

Bill Gates: Better data mean better schools

July 21 2009, By KATHY MATHESON , Associated Press Writer



Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates makes remarks at the National Conference of State Legislatures held at the Pennsylvania Convention Center in Philadelphia, Tuesday, July 21, 2009. Gates said in his speech that the U.S. needs better ways to measure student and teacher performance to improve its schools. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

(AP) -- The U.S. must improve its educational standing in the world by rewarding effective teaching and by developing better, universal measures of performance for students and teachers, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates said Tuesday.

Speaking at the National Conference of State Legislatures' annual legislative summit, Gates told hundreds of lawmakers how federal

stimulus money should be used to spark educational innovation, spread best practices and improve accountability.

Gates, one of the world's richest men, has been a longtime critic of American public schools and has used philanthropy to advocate for a better educational system.

U.S. schools lag their international counterparts because of "old beliefs and bad habits," and it's not clear how to get them back on track without uniform achievement standards, he said.

"We don't know the answers because we're not even asking the right questions and making the right measurements," Gates said.

On Tuesday, he urged legislators to ask colleges and universities in their districts to publish their graduation rates. The institutions should be rewarded with funding based on the number of degrees granted, not just students enrolled, Gates said.

Teachers, too, should be rewarded for effectiveness and not just for seniority and master's degrees, he said.

Gates suggested that developing data to identify the best instructors should be a priority for legislators even in a tight economy. Better teachers are more likely to result in higher achievement than other approaches such as lowering class size, he said.

"The way I see forward is to use measurement to drive quality," Gates said.

The Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation spent nearly \$4 billion between 2000 and 2008 to improve America's high schools and award scholarships, primarily to low-income and minority students.

Its aim is to increase the U.S. graduation rate from about 70 percent to 80 percent and to double the number of low-income adults who get a degree or certificate beyond high school by age 26.

In an interview later Tuesday with The Associated Press, Gates, 51, talked of the importance of improving the quality, quantity and searchability of online lectures, which he noted his own kids have used.

Community colleges and other financially strapped schools might find online lectures to be the most cost-effective way to teach introductory courses such as Physics 101, Gates said. The savings could then be spent on student-oriented discussion and lab sessions.

"The world of education is the sector of the economy so far the least changed by technology," Gates said. "Ten years from now, that won't be the case, and these online lectures are the cutting edge of that."

Kentucky state Rep. Kent Stevens, a retired principal who spent nearly 28 years in education, said after Gates' speech that public school teachers do a good job with the vast mission they've been given.

"We have to provide an appropriate education to anybody that walks through the door," said Stevens, a Democrat from Lawrenceburg, Ky. "That's a wide variety."

National Conference on State Legislatures: <http://www.ncsl.org>

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation: <http://www.gatesfoundation.org>

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