

A Quiet Family Fund Creates a Loud Buzz

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... While the Walton fund has a much smaller staff than most of its peers, grantees say the foundation seems much more like a professional grant maker than a family-run operation.

"Originally our founder would get John Walton on the phone and he'd talk to him and they'd make a decision together," says Derrell Bradford, executive director of Excellent Education for Everyone, in Newark, N.J., referring to Ms. Penner's uncle, who led the fund's education work until his death five years ago. "It's not like that anymore."

Grantees say the foundation is focusing more and more on measuring the results of its work.

"It's becoming increasingly important to them," says Keith Lawrence, seascapes director at Conservation International's global marine division.

Some describe the fund as fairly hands-off. Others, however, say foundation employees work closely with them on shaping and carrying out their projects.

"They are very intentional," says Peter C. Groff, president of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Susan Kaderka, regional executive director of the South Central Regional Center of the National Wildlife Federation, says: "They are pretty involved, in a good way."

Nonprofit leaders say they are unsure if it would help their causes if Walton's leaders were vocal, like Bill and Melinda Gates and Eli Broad have been about their vision for a better education system.

"There are obvious benefits to having that kind of advocacy and public support," says Frederick

M. Hess, an education scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. But he adds that it can also fuel concerns about billionaires' influence over the public agenda.

Some philanthropy watchdogs, however, criticize the fund's approach. Aaron Dorfman, executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, in Washington, notes that the fund doesn't share on its Web site information on its employees, board members, conflict-of-interest policies, or commitment to diversity.

"They were late to adopt even the most basic method of transparency used by foundations, the annual report," he says. "They still lag far behind the field in virtually all measures of transparency."

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