

ALL STUDENTS READY FOR COLLEGE, CAREER AND LIFE:

Reflections on the Foundation's
Education Investments 2000-2008

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How can we help support the important work teachers and students do in the classroom?

—Vicki Phillips, Director of Education, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

INTRODUCTION

Since 2000, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has worked across the United States to expand opportunity through improved public education. We believe **all** students deserve to graduate high school with the skills and knowledge that prepare them for college, career, and life.

Toward this goal, we have invested nearly \$4 billion to improve high schools and reduce financial barriers to college for more than 16,000 students through our scholarship programs.

- We support new and redesigned high schools that help all students succeed, particularly those from low-income and minority backgrounds.
- We partner with states and school districts to develop new approaches to teaching and learning, effective data systems to track student achievement, and public policy that sets high expectations for all.
- We fund research and evaluation to identify what works in education reform.

The foundation is committed to measuring results, evaluating success, and sharing information about our education investments. Along the way, we challenge ourselves to apply those lessons to future grantmaking in order to achieve meaningful progress.

This report examines what we've learned over the past eight years and how these lessons shape our vision for the future.

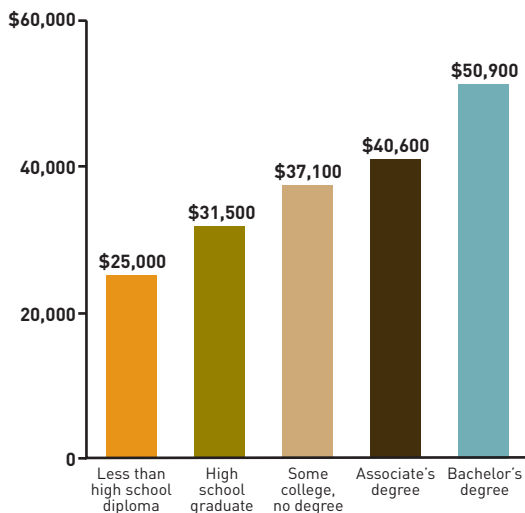
America's Education Challenge

America's large, comprehensive high schools were designed to meet the demands of an industrial economy that has largely vanished. For a century, their purpose was to provide equal access to secondary education.¹ But today, too many young people leave high school without the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century information economy.² Each year, more than 1.2 million students do not graduate with their peers,³ and the best available research shows that millions more graduate unprepared for postsecondary education.⁵

The consequences of America's education crisis are dramatic, and they affect low-income and minority youth disproportionately.⁶ Graduation rates for African-American and Hispanic students are dramatically lower than the national average.⁷ The 50 largest U.S. cities—which are home to one in eight high school students—have an average graduation rate of 52 percent.⁸

Median Earnings by Level of Education (2005)

Earnings for year-round full-time workers, ages 25 and older.⁴



We know that high school graduation is a strong predictor of economic and social mobility.⁹ Dropouts earn less than high school graduates and are more likely to end up in prison, on welfare, or dependent on social services. Most significantly, they are more likely to have children who follow in their footsteps, perpetuating a cycle of intergenerational poverty.^{10,11}

Our Efforts to Transform High Schools Provided Thousands of Students New Opportunities for Learning

Our primary strategy to increase graduation and college-readiness rates has been to fund high schools across the country that promote high expectations for all students, deliver a rigorous curriculum, and promote caring relationships between adults and students. We supported the replication of several distinct school models and helped schools and districts reorganize large high schools into small learning communities. Many of these schools serve 400 or fewer students—significantly smaller than the average American high school. Our investments focused on changes in structure at the school level to promote improved learning conditions for students.

We have invested \$2 billion, directly reaching at least 781,000 students and opening or improving 2,602 schools in 45 states and the District of Columbia. We have also worked with 40 school districts to support efforts such as the development of rigorous curricula, advanced teacher training, and data systems to track student performance. By funding the development and improvement of many quality schools across the country, we have expanded the options available to thousands of students who would not otherwise have had them.

Evaluations of foundation-funded schools have shown that newly formed small schools can increase student attendance and grade progression. Students at these schools also show higher levels of academic interest and educational aspiration than students in large high schools.¹²

In New York City, the site of our largest education investment in a single school district, we have seen dramatic progress. Since 2002, New York City has replaced some of the least-successful public schools with more than 200 new, small high schools supported by the foundation and other partners. The results are exciting. In 2007, 47 of these schools had an average graduation rate of 70 percent, double the 35 percent rate posted by the schools they replaced. More than 90 percent of these graduating seniors are African

America's high schools are obsolete.

By obsolete, I don't just mean that our high schools are broken, flawed, and under-funded – though a case could be made for every one of those points.

By obsolete, I mean that our high schools – even when they're working exactly as designed – cannot teach our kids what they need to know today.

—Bill Gates, National Education Summit on High Schools, 2005



SCALING SCHOOL MODELS

Working with our partners, we have expanded the most promising new American high schools.

Charter Management Organizations (CMOs):

Charters are public schools open to all students, but have fewer regulations and more freedom to innovate than traditional public schools. CMOs replicate effective charter schools, creating a network of similar schools. The foundation has enabled some of the nation's leading CMOs to open new schools and serve more students.

Early College High Schools: These schools allow students to complete requirements for a high school diploma while taking college courses. Students graduate with an associate's degree or up to two years of college credit. Early college schools recruit students who are traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary institutions, many of whom perform below grade level at traditional high schools.

Alternative High Schools: These schools serve at-risk students and dropouts—students who haven't been successful in traditional high schools. Some of the schools offer more hands-on opportunities for learning and social supports that meet the unique and often daunting needs of students and their families.

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Schools: STEM schools encourage problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity through a project-based, interdisciplinary curriculum focusing on math and the sciences. The foundation supports a national STEM agenda and work in pioneering states across the country.

American or Hispanic, and almost 70 percent entered high school below grade level academically.¹³

To achieve these results, the new schools implemented strong standards, with high expectations and additional support for students who started out behind. They made sure the classes were relevant by connecting the material to contemporary issues and to students' career aspirations. And they spurred strong relationships among students, their teachers, and their parents. Finally, they helped students prepare to take their next steps in life with intensive career and college counseling.

Other schools funded by the foundation have shown that all students, no matter what their background, can graduate from high school college-ready. For example, the entire 2008 graduating classes at IDEA College Preparatory and YES Prep in Texas were accepted to four-year colleges.¹⁴

But while graduation rates have increased in many foundation-supported schools—and even rose by 3.9 percentage points nationally from 2000 to 2005¹⁵—we have not seen dramatic improvements in overall student achievement or corresponding increases in the number of students who leave high school adequately prepared to enroll in and complete a two- or four-year postsecondary degree or credential.¹⁶

Across the country, high school standards and graduation requirements are typically too low. Especially in large urban school districts, students can fulfill all the credits for a high school diploma and yet still not meet the minimum requirements to enter state colleges and universities. This distinction between a high school diploma and a college-ready diploma is critical. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that 87 percent of new jobs in fast-growing, high-wage fields will require some postsecondary education.¹⁷ Without a college-ready high school diploma, students will find it increasingly difficult to live the American dream.

We have learned that a focus on structural change at the school level, including the creation of new schools and small learning communities, is not sufficient to ensure that all students are ready for college, career, and life.¹⁸

We believe that without a focus on what happens inside the classroom—what students learn, how they are taught, and the standards to which they are held—millions of students will continue to be denied an excellent education. We are evaluating ways to have a greater impact on college readiness as we build on our investments in new, small schools and school districts around the country.

Our Research and Public Policy Partners Reshaped the Debate on Education in America to Focus on Success for All Students

In addition to our investments directly in schools and districts, the foundation has also worked to promote public policy that raises expectations for all students. We have made significant progress in two areas: calculating accurate graduation rates and strengthening high school graduation requirements.

Before the foundation began funding studies of graduation rates, frequently cited statistics based on census data put the U.S. high school graduation rate close to 87 percent.¹⁹ Yet in many high schools, it was not uncommon for classes to shrink by one-third or more in the four years between freshman orientation and graduation day.²⁰ In addition, states had adopted different procedures for calculating graduation rates, making comparisons across state lines unreliable.²¹ Without a common and accurate method for calculating graduation rates, the problem of high school dropouts languished among education leaders and policy-makers.

We supported groundbreaking, independent research on America's dropout crisis that found most states were inflating their on-time graduation rates. The response, from Main Street to Wall Street, was overwhelming: Americans agreed that we cannot afford to let more than 1.2 million students leave high school each year without a diploma. National media coverage highlighted the dropout crisis, including a TIME cover story and two episodes of "The Oprah Winfrey Show" dedicated to the issue.²²

Policymakers responded. Working with the National Governors Association, all 50 governors agreed to adopt a common graduation rate formula.²³ By 2008, 16 states had implemented the new formula,²⁴ and U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings proposed regulations that would mandate the use of a rigorous federal formula for calculating graduation rates that will affect every high school in the country.²⁵

Obtaining accurate data to understand the scope of the dropout crisis is just the first step toward addressing the problem. That's why we worked with dozens of community groups and education advocacy organizations around the country to urge school districts and states to strengthen standards for what students should learn in high school so that they match the demands of college and work.

In Los Angeles, for example, we supported the efforts of the Community Coalition and the Alliance for a Better Community to

PROMOTING A NATIONAL COLLEGE- AND CAREER-READY AGENDA

One of our partners, Achieve, Inc., closely tracks the progress of all 50 states in adopting college- and career-ready policies through its annual report, *Closing the Expectations Gap* (2008)

Graduation Requirements: Eighteen states and the District of Columbia require all students to complete a college- and career-ready curriculum to earn a diploma. Twelve other states report plans to adopt similar requirements.

Assessments: Nine states administer college-readiness tests to all high school students as part of their statewide assessment systems. Twenty-three other states report plans to do so in the future.

Data Systems: Nine states report that they have longitudinal data systems that match K-12 data with postsecondary data to track the progress of individual students from kindergarten through college graduation. Thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia are developing such systems.

Standards: Nineteen states report that their high school standards are aligned with postsecondary expectations. Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia states report they are in the process of aligning their standards or plan to do so.

Accountability: Four states include both a cohort graduation rate and the earning of a college- and career-ready diploma into their systems for evaluating high schools and holding them accountable for improvement. An additional six states and the District of Columbia plan to move in this direction in the future.

Yet much work remains to ensure that students across the country receive an education that prepares them for college and career. Only recently have states realized the importance of comparing their education standards to those in other countries. If America is to remain competitive internationally, high school students must keep up with their peers abroad.

Our Work to Promote Accurate Data Built Public and Political Support for Change

Until relatively recently, public education in the United States was considered a local concern. Elected school boards determined curriculum, set graduation requirements, and controlled assessments to measure what students had learned. While the state and federal role in education has expanded, particularly under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, teachers, parents, and administrators across the country still set the direction for local schools.³⁰

Today, parents can go online and find the latest information about their child's school—from demographics to test scores—through two nationwide Web sites funded by the foundation and other partners: www.schooldata.org and www.greatschools.net. Just as parents need accurate information about their local schools, teachers and principals need high-quality data about student performance to monitor their progress and make sure they remain on track. Since 2004, we have made significant investments to help school districts and states collect, analyze, and put to use data on student achievement.

In most districts, year-end standardized tests only provide a snapshot of student achievement on a single day, telling educators little about which students are making the most progress and why. In Houston, a data system supported by the foundation is helping teachers better understand their students' learning needs so that they can refine classroom instruction throughout the year. ASPIRE (Accelerating Student Progress, Increasing Results & Expectations) predicts how much students should improve based on their past grades and test scores. The system provides teachers and principals with at-a-glance reports showing whether a student, classroom, or school is on track. The ASPIRE program is expected to provide a model for teacher development and instructional improvement.³¹

We believe that more accurate information about the performance of American schools helps teachers and students in the classroom and encourages the public to advocate for better public education.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- New small schools can improve school climate, grade progression, and student attendance. Improved graduation rates do not always mean greater student achievement or college readiness.
- The requirements to succeed in today's workplace and in college are the same—postsecondary education is required for a family wage job. A high school degree that is not a college-ready degree is insufficient.
- Significantly improving student outcomes requires a focus on teaching and learning inside the classroom.
- Teacher and principal support is critical, especially when redesigned schools change educators' roles and responsibilities or adversely affect their colleagues.
- Effective solutions and policies must travel well and be easily adapted to local conditions and circumstances.



We at Gates are going to be relentless about acquiring quality data and the need to focus on evidence-based decision making. And we will go where the evidence takes us.

—Vicki Phillips, 2008

But important challenges remain. The use of high-quality, real-time, and relevant data for critical decisions regarding teaching and learning—from statehouse to schoolhouse—is still the exception rather than the norm.³² And there is evidence that the public is still skeptical that all students benefit from a college-ready education.³³

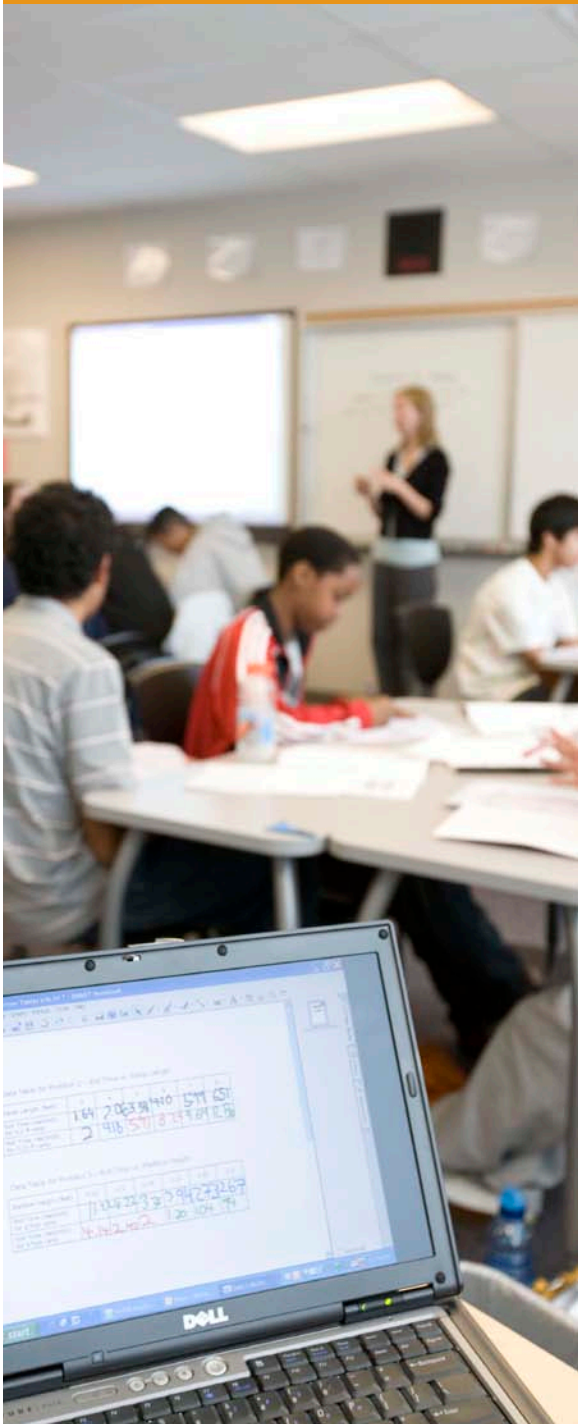
The Way Forward

As a foundation, we are committed as ever to ensuring that all young people graduate ready for college, career, and life. We also believe that progress toward this goal is happening too slowly. Given the tremendous human and economic costs of our education crisis, we are impatient for change that takes hold faster and reaches more young people.

As we learn from the past eight years of education investments, we recognize that we'll never reach our ambitious goal if we continue to focus primarily on the structure of public schools. To get transformational results requires us to expand our focus to the heart of the educational experience: the learning partnership between teacher and student.

We know—based on research in the field and our own evaluations—that excellent teachers are critical to student success.³⁴ Our challenge is to support teachers and help them be more effective in the classroom. One way to do that is to establish fewer, clearer, and higher standards to guide instruction.³⁶ These standards should be supported with proven curriculum and instruction tools that teachers trust. We must also use timely data to help teachers, parents, and administrators understand the progress young people are making and prepare all students to be college-ready.

In the coming years, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will build upon our past work while investing in promising new areas supported by rigorous evidence. Students, teachers, and communities across the country continue to be our partners and our inspiration. They are upending the conventional wisdom that says only some students should graduate and go on to college and we must forever accept lower achievement rates for minority students. They show us what is possible when we set high expectations and provide teachers and students with the support they need to succeed.



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- ⁵ Greene, J. and Winters, M. (2005). "Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991–2002," *Education Working Paper*. no. 5, February 2005. NYC: Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute. Accessed at www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_08.htm; ACT (2008), *2008 ACT National Profile Report*. Iowa City: Iowa. Accessed at www.act.org/news/data/08/data.html. Greene calculates that 34 percent of 2002 public high school graduates were college-ready (roughly 2.6 million students). ACT estimates that 22 percent of ACT-tested high school graduates of the class of 2008 are ready for college-level coursework in English, math, reading, and science (more than 1.1 million students).
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- ⁹ MDRC (2008). *MDRC Fast Fact: Does Education Increase Economic Mobility?* March 14, 2008. Accessed at www.mdrc.org/area_fact_36.html; Hall, D. (2007). *Graduation Matters: Improving Accountability for High School Graduation*. DC: The Education Trust. p. 8. Accessed at www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/5AEDABBC-79B7-47E5-9C66-7403BF76C3E2/0/GradMatters.pdf.
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