

Breakthroughs in K–12 Education

By Adam Meyerson

One of the greatest achievements of American philanthropy in the early 21st century has been to establish the groundwork for dramatic improvements in K–12 education. Charitable giving accounts for only about 1 percent of the \$600 billion spent on K–12 education, but philanthropists have been crucial leaders in the following breakthroughs:

- The creation of multiple charter-school networks where low-income children achieve high academic performance. Networks such as KIPP, YES, Uncommon Schools, Success Academies, Mastery, Alliance, IDEA, Achievement First, and many others show conclusively that students of all races and income levels have the capacity to excel when taught effectively.
- Better methods for attracting, training, and retaining new teaching talent, such as Teach For America and TNTP; the Teach Plus network providing professional growth for high-performing teachers who want to stay in the classroom; new teacher college models such as the Relay Graduate School of Education, High Tech High, and UTeach; and education leadership programs such as New Leaders for New Schools, the Rice Education Entrepreneurship Program, and the Broad Superintendents Academy.
- The development of blended-learning models and tools such as Rocketship, Carpe Diem, Summit Prep, and Khan Academy that combine the best of online and classroom instruction.
- New business models for Catholic education, including the Cristo Rey network of work-study high schools, diocese-wide scholarship funds, and lay governance structures that free priests from school management.
- The expansion of vouchers, tax credits, Education Savings Accounts, and other forms of school choice that enable growing numbers of low-income students in Florida, Louisiana, Arizona, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and other states to attend private schools.
- Through a combination of philanthropy and political/advocacy giving, the creation of political cultures committed to public-school reform. Some of the most dramatic success stories include Tennessee and Philadelphia, which offer leadership models for turning around failing public schools; Houston, where the superintendent talks publicly of how the school district should learn from the success of the KIPP and YES charter networks; Washington, D.C., where Chancellor Kaya Henderson is continuing the reform agenda of Michelle Rhee; and New Orleans, the most option-rich city in the nation, with over 80 percent of children attending charter schools.

A striking feature here is the creation of a philanthropic reform movement consisting of donors and foundations from across the political spectrum. There is no other area of philanthropy today where liberal, centrist, and conservative donors work more closely in finding solutions for a national crisis.

And many solutions still need to be found. To build on its achievements, it will be important for the K–12 reform philanthropy movement to address the following challenges in the coming decade:

- So far, no transformational programs or organizations have proven readily scalable on a national level. Nor have we seen any city or state yet achieve truly dramatic improvements in education comparable, say, to the 75 percent reduction in crime in New York City over the past 20 years.
- The greater focus on our lowest-achieving students has come at the expense of our highest-achieving students, all too many of whom attend mediocre suburban schools that are uncompetitive internationally, especially in math and science.
- While technology offers extraordinary promise for individualizing education and providing rapid feedback for students, freeing teachers from drudge responsibilities, expanding education options in rural schools, and lowering costs, the successful application of technology to education is still in its infancy.
- A college-for-all emphasis at many high-performing K–12 schools has not yet translated into college completion for low-income students, and it has prevented the development of high-level vocational and career programs.
- There are too few options for rural students, who are really no better off in terms of educational opportunities than they were decades ago. (This may change with blended learning.)

The Philanthropy Roundtable has played an important leadership role in building the reform philanthropic movement in K–12 education, showcasing successful strategies, and calling donors' attention to the challenges ahead. Please contact me or Dan Fishman, our director of K–12 programs, if you are interested in finding solutions for this national crisis through your charitable giving. If you have a special interest in digital learning or Catholic education, please contact Anthony Pienta, our deputy director of K–12 programs. We are at your service in helping you forge effective K–12 philanthropic strategies and in connecting you with the best minds, including other donors, in the fields where you would like to make a difference. **P**

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