

How the Gates Foundation's push for 'high-quality' curriculum will stifle teaching

28 January 2019, by Nicholas Tampio



A new grant from the Gates Foundation to promote 'high-quality' curriculum comes with strings that could constrain teachers. Credit: [Kues/www.shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com)

For [much of American history](#), local school districts had a large amount of discretion over what they taught and how.

In my book on the [Common Core](#), I show how the national education standards in reading, writing and mathematics have reduced the power of communities and teachers to make lesson plans, coordinate field trips, invite guest speakers or incorporate special elements into the curriculum.

A new [initiative](#) by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation aims to advance the Common Core by getting schools to adopt "high-quality" curricula. But the way I see it, getting schools to use ready-made lesson plans under the guise of "high-quality" curricula will reduce teacher autonomy.

That's significant because research shows that increased teacher autonomy leads to a greater sense of [empowerment and professionalism](#). Research has also shown that teachers [are less](#)

[likely to be satisfied with their jobs](#) when they lack autonomy within the classroom. To treat teachers like professionals, they must have the freedom to make their own lesson plans for the students before them.

The Common Core's promise

The [Common Core](#) identifies what students should be able to know and do in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of each year in school. [Forty-five states and the District of Columbia](#) have used the standards since 2010, even if some of the states have changed the name and made small changes.

The [Common Core permits](#) teachers to "devise their own lesson plans and curriculum." For years, proponents have [said](#) that the Common Core sets high academic expectations for all students and gives teachers freedom in how to reach them.

The grant and the string

In 2017, Bill Gates, a billionaire tech titan who has devoted a sizable portion of his philanthropic efforts toward education, [said](#) that "teachers need better curricula and professional development aligned with the Common Core." The Gates Foundation has put that plan into motion with a new [initiative](#). School districts with more than 50,000 students – and that serve at least 50 percent black, Latino, or English learners, and/or low-income students – may apply for a [US\\$1 million grant](#) to work with professionals to improve how teachers use what the foundation calls "high-quality" curricula. Even though the foundation anticipates awarding [10 grants](#), more school districts could change their curricula in the process of applying.

What is a "high-quality" curriculum, [according](#) to the Gates Foundation? First, it is coherent and comprehensive, providing lesson plans in English language arts or mathematics for the entire school

year. Second, publishers must receive a favorable review from a group such as [EdReports.org](https://www.edreports.org) that evaluates alignment with the Common Core standards.

Gates officials have [said](#) that the purpose of the grants is to help teachers use existing titles, not develop new ones from scratch.

EdReports.org has [determined](#) that many curricula do not actually align with the Common Core standards. EdReports.org has identified a curriculum that meets all of the Common Core standards: [EngageNY](#).

If a district applies for a Gates grant, one way to meet the guidelines for eligible curricula is to adopt EngageNY.

EngageNY is not high-quality

The person who eats the meal, not cooks it, gets to write the review. So are the EngageNY modules high-quality? Based on my experience as an education scholar and parent whose children have been subjected to this curriculum, the answer is no.

When my oldest son was in fifth grade, he read the novel, "Esperanza Rising." If you go to the EngageNY website, you can download the 287-page [module](#) that covers 18 lessons and tells the teacher and students what they are supposed to do for virtually every minute of the unit.

For example, the module specifies that for minutes 11 to 30 of the fourth lesson, students will complete jigsaw task cards that require the students to write about how Esperanza's mother feels about marrying her dead husband's brother. According to my son, students would answer questions about the text, but they were not given an opportunity to share their own thoughts about the material or the topics.

In a report on EngageNY published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, curriculum experts Kathleen Porter-Magee and Victoria Sears note that the modules are [prescriptive and hard to adjust](#), and the "sheer length can be overwhelming."

What does this mean for teachers and students who are required to use these modules? Education scholar [Cara M. Djonko-Moore](#) provides a [warning](#) in an article on the role of school environment in [teacher](#) dissatisfaction. After examining survey data of more than 38,000 public school teachers, Moore notes that "control and autonomy over classroom decisions are very important for teachers to be satisfied with their jobs."

Freedom is essential

According to a blog on [EdReports.org](#), educators should be "engaged in selection" of instructional materials and "supported with meaningful, quality professional learning." But the blog does not mention the importance of teachers creating lesson plans based on their own knowledge or their students' interests.

A few years ago, the second-grade teachers in my neighborhood public [school](#) made a literacy unit based on fairy tales. The teachers crafted rich vocabulary and spelling lessons out of the books, embedded math and art lessons in the assignments, and gave students an opportunity to create their own fairy tales. The teachers were like chefs preparing a special meal, and my children and the others appeared to love going to class. This is the kind of education all children deserve.

I've invited the Gates Foundation to respond to my critique of the new initiative. Spokespersons for the foundation declined to comment.

Correction note: This article has been updated to remove references to Great Minds, which created only the math portion of EngageNY, now called Eureka Math. Great Minds did not create the "Esperanza Rising" module cited in the article.

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