Last week, Harvard Education Press released *The New Education Philanthropy*, to which I was happy to contribute a chapter (along with my friend and collaborator Jenn Hatfield). It brings together education policy experts to examine philanthropy in education from a variety of different angles and collect lessons that have been learned in effective (and ineffective) education philanthropy efforts over the past decade.

For those interested in how philanthropy shapes education policy, the book is a great resource, compiling research on the activities of philanthropic organizations and their effects. It is also a great way for anyone affiliated with a foundation to learn from the successes and failures of other philanthropic efforts.

The chapter Jenn and I wrote deals specifically with the backlash that education philanthropy often receives. Even a cursory web search of “Gates Foundation” or “Walton Foundation” and "education" will turn up reams of criticism. We analyzed news coverage of philanthropy to mark changes in public opinion, and we interviewed critics from across the political spectrum to understand their qualms with the work of the foundations most associated with education reform.

The main lesson that we took away is that any education initiative (philanthropic or otherwise) must be done with people, not to them. Education is an incredibly decentralized system, and
individual teachers have a great degree of latitude in what they choose to do once they’ve closed their classroom doors. If folks want to change teacher practice, or the curriculum, or the ways schools function, they have to do the hard work of making their case to the people who will see the changes through. Too often it appears that organizations win over a few high-ranking decision makers, but find that new policies are adopted either in name only, or without the buy-in from teachers or principals. By the time the policy trickles down to them, teachers are frustrated, confused, and upset that they didn’t have more input in the process.

Philanthropists have an incredible opportunity to change the world of education for the better. But they have to realize that they will not ultimately be the ones making policy work. That falls to teachers and principals, and unless they are brought into the program, it’s never going to happen. Reading The New Education Philanthropy should help cement that principle, among other insights that can make philanthropists more effective at what they do.

About the Author

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