

Bill Gates gives \$44M to influence state education plans

May 16 2018, by Sally Ho



In this Feb. 1, 2018 file photo, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates and his wife Melinda take part in an AP interview in Kirkland, Wash. Gates' non-profit Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has given about \$44 million to outside groups over the past two years to help shape new state education plans required under the 2015 law, according to an Associated Press 2018 analysis of its grants. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, file)

Billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates saw an opportunity with a new federal education law that has widespread repercussions for American classrooms.

His non-profit, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has given about \$44 million to outside groups over the past two years to help shape new state [education](#) plans required under the 2015 law, according to an Associated Press analysis of its grants. The spending paid for research aligned with Gates interests, led to friendly media coverage and even had a hand in writing one state's new education system framework.

The grants illustrate how strategic and immersive the Microsoft founder can be in pursuit of his education reform agenda, quietly wielding national influence over how schools operate. Gates' carefully curated and intersecting web of influence is often invisible but allows his foundation to drive the conversation in support of its vision on how to reshape America's struggling schools systems.

Critics call it meddling by a foundation with vast wealth and resources. The Gates Foundation says it's simply helping [states](#) navigate a "tectonic" shift in responsibility for education—from the federal government to more local control.

"For 50 states with varying sets of capacities and capabilities and readiness, it was both an opportunity and also a concern that states and partners in those states needed support," said Allan Golston, president of the Gates Foundation's U.S. work.



This Friday, April 27, 2018 photo shows the headquarters of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle. The non-profit foundation has given about \$44 million to outside groups over the past two years to help shape new state education plans required under the 2015 law, according to an Associated Press 2018 analysis of its grant database. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

The Gates Foundation spent about \$44 million focused on the 2015 federal education law called the Every Student Succeeds Act. The law gives states flexibility to create their own education system framework defining what a "good school" is—and in turn states get federal dollars for complying with their own rules.

The law requires academic standards, which means that the backbone for most state education systems is the Common Core—a symbol for many critics during the Obama years of federal overreach in schools. Gates was influential in supporting the Common Core academic standards, and now is doing the same as states sort out the best ways to implement their

education policies under the 2015 law.

And that is how the world's largest philanthropy works: funding everything from policy work on the ground to broader research and analysis, as well as national advocacy groups, community leaders and media coverage both mainstream and niche.

In Tennessee, a Gates-funded advocacy group had a hand in the state's new education plan, with its leader sitting on an important advising committee. A media outlet given money by Gates to cover the new law then published a story about research funded by Gates. And many Gates-funded groups have become the de facto experts who lead the conversation in local communities, across states and featured nationally.

Gates also dedicated millions of dollars to protect Common Core as the new law unfolded. Patrick McGuinn, an education policy expert and professor at Drew University, said the Every Student Succeeds Act removed the political pressure from the standards despite how politically toxic Common Core has become. The policy idea suggests every child can and should be taught the same things as their peers. "ESSA politically was probably the best thing that could happen to Common Core," McGuinn said.



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Some Common Core and Gates critics said they weren't aware of the foundation's interest in the education law or the millions of dollars it has continued to pour into supporting the standards. "They're doing it in a quiet way because they don't want the general public to know they're still meddling in education policy," said Carol Burris of the Network for Public Education.

And long before thousands of fed-up teachers walked out on the job in four unprecedented statewide strikes this year over pay and school conditions, education union officials had rung the alarm bell about Gates' influence.

"They thought they could socially engineer all of public education through a top-down model and that they could reduce education to an algorithm, but kids are not widgets and teachers are not widgets," said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. The national teachers union in 2014 famously broke ties with Gates over Common Core after initially supporting the standards.

To be sure, the Seattle-based foundation's education spending is just a small fraction of its philanthropy, which is primarily focused on global health and development. Still, in terms of dollars, it is the top funder of schools reform in the United States. The foundation since 2001 has contributed more than \$6 billion toward reshaping American schools, including nearly \$300 million on Common Core by some estimates.

The groups receiving the recent ESSA-related grants said the money from Gates and other like-minded philanthropies—such as the Carnegie Corporation of New York and William and Flora Hewlett foundations—was used to develop expertise in the education law so that they could be a resource to states. Most of those same groups have been funded by Gates in other initiatives, including some of the most prominent Washington-based policy players who developed Common Core in 2009.



In this Sept. 8, 2009, file photo Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates speaks at the "Get Schooled" conference hosted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Viacom in Los Angeles. Gates' non-profit foundation has given about \$44 million to outside groups over the past two years to help shape new state education plans required under the 2015 law, according to an Associated Press 2018 analysis of its grants. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

Achieve, Inc., collaborated with local leaders to compile information about new state education plans. Mike Cohen, Achieve's president who helped write Common Core, also had more notable roles in states such as

Tennessee and New York.

"Our focus has always been about standards, about helping states set the right expectations for students in terms of what they need to know so that they're prepared for success after high school," said Cohen, who was a member of a local stakeholders group in Tennessee focused on standards and assessments. He also gave a presentation to New York's Board of Regents urging the state to adopt high standards as part of its new education plan.

Tennessee said Cohen had a seat at the table because it sought national experts in addition to state officials, community advocacy groups and traditional and charter schools. Eve Carney, who led the plan's development for the Tennessee Department of Education, said it was impossible to quantify the specific impact of each of the 67 stakeholders across six working groups.

"It's important to have diversity in voice and different points of view, however, the influence of one over the other is not there," Carney said.

Another example of Gates' reach can be found in The 74 Media, Inc., which last year published an exclusive story featuring the analysis of state plans done by the Collaborative for Student Success and quoting an expert voice from the Council of Chief State School Officers. Gates gave all three groups money to work on Every Student Succeeds Act.



In this Dec. 10, 2015 file photo, President Barack Obama speaks before signing the "Every Student Succeeds Act," in Washington. In the two years prior to May 1, 2018, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has spent about \$44 million on grants related to the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, according to an Associated Press review of the foundation's grants database. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci, File)

The 74 said Gates doesn't influence the direction of their coverage and that the money funded its broader operation. After the AP's inquiry, the education news outlet acknowledged an oversight by updating the nearly year-old story to add a Gates funding disclosure.

Golston said it's necessary to take a multidimensional approach to play at the system-wide level.

"We're thoughtful about the programmatic dimensions and advocacy and communications dimensions. That's just the nature of being in education

and we've learned over time that you have to be thoughtful," Golston said.

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