



Can Philanthropists Engineer Effective School Reforms?

Sarah Reckhow, Michigan State University

Not long ago, critics decried educational philanthropists for ineffectively tipping tiny buckets of funds into a vast sea of public expenditures; but now, critics worry that wealthy donors and overweening foundations are undermining public education. Fast-shifting criticisms raise obvious issues that my research explores. What reforms are educational philanthropists pursuing – how do they proceed, and with what effects for schools and American communities?

Looking for possibilities to engineer rapid changes through top-down decision-making, foundations have showered funds on school districts under mayoral or state control – in places such as New York City, Chicago, Washington, DC, and New Orleans. My research reveals that quick policy shifts certainly can happen in such circumstances, but top-down efforts can also prove politically explosive and unsustainable. My examination of the course of school reforms in New York and Los Angeles suggests that a gradual, community-oriented approach can prove more effective in the long run.

A Reform Sprint in New York City

In 2002, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg gained control of the schools and appointed Chancellor Joel Klein to propel changes. Klein led the Children First reform agenda, which included the development of smaller schools, charter schools, new kinds of training for principals, and the implementation of new systems of data collection and accountability. Philanthropists supported these measures with hundreds of millions in grant dollars. Immediate results were touted as a nationally exemplary success, and Klein won praise and awards for his leadership. However, a closer look suggests that the national adulation glossed over important signs of trouble at the local level.

- **A closed reform network.** When I surveyed dozens of education leaders and stakeholders in New York City and tracked how they share information, I learned that foundations and nonprofit reform advocates are closely connected to the district administration, but parents groups and neighborhood-based organizations are largely left out of the loop. Potential supporters of reforms have found themselves ignored and alienated.
- **Lack of political accountability:** New York City lacks a legitimate venue for public input on education policy. An appointed board known as the Panel for Educational Policy is the designated “board of education” for the city, but it amounts to a rubber-stamp body. Proposals from above are never voted down, and three members were summarily replaced when they opposed measures favored by the Mayor and Chancellor.

The same arrangements that allowed fast top-down action limited broad public buy-in and involvement in the Children First changes, and now their future is uncertain. In 2013, New Yorkers elected Bill DeBlasio, the mayoral candidate who mostly vocally opposed many of Bloomberg’s policies, including his education agenda.

Widespread Reforms in Los Angeles

Unlike the top-down approach to school reform in New York, reforms in Los Angeles have developed slowly and with greater community input. Although Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa attempted to take control in 2006, the Los Angeles Unified School District is still governed by an elected board. Los Angeles is less attractive for reform funders who want executive control, but major foundations have still invested heavily in the city’s charter schools and in other school reform projects.

With an elected public school board operating side by side with rapidly proliferating charter schools, Los Angeles educational politics could be a train wreck. Political battles certainly do rage, as pro-union and pro-charter protestors regularly clash and millions of dollars of outside money flow into contested school board

elections. Nevertheless, my survey of local stakeholders reveals a robust and closely linked network of advocates and neighborhood organizations that regularly share ideas and information. Unlike in New York, Los Angeles reforms have spread slowly and organically – the very sorts of reforms philanthropists push everywhere, including more autonomy for individual school leaders and enhanced student choice and teacher accountability. In Los Angeles, such changes have been encouraged both by philanthropic grants to charter school managers and by smaller grants to community groups working to reform regular public schools. Two lessons stand out:

- **Citizen involvement is important.** For reformers looking to shape education policy, locally generated political support is an integral resource. Buy-in from diverse groups requires persistent willingness to address local concerns, not just public relations messaging. In Los Angeles, many organizations with foundation funding, including charter management entities, fashioned relationships with local advocacy groups and constituents. Engagement does not ensure full agreement, but it opens reciprocal lines of communication.
- **Sustainable reforms require patience.** In Los Angeles, charter schools and enhanced autonomy for public schools are developing through public debate, community organizing, and electoral politics. Changes take hold slowly, and do not always unfold in a straight line. Yet the expansion of charter-like autonomy for public schools now has ongoing support from a broad coalition of district leaders and community organizations in Los Angeles.

In many places, U.S. education reformers and donors favor rapid, top-down strategies that forego opportunities to build diverse, locally-rooted coalitions. A desire to avoid compromise with established groups such as teachers' unions can also lead to imposing changes on parents and communities, rather than fashioning changes in concert with them. But, not surprisingly, citizens who are excluded may strike back at the ballot box. If sustainable improvements in America's schools are the goal, much evidence suggests that funders will achieve reforms with greater staying power if they act in concert with democratic politics, rather than trying to avoid it.

Read more in Sarah Reckhow, *Follow the Money: How Foundation Dollars Change Public School Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2013).