



Week of Feb. 28-March 4, 2011

Money Might not Matter to Bill Gates . . . but Facts Should

by UCLA IDEA

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has been much praised for its generous spending and much criticized for the particulars of its costly but modestly successful education initiatives. The Foundation has embarked in several reform directions and retreated from some—most notably its massive support for “small schools.” Now Bill Gates has unveiled still another shift in his thinking about education reform. This matters because when Gates talks, policy often follows.

In an op-ed this week for the Washington Post, Gates criticized decades of U.S. education policies for producing disappointing results. Broadly speaking, that's a fair enough critique, and few would disagree. But then he reaches into a worn bag of simplistic and proven-wrong claims to anchor his next reform adventures. Apparently extrapolating from his own reform experiences, Gates has decided that there is enough education money available, and the problem is that people don't spend it correctly: “Now we need to raise performance without spending a lot more.”

To further this claim of sufficient but badly spent money, Gates said, “U.S. schools have almost twice as many teachers per student as they did in 1960, yet achievement is roughly the same.” His clear intent is to pose this factoid as empirical grounding to argue against the substantial costs of reducing class sizes. Indeed, Gates, along with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, is thinking of experiments with *raising* class sizes.

Gates follows the narrow thinking of those who see *inputs* as dollars that go into the system and *outputs* as test scores achieved. Thus, he misses a whole lot of what happens in the middle of this input/output model—the complex, human processes of learning and teaching. In the United States, with one of the highest rates of child poverty in the industrialized world, public schools are charged with educating *all* children, regardless of the many factors that make their learning difficult or expensive.

Gates astonishes us when he compares “achievement” over a time span of half a century, while overlooking substantial changes in the measuring instruments and in the pool of test takers. Furthermore, there is ample evidence that class size does matter both for achievement and for much else that does not show up directly on test scores. Indeed, Gates' argument is better used to show that money has been wasted on five decades of testing rather than looking for economies gained by larger classes.

Gates needs to do his homework—perhaps by listening to a fuller range of advisors both inside and outside his foundation. He might start by consulting with Rutgers University school finance expert Bruce Baker whose excellent blog this week offers a point-by-point refutation of Gates' claims.

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THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Feb. 28-March 1, 2011

Page 2

Gates, along with many other wealthy and influential people, wants to improve the nation's public education system. This is an admirable goal. But he can better do that in ways for which he is well qualified. He can speak to the many Americans who do not hold intellectual pursuits in high regard, and demonstrate that learning is different from winning. He can lead the call for all Americans to invest in and care about their children as much as people do in countries with high-achieving public school systems. And, he can follow people like his own father who have promoted the idea that America's wealthiest citizens should be taxed more so that all can benefit from a better quality of life.

Lastly, in a moment of reflection, Gates might visit the website of Lakeside School, his own formative middle/high school alma mater:

Ask any alumnus what the best thing about Lakeside is, and they will likely mention an environment that promotes relationships between teachers and students through small class sizes.

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