

Instructional Services Division

Evaluation of Gates Foundation Efforts

October 6, 2006

What is the Gates Foundation and what role does it play in high school redesign?

“While an influential small schools movement has been around for decades, largely due to the work of progressive-minded reformers such as Deborah Meier and Ted Sizer, Gates has made small schools the biggest and hottest high school reform in education today.

Gates has the financial muscle to back up its goals. With a \$28.8 billion endowment, the foundation is almost three times the size of the next largest U.S. foundation.

The foundation's education program "fact sheet" notes that its efforts are focused on two main areas: college scholarships for disadvantaged students and "redefining the American high school" by creating new small, high-quality high schools and converting low-performing large high schools into smaller learning communities.

As in its other program areas, the foundation is focused on bridging the gap between options available to the rich versus those for the poor. As Bill Gates said in a speech before the National Education Summit on High Schools in February, "If we keep the [high school] system as it is, millions of children will never get a chance to fulfill their promise because of their zip code, their skin color, or the income of their parents."

While its high school reform appears to focus primarily on school size, the foundation views small schools not as the end but the means to its primary goal of increasing graduation rates and preparing students for college.

"It is not just about size," Jim Shelton, the foundation's program director for education, told *Rethinking Schools*. "It is always about how you deliver quality instruction in a way that kids learn. But size is an enabler. It allows you to have an environment in which kids will know each other and the adults will know the kids."

In the last four years, Gates has poured almost \$1 billion into its K-12 education research and policy grants, with about \$735 million going specifically to its high school reform efforts. Since 2001, most of its grants have gone to high schools, according to Marie Groark, senior policy officer at the foundation.

To date, money is being used to start 1,500 high schools, with more than 400 already open and the rest slated to open in coming years. So far, about half have been new small schools and half of them conversions of large schools into smaller units with varying levels of autonomy. For new small schools, which the foundation has come to believe is a better model than converting existing schools, the goal is a maximum of 100 students per grade level.

In recent years, the initiative's pace has accelerated. Of the 1,500 high schools due to be funded, just a handful started in the first year, 2001-02; 150 opened in the fall of 2003; and 250 in the fall of 2004, according to Groark.

Clearly, the possibility exists that Gates will morph the small schools movement into the Gates small schools initiative. Which leads to the question: What are the implications both for small schools and urban reform efforts? “

From *Rethinking Schools*; The Gates Foundation and Small Schools, Summer 2005

What results have been seen as an outcome of this initiative?

"The answer is elusive, in part because the first group of small schools to receive Gates money didn't open until the fall of 2001, so there is not much to judge yet. There are also differences over whether it is more productive to emphasize the positives in the Gates initiative or to openly discuss concerns so that mistakes can be avoided. Some, meanwhile, dismiss the reform as the latest example of a "silver bullet" whose proponents don't understand the complexity of education reform.

Norman Fruchter, director of New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy and someone familiar with New York City's decade-old small schools movement, says the Gates initiative addresses perhaps the thorniest problems in urban reform — moving beyond the creation of a few good schools to transforming an entire district.

"The Gates Foundation has given an enormous boost to small schools," Fruchter says. "Because of the extent of the funding, they have leverage with school systems that no one else has. They have helped make small schools a part of districtwide reform agendas in a way that wasn't possible before."

There are other strengths to the Gates initiative. While some wealthy Americans such as John Walton focus funding on vouchers and privatization, Gates has refrained from bashing public schools. And many laud Gates' willingness to "think big" and tackle the problem of large urban high schools that churn out African-American and Latino dropouts with factory-like precision.

But some worry that the Gates scope is limited and too focused on size as a necessary prerequisite for reform. They fear the foundation will not sufficiently demand other needed policy reforms that will help small schools fulfill their promise.

"Gates has not asked many questions about what will sustain small schools and whether, without other systemic reforms, they can be sustained with quality," says Meier. "A small school can be as horrible as a big school," she says.

As founder of several small schools and author of books such as *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons from a Small School in Harlem*, Meier is perhaps the mostly widely known proponent of small schools.

Meier worries that Gates is overly preoccupied with increasing the number of small schools, with insufficient attention to quality. "Everybody I know who has taken Gates money is in a serious quandary because they don't see how they can pay attention to what they have started and still keep starting new schools," she says. "And they are rushing around to do fundraising to deepen and sustain the work Gates has compelled them into doing."

From *Rethinking Schools*; The Gates Foundation and Small Schools, Summer 2005

Why are small schools an attractive component of the redesign movement?

"Small schools advocate Michelle Fine speaks for the early proponents of "schooling on a human scale" who saw small as a metaphor for more collaborative, less authoritarian relations among students, teachers, and communities. These activist educators sought to create schools small enough to sustain a healthy, democratic decision-making process around issues of teaching, learning, governance, and allocations of time and resources.

They used thematic, interdisciplinary, inquiry-based approaches to develop innovative curricula that linked schools to student and community concerns, and in many cases, activism for social change. Fine sees all-too-little of these goals in current efforts to mass produce small school reform at the district and state levels.

Ann Cook and Phyllis Tashlik of New York City's Urban Academy build on Fine's analysis. They describe the school-based practices developed at Urban Academy and other "performance-based" small schools that can make "small" a framework for school improvement. But they add major cautions about how the misuse

of standardized tests can suffocate the potential of small school reform and undermine its aims and effectiveness.

Deborah Meier, founder of Central Park East, one of the most universally cited small school models, reminds us that a democratic school culture, rather than top-down consultant-driven processes, is the key to better teaching and learning."

Barbara Miner reports on the dramatically growing role of the Gates Foundation in shaping small school reform. Her survey identifies some key issues and concerns raised by advocates for educational excellence and equity.

Reports from New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Oakland, Portland, Ore., and Tacoma, Wash., provide examples of some of the most promising, and most problematic, aspects of small school reform. On the one hand we see how organized communities, enlightened union leadership, and committed educators can act to shape reform agendas and improve their ability to serve schools and communities. We can find hope in Héctor Calderón's inspirational description of El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice's efforts to use supportive small school relationships, integrated social justice curricula, and community activism to develop an educational vision for a better world.

From *Rethinking Schools*; Small Schools, Big Issues, Summer 2005

Who administers grants in the states?

Various intermediaries across the nation act as fiscal agents for the Gates Foundation. In North Carolina, the New Schools Project acts as a liaison between the Gates Foundation and the state.

"Backed by an \$11 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, in August 2003 the Governor's Education Cabinet and the Public School Forum launched a private-public partnership to focus leadership and financial resources on change in the state's high schools. The North Carolina New Schools Project (NCNSP) will award grants and provide other support to create up to one hundred new small high schools across the state. The schools will serve as models for academically rigorous curriculum to prepare all students for work and college. The NCNSP will also seek to engage key stakeholders in shaping consensus for change in the high schools and action steps to get there.

The North Carolina New Schools Project provides planning grants to encourage efforts to start new schools or to convert existing comprehensive schools into one or more discrete small schools within a building. Once the planning phase is complete, NCNSP will provide implementation grants to support a multi-year initiative to establish new models of teaching and learning in each school whose success during the planning stage demonstrates the likelihood of significant impact on reshaping high schools. The clear intent of the New Schools Project is to engender dramatic structural change as opposed to supporting a new "program." NCNSP's essential thrust is straightforward: in order to improve public high schools everywhere, individual schools must be encouraged and assisted to invent and implement more effective means of serving students. The successes which these schools achieve must be sustained, the processes which they utilize must be supported, and their new structures for success must then be replicated. The focus of NCNSP initiatives is the individual school, but the intent over time is to re-invent high school education."

From: *Newschoolsproject.org*

What does the North Carolina New Schools Project offer?

The North Carolina New Schools Project begins with a recognition that high schools have not changed significantly since the rise of the "comprehensive" high school nearly a century ago, even though the structure of work and of society are now dramatically different. Many students thrive in today's large settings, but many do not. NCNSP recognizes the compelling evidence that the "one size fits all" comprehensive high school no longer serves all students effectively and hence fails to prepare a significant segment of the next generation of citizens for its place in society. Boyer (*High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*), Goodlad (*A Place Called School*), andSizer (*Horace's*

Compromise) have all called for structural reform in high schools and have identified size as one key element. Overwhelming evidence for the need for improved outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged and minority students, underscores the urgency of these changes.

The NCNSP believes that there are better solutions-solutions found in the ways schools are organized and governed-and that, working together, schools and communities can create more effective structures. Smaller, more personalized high schools that are firmly connected to workplace knowledge and skills, while simultaneously preparing all students for higher education, are possible. But they require the creation of fundamentally different schools, built around fundamentally different beliefs and guided by fundamentally different modes of governance and funding. Using the NSP grants as a catalyst, North Carolina's high schools can change to reflect the new reality of 21st century citizenship.

What challenges are there for innovative high schools?

- Sustaining initiatives beyond the life of the grant is a growing concern.
- Involving teachers in designing deep changes to the traditional way of doing business is both unfamiliar and challenging to some teachers.
- Any type of change is difficult, but assuming responsibility for the change can be daunting.
- Some feel the projects are under funded, and the long-term cost may be more per pupil than currently expended. The research talks about some districts spending more, and some spending less.
- Communities are not well educated about the relation that exists between personalized environments for students and the impact on graduation rates.
- Graduation rates are not well understood by many. The effort to change the conversation from drop-out rate to graduation rate signals a drastic change in our standards.