



A Philanthropy at Its Best® Report

CONFRONTING SYSTEMIC INEQUITY IN EDUCATION

High Impact Strategies for Philanthropy

*By Kevin Welner
and Amy Farley*

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Kevin Welner is professor of education in School of Education at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He is director of the National Education Policy Center (NEPC), headquartered at CU-Boulder. Professor Welner's research examines the use of research in policymaking, the intersection between education rights litigation and educational opportunity scholarship, and the school change process associated with equity-focused reform efforts. He has authored or edited eight books and more than 70 articles and book chapters. The books include *Think tank research quality: Lessons for policymakers, the media, and the public* (2010); *NeoVouchers: The emergence of tuition tax credits for private schooling* (2008); *Legal rights, local wrongs: When community control collides with educational equity* (2001); and *Education policy and law: Current issues* (2008). He received the American Education Research Association Early Career Award (in 2006) and Palmer O. Johnson Award (best article in 2004), the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Residency, and the Post-Doctoral Fellowship awarded by the Spencer Foundation and the National Academy of Education. Dr. Welner regularly teaches courses in educational policy, program evaluation, school law and social foundations of education. He received his B.A. in biological sciences from the University of California, Santa Barbara and his J.D. and Ph.D. from the University of California, Los Angeles.

Amy Farley is a doctoral candidate at the University of Colorado at Boulder's School of Education, studying educational foundations, policy and practice and an additional emphasis in research methods. Amy earned her B.S. and M.Ed. from the University of Oregon before going on to teach at both the elementary and middle school levels. The stark discrepancies between the two schools in which she taught – an economically depressed rural public school and a highly-educated, affluent private institution – fuel Amy's interest in educational policy and equity-focused reform. Her research has focused broadly on how policies and reform efforts affect lower-income students, students of color, and other disadvantaged students. Amy's current research includes an evaluation of the teacher compensation reform efforts of Denver Public Schools, known as ProComp, and an investigation of how education policy is affected by state ballot initiative processes. Amy also works for the Initiative on Diversity, Equity and Learning (IDEAL), part of the National Education Policy Center.

Executive Summary

American schoolchildren face alarming inequities in educational opportunities. While the public schools attended by some U.S. students are among the best in the world, other children are cast off into unsafe, unsupportive, unchallenging and under-resourced schools where their chances of academic success are minimal. These inequities are tied powerfully to parental wealth, education, ethnicity and race, and they persevere from generation to generation.

Across districts large and small, rural and urban, low-income students – and students of color in particular – are outperformed on average by their higher-income white counterparts on all measures of academic achievement. Marginalized communities – primarily children in low-wealth families and children of color, but also English language learners, gay and gender-nonconforming youth, students with disabilities, immigrant youth and females in male-dominated fields – consistently experience public education in profoundly less positive ways than their more-advantaged peers. As a result, they face a greater likelihood of not graduating from high school, lower college attendance and completion rates, and decreased economic potential following school.

If these patterns of unequal opportunities and outcomes are to change in a dramatic way, there must be changes to the foundational inequalities, because differences in educational access and student outcomes are systemic problems and will continue until the system itself is improved. This report examines those systemic issues and considers the implications for effective education grantmaking. In particular, we focus on the importance of addressing inequalities in policy-making access and power through targeted funding decisions. Grantmakers have poured

billions in recent years into grants for education, yet improvements at the systemic level are elusive at best. This report offers specific, intentional practices that grantmakers can adopt to help reform and improve our nation's education system.

In 2009, NCRP challenged grantmakers to provide at least 50 percent of their grant dollars to benefit marginalized groups and to provide at least 25 percent of their grant dollars for “advocacy, organizing and civic engagement to promote equity, opportunity and justice.” Those two benchmarks provide a foundational touchstone for this new report. New analyses of education grant data suggests that of 672 foundations included in the sample, only 11 percent devoted at least half of their education grant dollars to marginalized communities and only 2 percent devoted at least one-quarter of their education grant dollars for systemic change and social justice. This suggests that many foundations seeking to improve education may not be as strategic in their grantmaking as they intend.

The key contention in this report is that grantmakers in education will have the most success in advancing equity and access if they focus a great deal of attention and funding on marginalized populations and if they do so by addressing systemic inequality.

This need not entail a wholesale devotion of resources to those singular goals; education grantmaking also can be extremely effective when focused on other pressing needs and worthwhile projects. But this report explores the tensions and tradeoffs, concluding that a far greater focus on marginalized populations and systemic inequality would be beneficial.

First, this report examines the tension between advancing overall change aimed at improving schooling versus targeted change

aimed at marginalized groups. We contend that most education-related grants, even if motivated by general objectives of higher-quality schooling, can be structured to provide substantial benefits for marginalized groups and, as such, we advocate “targeted universalism.” The key is for grantmakers to focus conscientiously on the needs of marginalized students, in ways that can benefit education generally and the population of students at large. Without such targeting, the services and systems-change efforts funded by foundations are not likely to successfully address the needs of marginalized students.

Second, we examine the tension between addressing immediate needs versus addressing long-term effectiveness. We argue that a given grant can advance needs of *both* types.



However, because policymaking takes place within a context that makes some policy options more feasible than others, it is critical to shift this context so that the political voice of marginalized communities is strengthened and the intergenerational reproduction of inequality diminished. Merely providing assistance to address unmet needs in education does little or nothing to change the cycle of inequity. Such assistance addresses only the cycle’s damage – its harmful byproducts. As such, breaking the cycle of systemic inequality is absolutely necessary to avoid intergenerational inequities. Another main contention of this report, then, is that by investing in advocacy, organizing and civic engagement, grantmakers seeking to improve education can assist in addressing power imbalances and participatory inequities and, ultimately, can help break this cycle. By investing in such advocacy-related activities, philanthropists receive a return on their investment of a magnitude that would be impossible if the spending had only immediate, direct beneficiaries.

The advocacy, organizing and civic engagement necessary to accomplish this can and should take a wide variety of forms. But ultimately a foundation advances these goals best when it works collaboratively with a marginalized community. Those most affected by the problem should be decision-makers spearheading the change, and meaningful community involvement adds weight to the foundation’s efforts.

NCRP encourages every education funder to have probing conversations about the ideas raised in this report. We especially encourage you to consider your foundation’s current allocation of grant dollars, and how investments in marginalized communities and advocacy-related efforts might help better achieve your goals. Were American schooling inequalities and their repercussions less stark, the rationale for taking on these challenging projects would be weaker. But ultimately, this report follows the compelling logic that philanthropic ambitions should match needs, and in education those needs are systemic, vast and stubborn.