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This issue...

The Influence of Philanthropists on Education

Keystone Exams Update

Legislative Update

Common Core Standards Update

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The Influence of Philanthropists on Education

Philanthropists and charitable foundations have a long history of giving to educational establishments. Generally, in the past, they have given to a particular school or university that held some attachment for them or perhaps to a specific department within the system; a project or a new building. Often the only strings attached had to do with having something named after them. More recently, however, there has been a coming together of the philanthropists and the federal educational policymakers. The modern philanthropists want to be more involved with their giving due to an apparent personal desire to improve the state of American public schools. The results of all this giving, however, have been less than impressive. In 1993, publisher Walter Annenberg, gave \$500 million to school systems in nine major US cities, but it had little impact in improving those districts. Bill Gates spent millions over a ten-year period on his Small School Initiative which he now admits failed to increase the number of kids going to college as he had hoped it would. Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, gave \$100 million to the city schools of Newark, NJ in 2010. He is currently working with Mayor Booker to improve their seriously failing schools, but no outcomes are available as yet. However, on August 23rd, the ACLU filed a lawsuit on behalf of the Secondary Parent Council (a parents group) that was denied access to the records related to the gift pledged to the Newark schools by Zuckerberg last year.

Interestingly, the teachers' unions also seem to have a problem with some of this giving, particularly if they sense any criticism of their existing monopoly. A New Business Item (#37) at this year's NEA convention states, "NEA will investigate and inform its members about the anti-public education agenda behind the ill-informed intrusion of billionaires on education." A case in point, Rupert Murdoch and his News

Corp. organization announced last year that they wanted to get involved in education technology and work on improving the plight of public schools. Mr. Iannuzzi of New York State United Teachers, a joint National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers affiliate, suggested that News Corp.'s Education Division will be seen to have "ulterior motives" most likely because of his ownership of FOX news.

"Although teachers are skeptical, the Obama administration has embraced this philanthropy trend. It has gotten to the point that the current administration is actually imploring corporate CEO's to give more to education. Of course, they want to be able to apply this money to the reforms **they** deem worthy. Melody Barnes, White House domestic policy advisor, commented that "there's no other group that better understands the importance of increasing excellence in America's schools than our business leaders." Unfortunately, those same business leaders usually have little knowledge about improving education and learning.

"If the foundations were supporting policies that were known to be successful, there would likely be a lot less angst at their unprecedented—and in some cases, hands-on—involvement in federal education policy, but they aren't. That they are pursuing strategies that are not helpful and are in some areas harmful makes their questionable involvement worse." ("Where Private Foundations Award Education Cash" by Valerie Strauss 7/25/2011) Though \$684 million in private grants was donated between 2000 and 2008, improvements have been negligible. "Philanthropists simply don't have enough resources to reshape the education system on their own; all their giving put together amounts to only a tiny fraction of total education spending, so their dollars alone can't make a significant difference. In order to make a real difference, philanthropists must support programs that redirect how future public education dollars



are spent.” (Rick Hess With the Best of Intentions, 2005)

One of the largest contributors to public education in recent years has been the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Bill Gates has been a long-time critic of the public schools. He continues to invest in projects, but seems to admit that even with all of his resources and his strong desire to improve education, all that he has done so far has barely scratched the surface. He praises parochial schools saying that “per dollar spent, (it) is an excellent school system”, yet he shies away from working on school vouchers because he says there isn’t “broad-based acceptance”. While he maintains publically that “negativity about (vouchers) is very high” he is ignoring the latest studies showing that the support for vouchers has soared in 2011. (“The Public Weighs In on School Reform”, <http://educationnext.org/the-public-weighs-in-on-school-reform/>) Mr. Gates seems to understand competition in business, but for some reason doesn’t see that it could be similarly applied to improve education, or he is just too afraid to address the elephant in the room...the teachers unions. “The reality is that the Gates Foundation met the same resistance that other sizeable philanthropic efforts have encountered while trying to transform dysfunctional urban school systems run by powerful labor unions and a top-down government monopoly provider.” (Jason Riley in “On the Poor Return from Bill Gate's Education Efforts” 7/23 /11) According to an article by Jay Greene (July 25, 2011) entitled, “The Gates Foundation Follies”, Gates made it clear in an interview that his foundation’s efforts going forward need to be focused on the political control of schools and yet he admitted that they don’t want to use political influence “to advance market forces in education”. He has been pretty good in his business life at taking care of his “customers”, but for some reason he ignores the real “customers” in education...the parents.

What are some other endeavors of the Gates Foundation? They want to work on a system that reliably measures teacher effectiveness. This is encouraging since it is well known (though often not accepted by some) that an effective teacher goes further than small classes or increased per pupil spending in improving academics. They plan to spend \$335 million on a five-year project to study such things as classroom management while diagnosing and correcting common student learning problems.

Gates also intends to use foundation money to find “best practices” and to create a system of national standards. His support for national standards to improve education by “getting everyone on the same page”, ignores the fact that there are twelve countries academically ahead of the United States and they each have totally different standards and curriculum (including Australia and Canada who have different standards in each of their provinces).

Some of Gates’ money came to Pittsburgh in the form of

a \$40 million dollar grant awarded in 2009. This money was to go toward the noble goal of increasing the number of highly effective teachers and to increase high school graduation. There has been much talk here and elsewhere about improving college readiness, but for some reason they think this can be done at the high school level. Meanwhile, approximately 60% of the students in many of the city schools remain below proficient at the elementary and middle school level. If they are not proficient in math, reading and writing at these lower levels of education, how can they be expected to do well in high school, graduate and be prepared for college?

A big part of the problem with Gates’ and others failed and sometimes questionable attempts at fixing education may be the advice they have been getting. Why do they continue to seek out the same educators who have been unable to improve education and narrow the achievement gap? “Gates isn’t the first well-meaning philanthropist to run upon the rocks and shoals of public education reform. Other philanthropic efforts like ones from the Ford Foundation, Carnegie Foundation and more recently the Annenberg Foundation are now largely history. None made much of a dent in the achievement gaps they hoped to reduce or eliminate.” (Dick Innes <http://bluegrasspolicy-blog.blogspot.com>) One example of this, as Mr. Innes points out, is his recent announcement in Kentucky that he intends to join with the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence to push “student-centered learning” into



more classrooms. Mr. Innes continues on his blog, “I bet no one told Gates that his supposedly new effort is actually old news...our schools have been using student-centered, higher order thinking approaches for two decades. Those approaches haven't worked well.” Innes continues, “Maybe someone recently came up with a way to do student-centered learning better, but it seems to me that shaping learning only around what interests a child will simply insure many children won’t learn a lot of things they need to know. The real key isn’t appealing to a child’s desires; it is knowing how to fire kids up to want to learn things that initially might be unknown to them or which might not be terribly appealing. That’s not student-centered, but it is what is needed if kids are really going to become college and career ready by the end of high school.”

The above illustration brings us to another reform that Gates and others might consider if they are serious about improving education. Changes need to be made to the schools of education. It seems that almost all of them have holes in their educational philosophy that have continued for decades. Why should they improve when they are feeding a monopoly that needs them? Educational fads begun in the schools of education, by professors who sometimes have never even taught outside a college classroom, have swept through district after district. Rarely grounded in any

sort of evidence-based approach, these fads fail to generate positive and reliable results across multiple learning scenarios. That does not stop these fads, however, from proliferating through educational professors and their protégés who clone the programs incessantly changing only the tainted title. For some unknown reason, public education continues to do the proverbial “same thing over and over again” expecting different results. One can only hope that Gates and other philanthropists will not continue to follow this same “insanity”.

Article written by Marilyn Reed. Read more at <http://www.american.com/archive/2011/august/the-atlanta-cheating-scandals-tough-lessons-for-business-leaders/>

Keystone Exams Delayed

From the Office of the Secretary of Education:

The 2011-2012 State Budget proposal presented by Governor Corbett includes many difficult decisions to address a significant budget shortfall. While the PA Department of Education (PDE) remains committed to the new system of high school graduation requirements that took effect just over one year ago, fiscal constraints **will delay implementation of certain provisions, including the use of Keystone Exams during the 2011-2012 school year.**

The Governor’s proposal reflects a one-year pause in the development and implementation of Keystone Exams. It is important to note that this delay will not adversely impact students. Fortunately, in developing this initiative the State Board of Education anticipated that fiscal challenges might require course corrections in implementation of the reform and included a waiver provision to ensure that no student is negatively affected by a delay in implementation. The additional time also will allow districts to make certain that local curriculum is fully aligned with the content assessed by keystones and to provide associated professional development.

PDE’s work on other components of the new high school graduation requirements, including development of the project-based alternative assessments will continue to move ahead. Additionally, the voluntary model curriculum, classroom diagnostic tools and other SAS resources, which are key components of the broader reform, will continue to serve students and schools during 2011-2012.

Please see the following website for more information on the Keystone Exams—www.pde.state.pa.us

Legislative Update

The next legislative session in Harrisburg will be starting in mid-September. There will be a number of pieces of legis-

lation to watch. **Under School Choice:**

House Bill 1330—expansion of existing EITC program.

House Bill 1678—\$5000 voucher to students residing in the 144 failing schools or districts.

House Bill 1679—\$5000 voucher to all students for school of their choice.

House Bill 240—Open enrollment program enables a student to attend a public school in a non-resident district.

House Bill 1708—Increase in EITC, introduction of scholarships for students to select non-public and public schools of their choice.

Senate Bill 1—Increase in EITC along with the creation of vouchers/scholarships for students in the 144 lowest performing schools or school districts.

Under Charter Schools:

Senate Bill 904—Creation of a statewide commission, independent of the Dept. of Education, to be charged with oversight of charter and cyber schools.

For more information, visit www.ceopa.org and look under the legislation heading.



Common Core Standards Update

Are We Closer to Losing Local Control of Our Schools and Our Students?

This is what we know about the Common Core (National) Standards in Pennsylvania. (Information taken from the Buck’s County Intermediate Unit Website).

- The PSSA test will not change in the near future.
- There is to be a close alignment between the PSSA and Common Core Standards.
- Districts are expected to transition to Common Core State Standards by July 1, 2013.
- There seems to be “national” assessments aligned to the Common Core Standards on the horizon. (Does this also mean an eventual national curriculum?)
- K-8 alignment has gaps in both mathematical content and math practices.

What we don’t know...

- In 2013, will content change for the PSSA tests?
- Will the PSSA in grades 3-8 be replaced by a Common Assessment Initiative (national testing?)
- Will the Keystone Exams (new PA Graduation Exams) replace Grade 11 PSSA tests for Average Yearly Progress purposes?

For more information related to the Common Core (National) Standards, and the concerns now being expressed about these standards, please see the links on our website at www.ceopa.org.

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