's fair to say that the Gates Foundation cannot hope to avoid the top-down problem unless it very deliberately builds authentic community engagement into its activities.

In addition to a top-down approach that fails to adequately include genuine engagement with the affected communities, the work of the Foundation has been hampered by three additional repeated errors, each of which is discussed in more detail below: (a) excessive faith in choice and markets, (b) similarly excessive faith in technology and data, and (c) insufficient attention to outside-school obstacles to students' opportunities to learn.

*Choice/Markets:* This is primarily seen in the Gates Foundation's charter-school investments and broader support of "portfolio" governance approaches to school reform. As opposed to right-wing foundations that see choice as an inherent good, the Gates Foundation appears to look to school choice as a way to innovate in an environment free of the bureaucratic constraints of school districts—particularly the larger urban districts that suffer from more byzantine bureaucracies and that serve disproportionately low-income communities of color. There is a sensible theory of action underlying these investments, but there is also a clear body of strong research evidence showing [zero or minimal benefits](#) combined with [very real harms](#). With forceful constraints and supports in place, [charter schools might become a tool for broader-scale equity](#). But without constraints school choice (as with market-based distributions of benefits more generally) tends to lead to [stratified opportunities](#)—exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. The more deregulated environment has also led to [financial abuses, self-dealing](#), and poor use of [public assets](#).

While we can assume that the Gates Foundation is not investing in the obvious abusers in this ecosystem, evidence also suggests that the Foundation's support of charter school growth has indirectly exacerbated these problems. Even the prominent charter management organizations (CMOs) held up as exemplars are contributing to the pervasive problems of stratification and churn felt in our urban communities.

*Tech/Data:* Given the software roots of the Foundation's endowment, its faith placed in digital data and technology is not surprising. But the problem remains. A great deal has been written about the limitations of using data to drive reform, often focused on issues of [validity](#) and pointing to Campbell's Law: In the realm of social science, as opposed to the hard sciences, high-stakes use of data will lead to corruption of the data themselves as well as distortion of the processes generating the data. When student tests are used to hold schools and teachers accountable, for example, we see the educational process distorted (teaching to the test, cheating, squeezing out non-tested subjects, steering away or pushing out students with lower scores, etc.), and this means that the test scores themselves give us an incorrect picture of the quality of the schools and teachers. This was pointed out years ago by [Berliner and Nichols](#) and again this past year by [Daniel Koretz](#).

For the Gates Foundation, however, the faith in digital data goes beyond a faith in test scores. The core concern here is simple: the data gathered (and gatherable) are not representative of what we want our children to learn and experience in school. The maxim, *What gets measured, gets managed*—generally attributed to Peter Drucker—should give us pause. If, for example, we care about socioemotional learning, but our measures are weak, should we push this learning aside? Should we craft those learning experiences to fit the weak available measures? Similarly, if we care about high-quality preschool, but a big part of what we hope for in those preschools involves play, what recourse do we have



if data are driving the reform?

The faith in tech is similarly excessive. Since 2009, the Gates Foundation has issued grants of about a third of a billion dollars for what it calls the Next Generation Learning Challenges. I remember Tom Vander Ark (the former Executive Director of Education at the Gates Foundation) holding up his iPhone at a meeting I attended, where he expressed wonder that folks entrenched in the education world were not open to embracing tech cure-alls that have transformed the rest of society. But learning is largely a [social activity](#), dependent on relationships as much as ... relationships themselves. My iPhone might help me find a date, but it's not going to do much to help me build a healthy relationship. When we see advocates of software-based ("digital") learning describing it as "personalized" because algorithms respond to past inputs from a given student, we should be very concerned. If [poorly regulated](#), it can lead to abuses. If used as a shortcut, digital learning can lead to [disastrous](#) results, and digital learning approaches appear to be [least useful \(and most harmful\)](#) for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged students. I do see evidence that the Gates Foundation seeks out grantees who understand this, and the Foundation deserves praise for commissioning a serious evaluation of "personalized" (digital) learning by the [RAND](#) Corporation. But I also see rhetoric and grants that suggest irrational exuberance for the role of tech in school improvement. Technology (as with school choice) is merely one tool that can potentially help increase learning opportunities—but only if used wisely and with a large dollop of skepticism.

*Outside-school Obstacles:* It is indeed these learning opportunities that sometimes seem lost in the mix. When technology or small schools or charter schools or data or teacher evaluation systems are occasionally able to improve learning outcomes, it is because they have managed to increase opportunities. Achievement gaps arise from these [opportunity gaps](#), and opportunities to learn are very much unequal in our society. Those inequalities, however, arise in larger society even more than in schools. Attempts to apportion variance between school and non-school factors find that only about [one-fifth](#) of the variation in student achievement can be attributed to measured in-school factors. Even if we assume that much of the unmeasured variation results from in-school factors, we would have a hard time getting beyond the [one-third](#) threshold that dates back to the Coleman et al study. If the Gates Foundation or anyone else truly hopes to equalize learning opportunities, the levers for that progress will almost surely have to be systemic, [addressing out-of-school harms](#) linked to factors such as concentrated poverty and racism.

## **The New “Networks for School Improvement” Initiative**

The new Gates Foundation initiative appears to be a shift toward addressing some of these impediments. Bill Gates, in his [speech](#), said, “We believe when teams of educators within schools and across schools work collaboratively with communities and have a strong partnership with families to solve common problems and continuously improve, change will be more enduring.” The [intermediaries](#) in the New Visions for Public Schools initiative in NYC helped the schools to add instructional time, to use project-based learning and per-

formance-based assessments, and to encourage schools “to provide teachers with common opportunities to examine student work and plan curricula.” They “championed authentic pedagogy and building professional learning communities, and they provided financial and other resources to enable schools to work with external partners.” They also pushed to combine that authentic pedagogy, which could be career-focused, with universal access to challenging, college-preparatory curriculum—an [important practice](#) at a time when we’re seeing [renewed advocacy for watered-down vocational tracks](#).

Despite these encouraging signs, there are plenty of red flags. The Foundation still plans to invest 15% of its K-12 education funding in charter schools. This would be in addition to funding CMOs and charter-related organizations that serve the desired intermediary role. So the strong support for charter school growth, which I don’t see as supported by evidence, will continue—although an apparent emphasis on increasing access and service for students with special needs attempts to address a significant criticism of charter schools.

The unwarranted faith in tech solutions remains as well. From Mr. Gates’ speech: “We expect that about 25 percent of our funding in the next five years will focus on big bets – innovations with the potential to change the trajectory of public education over the next 10 to 15 years. The conditions for developing and spreading new approaches in education, particularly technology-enabled ones, are better than ever.”

More concerning is this passage from Mr. Gates’ speech: “We will do this by investing in networks of schools to solve common problems schools face by using evidence-based interventions that best fit their needs, and **data-driven** continuous learning” (emphasis added). Evidence-informed (or evidence-based) change is indeed beneficial, as is evaluation-informed change, and often data-informed change—but not **data-driven** change. When data “informs” a reform, it is considered in context, combined with other information, and can be used thoughtfully; when it “drives” reform, the changes are often on auto-pilot and irrational. As we’ve seen with No Child Left Behind and related reforms, Campbell’s Law should be heeded; such high-stakes use of social science data can have powerful, negative unintended consequences.

Perhaps this was not what Mr. Gates means by “data-driven.” A closer look at his speech shows that the examples he gave are in fact more in the nature of data-informed than data-driven. I’ll quote this passage at length, because it offers some hope for sensible approaches:

Summit Public Schools, which operates 11 charter schools in California and Washington, analyzed data and determined that English Learners entered school significantly behind and never caught up. So, it identified the teachers whose EL students were doing the best, talked to them and curated their materials, and applied those best practices across all Summit schools. In less than a year, the performance gap between English Learners and others decreased by 25 percent.

In Chicago, researchers also found powerful insights in their data that are predictive of student progress and success. They determined, for example, that

9th graders who succeed on four key indicators – high attendance, course completion rates, credit accumulation, and grades – are more than four times as likely to graduate. And if their grades are a B+ or higher, they are much more likely to succeed in their first year of college. Excited by insights like these, school leaders in Chicago partnered with the University of Chicago to create the Network for College Success. This network of schools is using data to identify strategies that educators can use to solve specific problems. From 2007 to 2015, the percentage of students on track to graduate from Chicago high schools rose from 61 to 85 percent. And four-year college enrollment rates in Chicago went from 36 to 44 percent.

While the description here of the results of data use in these two instances undoubtedly is simplified for purposes of a short speech, there's a lot to like. Using data to yield "powerful insights" is a very different practice than using data to drive change through high-stakes consequences such as closing schools and dismissing teachers. There are clear benefits to a healthy evaluative feedback loop that uses data to inform future practice.

## Closing Opportunity Gaps

As the Gates Foundation sifts through the responses to its [Request for Information](#) about the new "Networks for School Improvement" initiative, it should grapple with cautions like those discussed here. Further, the research world offers affirmative lessons about [the importance of increasing opportunities to learn and about how to do so](#). One of those lessons is, in fact, embedded in the Foundation's support for CMOs: the importance of systemic change. That is, while an isolated school—whether neighborhood public school or charter school—can [beat the odds and offer rich opportunities to learn](#), larger-scale change requires meaningfully improving those odds themselves.

At a time when we see disturbing erosion of societal commitments toward equality, the hardships brought on by poverty and racism will inevitably produce greater divides, starker opportunity gaps, and larger achievement gaps. Changing this will require unified efforts among people of good will, inside and outside our formal educational institutions.

Within our schools, the needed systemic change goes beyond hard work and beyond big data or improved standards and tests or changed school size or governance. It entails changing the system, the context within which schools operate. Improved practices, resources and capacities are needed in order for a broad swath of our schools to provide supported, engaging and challenging learning opportunities, and this requires new rules, incentives and supports at the federal, state and district levels.

But, as tempting as it may be, this sort of policy change must not be pursued from the top down. Instead, the ideas and expressed interests of people in the communities most impacted must be in the forefront. Sustainable and beneficial change must be grounded in the authentic voices of parents, organizers, students and teachers in these communities. The issue here is one of political power, with community voices too often drowned out. Children in advantaged communities have no greater moral claim to rich opportunities to learn than



do children in communities of concentrated poverty, but until political voice is balanced the severe inequalities of opportunity will remain.

The Gates Foundation's Networks for School Improvement initiative could, with some relatively small adjustments, focus on systemic improvements in collaboration with community organizers and others. The initiative can move beyond supporting small groups of schools, can cautiously push back against stratified opportunities, and can extend efforts to working with communities to build strong school districts and supportive state contexts—all focused on closing opportunity gaps.

Over the next five years, the Gates Foundation is expected to spend \$1.7 billion on initiatives in public education, and I hope that they actually do, as Mr. Gates suggests, “work collaboratively with communities and have a strong partnership with families to solve common problems and continuously improve.” This is the approach that the Ford Foundation and some smaller regional foundations have long pursued; it's not easy, but it's extremely important.

I hope, too, that the Foundation's grant-makers keep their focus on the hard work of closing opportunity gaps rather than on alluring but futile quick-fixes, whether stemming from technology or from markets and deregulation. Tech and choice are best understood as sometimes-useful tools to be used carefully in pursuit of larger aims.

I hope that the leaders and program officers there do indeed build on the good work of the New Visions for Public Schools initiative in New York City.

Our public schools are subject to competing and unrealistic demands, they're under-resourced, and they're under continual attack. They are also, as they have long been, core institutions of our democracy. Undeniably, given their importance and their shortcomings, they are in great need of improvement.

As the Gates Foundation embarks on its new K-12 strategy, I keep thinking of those mosquito nets—as many nets as \$1.7 billion could buy. Our educational system is worthy of the new investment, if that investment is wise. Human progress is not a straight line. But we can learn from the past and plan for success.