

# EDUCATION WEEK

## Gates Foundation Announces New \$1.7B for K-12



Bill Gates detailed new investments by his foundation in K-12 education at the Council of the Great City Schools' annual conference in Cleveland.

—Clarence Tabb Jr./CGCS

### Foundation pivots from previous priorities

By [Francisco Vara-Orta](#)

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The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation **announced a new investment of \$1.7 billion for K-12 education** over the next five years, with the bulk of the funding aimed at existing traditional public schools that show progress in improving educational outcomes, the development of new curricula, charter schools focused on students with

special needs, and “research and development” for scalable models that could inform best practices.

Bill Gates, the billionaire co-founder of the foundation, **delivered the news in a speech** Thursday at the Council of Great City Schools’ annual conference in Cleveland, where he spoke about the foundation’s work in education over the past 17 years, which has drawn both praise and harsh criticism. The preview of the philanthropy’s new priorities in education ended months of speculation following the appointment of new leadership in late 2016 and continued scrutiny of its K-12 priorities.

“If there is one thing I have learned,” Gates said, “it is that no matter how enthusiastic we might be about one approach or another, the decision to go from pilot to wide-scale usage is ultimately and always something that has to be decided by you and others in the field.”

(*Education Week* receives financial support from the Gates Foundation for coverage of continuous improvement strategies in education, and has received grant funding in the past for coverage of college- and career-ready standards implementation. *Education Week* retains sole editorial control.)

In outlining the foundation’s work to date, Gates singled out the creation of smaller, more personalized high schools, support for teacher-evaluation models, and funding for the development and implementation of the Common Core State Standards. He also noted academic improvements in New York, Washington, and Los Angeles, among others, from the foundation’s programming. But Gates acknowledged the foundation chose to pivot to other initiatives once it became clearer there were limits to sustaining and scaling up those earlier reforms.

“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,” Gates said.

Gates listed five key shifts for the foundation over the next few years:

1. The foundation will no longer directly invest in new initiatives based on teacher evaluations and ratings—something the foundation had spent more than \$700 million on by late 2013—but will continue to gather data on the impact of the reforms.

2. It will focus on “locally-driven solutions” that networks of schools will identify as working well with more potential to improve, with a focus on those that use a “continuous improvement” methodology that relies on data and feedback to incrementally reach set outcomes.
3. It will help to develop curricula and professional development models aligned to state standards, despite the political fallout that accompanied the adoption of the common core in some states.
4. It will do more in support of high-quality charters—with an emphasis on efforts that improve outcomes for special needs students, especially those with mild-to-moderate learning and behavioral disabilities.
5. It will make more funding available for “innovative” research to accelerate progress for underserved students.

About 60 percent of the \$1.7 billion will go toward the development of new curricula and networks of schools that work together and use data to identify local problems and solutions. About 25 percent will go toward what Gates termed “big bets” that could revolutionize education through research and development in the next 10-15 years, citing it as an area severely underfunded compared to other sectors in the U.S. economy. The remaining 15 percent will be for charter schools, Gates said.

Gates cited the CORE Districts in California—comprised of eight of the largest school districts in the state—and the LIFT Network in Tennessee, which includes educators from rural and urban districts across the state, as models ripe for funding. The foundation hopes to support about 30 of these networks, and will start initially with “high needs” schools and districts in six to eight states.

“In general, with philanthropic dollars, their percentage on charters is fairly high. We will be a bit different, because of our scale, we feel we need to put the vast majority of our money into these networks of public schools,” Gates said to the loudest applause during the speech.

In a brief question-and-answer session, Gates explained that those eligible could be a large singular district that serves the majority of a region, or a consortium of districts using an intermediary overseeing the funding.

Gates cautioned that people wanting to reform education shouldn't "fool" themselves that every model is scalable, explaining at one point that, "solutions to these problems will only endure if they are aligned with the unique needs of each student and the district's broader strategy for change."

### **A Change in Approach?**

Megan Tompkins-Stange, a public policy professor at the University of Michigan who has extensively researched education philanthropy and profiled the Gates Foundation in her book, *Policy Patrons*, said she was somewhat surprised that Gates said the foundation should serve more as a "catalyst of good ideas than an inventor of ideas."

"To me, it says that he and the Gates Foundation leadership has perhaps listened to some of the criticism of their more top-down, outside expert-driven approach to philanthropy in education," said Tompkins-Stange, who watched the speech online. "I could not have predicted the new approach they would take would heighten the focus on communities having more autonomy."

Pedro Noguera, a professor of education at the University of California, Los Angeles, whose research focuses on how schools are influenced by social and economic conditions, said that the focus on continuous improvement might be welcomed by educators. But like Tompkins-Stange, he echoed that the details of how the money is allocated will dictate if the foundation is pivoting strongly to a softer approach and if there's simply a new flavor of the month in which to put their dollars.

"Especially in high-need communities, it takes a lot of money and people to sustain change. I continue to hope these are not investments in just one single strand, that if it doesn't pan out, they move on," Noguera said. "Hopefully they are learning from past efforts to more smartly leverage change."