

School Reform That Works

By Bill Gates

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Bill Gates released an annual letter this week outlining the state of his foundation and its goals for 2009. Following are excerpts from the section on education:

Warren Buffett [says] every American, including him, is lucky to have been born here. He calls us winners of the "ovarian lottery."

But even within the United States, there is a big gap between people who get the chance to make the most of their talents and those who don't. Melinda and I believe that providing everyone with a great education is the key to closing this gap. . . .

The private high school I attended, Lakeside in Seattle, made a huge difference in my life. The teachers fueled my interests and encouraged me to read and learn as much as I could. Without those teachers I never would have gotten on the path of getting deeply engaged in math and software. . . .

How many kids don't get the same chance to achieve their full potential? The number is very large. Every year, 1 million kids drop out of high school. Only 71 percent of kids graduate from high school within four years, and for minorities, the numbers are even worse -- 58 percent for Hispanics and 55 percent for African Americans. . . . The federal No Child Left Behind Act isn't perfect, but it has forced us to look at each school's results and realize how poorly we are doing overall. It surprises me that more parents are not upset about the education their own kids are receiving.

Nine years ago, the foundation decided to invest in helping to create better high schools, and we have made over \$2 billion in grants. The goal was to give schools extra money for a period of time to make changes in the way they were organized (including reducing their size), in how the teachers worked, and in the curriculum. The hope was that after a few years they would operate at the same cost per student as before, but they would have become much more effective.

Many of the small schools that we invested in did not improve students' achievement in any significant way. These tended to be the schools that did not take radical steps to change the culture, such as allowing the principal to pick the team of teachers or change the curriculum. We had less success trying to change an existing school than helping to create a new school.

Even so, many schools had higher attendance and graduation rates than their peers. While we were pleased with these improvements, we are trying to raise college-ready graduation rates, and in most cases, we fell short.

But a few of the schools that we funded achieved something amazing. They replaced schools with low expectations and low results with ones that have high expectations and high results. These schools are not selective in whom they admit, and they are

overwhelmingly serving kids in poor areas, most of whose parents did not go to college. Almost all of these schools are charter schools that have significantly longer school days than other schools.

I have had a chance to spend time at a number of these schools, including High Tech High in San Diego and the Knowledge Is Power Program, or "KIPP," in Houston. . . . It is invigorating and inspirational to meet with the students and teachers in these schools and hear about their aspirations. They talk about how the schools they were in before did not challenge them and how their new school engages all of their abilities. These schools aim to have all of their kids enter four-year colleges, and many of them achieve that goal with 90 percent to 100 percent of their students.

These successes and failures have underscored the need to aim high and embrace change in America's schools. Our goal as a nation should be to ensure that 80 percent of our students graduate from high school fully ready to attend college by 2025. This goal will probably be more difficult to achieve than anything else the foundation works on, because change comes so slowly and is so hard to measure. . . . If one school's students do better than another school's, how do you determine the exact cause? But the difficulty of the problem does not make it any less important to solve. And as the successes show, some schools are making real progress.

Based on what the foundation has learned so far, we have refined our strategy. We will continue to invest in replicating the school models that worked the best. Almost all of these schools are charter schools. Many states have limits on charter schools, including giving them less funding than other schools. Educational innovation and overall improvement will go a lot faster if the charter school limits and funding rules are changed.

One of the key things these schools have done is help their teachers be more effective in the classroom. It is amazing how big a difference a great teacher makes versus an ineffective one. Research shows that there is only half as much variation in student achievement between schools as there is among classrooms in the same school. If you want your child to get the best education possible, it is actually more important to get him assigned to a great teacher than to a great school.

Whenever I talk to teachers, it is clear that they want to be great, but they need better tools so they can measure their progress and keep improving. So our new strategy focuses on learning why some teachers are so much more effective than others and how best practices can be spread throughout the education system so that the average quality goes up. We will work with some of the best teachers to put their lectures online as a model for other teachers and as a resource for students.

Bill Gates is co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Melinda French Gates is a director of The Washington Post Co. The full letter is online at

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/annual-letter/>.

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