

A New Outlook on How Philanthropy Can Help Improve Schools

By Leslie Lenkowsky

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When the venerable Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching stirs, the nation's educators usually take notice. And with the selection last month of a Stanford University professor, Anthony S. Bryk, as its next president, the Carnegie foundation may be about to write a new chapter in its illustrious history.

Founded in 1905 by the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, the organization, which is now based in Stanford, Calif., has been responsible for many important innovations, including the creation of the Educational Testing Service, the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association, a standard measure of class time ("Carnegie units"), and a widely used classification system for colleges and universities. It was a leader in promoting federal aid for higher education, and its reports, like a 1910 study by Abraham Flexner on medical education and a series of publications by a former president, Ernest Boyer, on elementary and secondary schooling, have been extraordinarily influential.

Mr. Bryk, however, is not just a distinguished researcher who can be expected to lead the organization and its staff in producing studies on important issues in American education. He is also widely known for his openness to considering ideas often thought controversial, like charter schools and other efforts to give parents more choices about the schools their children attend. If Mr. Bryk's appointment means that the Carnegie Foundation will be taking such measures seriously, the likelihood is that many other grant makers and educational policy makers will too.

That is not the case now.

To the contrary, a new report from the [National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy](#) contends that "school choice," through vouchers and tax credits for private-school gifts and tuition, appeal mostly to a small number of conservative foundations.

In "Strategic Grantmaking: Foundations and the School Privatization Movement," the latest in a series of reports examining the giving patterns of right-leaning donors, Rick Cohen suggests that these ideas, as well as charter schools, are really efforts to undermine public schooling by stripping it of able students and badly needed resources.

And while this "movement" has had relatively few major victories so far, writes Mr. Cohen, it has nonetheless had "a significant impact in shaping the public's understanding of K-12 education, and for getting the public to assume that public education doesn't work, may not be repairable, and is less effective than privatized education."

Central to these accomplishments was a group of grant makers, like the Walton Family Foundation, the Lynde and Harry F. Bradley Foundation, and the Sarah Scaife Foundation.

From 2002 to 2005, the report estimates, they gave nearly \$40-million to the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, Focus on the Family, and other think tanks and activist groups sympathetic to "school choice."

Just as important, this money usually came with few strings attached, underwrote large-scale public-policy advocacy as well as narrower projects, and often exceeded the amount those grant makers were legally required to spend. As a result, groups promoting "school choice" were better-equipped to outspend and outmaneuver public-school defenders and more moderate reformers.

However, those conclusions deserve to be taken skeptically.

That is partly because the research on which they are supposedly based is misleading. For example, while the think tanks and activist groups studied undoubtedly did receive large amounts of money from conservative foundations, the report does not indicate how much of it was actually spent to advance "school choice" and how much of the many other issues these organizations typically tackle.

Similarly, although two-thirds of the grant makers examined had payout rates in 2005 above the Internal Revenue Service minimum of 5 percent, the share that went for education grants is not revealed, nor is the amount actually contributed by the most-generous donors. Smaller foundations, which often give more than they have to, figure prominently among "school choice" supporters, but their dollars do not amount to very much.

In addition, the report avoids comparing what it says conservative foundations are spending to what other grant makers are pouring into education. According to the Foundation Center, nearly a quarter of foundation gifts — some \$3.5 billion — went to one or another aspect of education in 2005, dwarfing the \$86-million put into "school choice" that year.

And by themselves, some major foundation programs, like the Annenberg Foundation's \$500-million urban-education project in the 1990s, which largely underwrote efforts developed by public-school advocates, exceed what the report calculates the conservative grant makers spent in all the years under examination. Add the vast sums that corporations, teacher unions, state and local governments, and schools of education regularly commit, and why the "school choice" movement has not had many successes becomes obvious.

Still, the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy is right in suggesting that "school choice" mostly appeals to conservatives. That was not always true.

During the "war on poverty," a number of liberal scholars and writers considered school vouchers as a way to help poor people, and the federal government underwrote a test of the idea. Even today, charter schools attract grant makers from across the ideological spectrum, an inconvenient fact that leads the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy to exclude gifts from some big foundations in its tallies of support for "school choice."

Leaders among education grant makers, like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the

Broad foundation, have underwritten a variety of innovative approaches to schooling, including some that give parents more options in selecting schools for their children.

That is why the selection of Anthony Bryk as the Carnegie foundation's next president is potentially so significant. Although he is a researcher, not a political advocate, Mr. Bryk's own work, including a well-regarded book about Catholic schools, has reflected an appreciation of the value of alternatives to public schools. He himself has been instrumental in creating charter schools in both Chicago and Palo Alto, Calif.

Under his leadership, the Carnegie foundation is not likely to join the "school choice" movement. But if it devotes even a small portion of its resources to studying ways of assisting needy students outside the confines of public schooling, it will have greatly expanded the agenda of education improvement, as it has so often done in the past.

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