



MAKE IT.

Bill Gates is spending \$1.7 billion to fix the US education system—here's how

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Bill Gates has been an education-focused philanthropist since 2000 and over the next five years, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation plans to invest \$1.7 billion in U.S. public education. Earlier this month, the tech billionaire spoke at the Council of the Great City Schools and shared how he and his wife plan to spend this money.

"By and large, schools are still falling short on the key metrics of a quality education — math scores, English scores, international comparisons and college completion," he says.

According to Gates, one of the biggest issues in public education is inequality. "Melinda and I made public education our top priority in the U.S. because we wanted to do something about the disparity in achievement and post-secondary success for students of color and low-income students," he says. "That inequity persists today, and we are just as determined now to eliminate it as we were when we started."

Gates believes that fixing this issue is both a moral and economic imperative, writing, "Without success in college or career preparation programs, students will have limited economic mobility and fewer opportunities throughout their lives. This threatens not only their economic future but the economic future and competitiveness of the United States."

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1. Collect data

The billionaire knows the importance of collecting quality data. "Schools that track indicators of student progress — like test scores, attendance, suspensions and grades and credit accumulation — improved high school graduation and college success rates," he explains.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has previously invested millions of dollars to help collect data about teacher and student success. Gates believes that these initiatives have allowed for schools to better address the issues of their students. One example he provides is Fresno, California.

"In Fresno, a new data system revealed that students weren't aware of their college options. So, the district created individualized college information packets for every senior who met the state's college requirements," says Gates. "The result was a 50 percent increase in the number of students applying to California public universities."

Results like these are why he plans to continue to support data collection initiatives.

2. Work locally

"Second, we will focus on locally-driven solutions identified by networks of schools, and support their efforts to use data-driven continuous learning and evidence-based interventions to improve student achievement," says Gates.

Every school district is different and students across the country have different needs. In order to address this range of needs, Gates suggests allowing local school districts the freedom to create programs tailor-made for their student populations.

Gates points to a program in Chicago where school leaders partnered with the University of Chicago in order to increase high school graduation and college enrollment rates. This initiative worked for Chicago, but might not be applicable to every school district.

"We believe this kind of approach — where groups of schools have the flexibility to propose the set of approaches they want — will lead to more impactful and durable systemic change that is attractive enough to be widely adopted by other schools," he says. "Giving schools and districts more flexibility is more likely to lead to solutions that fit the needs of local communities."

3. Improve curriculum

"Third, we are increasing our commitment to develop curricula and professional development aligned to state standards," he says.

Gates says he supports Common Core standards because "all students — no matter where they go to school — should graduate with the skills and knowledge to succeed after high school," he says. "But more needs to be done to fully realize their potential."

He argues that in order for Common Core standards to be most effective, teachers need a more effective curriculum.

4. Help students with special needs

Gates writes that he believes that supporting charter schools will improve the American education system, because they are better equipped to support students with special needs.

"We will focus more of our work with charters on developing new tools and strategies for students with special needs," he says.

Gates says that more needs to be done so that students with special needs have access to a quality education. He believes that charter schools can be part of the solution.

"Our emphasis will be on efforts that improve outcomes for special needs students – especially kids with mild-to-moderate learning and behavioral disabilities," says Gates. "This is a critical problem across the education sector, and we believe that charters have the flexibility to help the field solve this problem."

5. Fund research

When it comes to investing billions of dollars, Bill Gates does not make uneducated decisions. That is why the philanthropist also plans to fund research that will allow the public the better understand and address the issues that face American students.

"Finally, we will expand investments in innovative research to accelerate progress for underserved students," he says.

He hopes that this research will help the foundation make smart investments: "Our role is to serve as a catalyst of good ideas, driven by the same guiding principle we started with: All students – but especially low-income students and students of color – must have equal access to a great public education that prepares them for adulthood."