

Inequities in Educational Access Aren't Getting Enough Attention

By Sherece West
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Despite the notion that fixing the nation's public schools may require an "act of Superman," a coming together of not just educators, education officials, policymakers, parents and students, but education grantmakers, as well, might actually be the "force of nature" needed to turn around our failing schools.

A few months ago, I attended the largest gathering of education funders for a conference that focused on "fulfilling the promise of excellence and equity." I hope that participants of the Grantmakers for Education conference wrestled with some startling findings from a new study. Every year, grantmakers give billions of dollars in grants for education. But only a few of them provide funding to address the specific needs of all students, especially those most in need — lower-income and other underserved students — and an even smaller number supports efforts to solve our education crisis, according to a report recently released by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP; www.ncrp.org), a watchdog group based in Washington, D.C.

In "Confronting Systemic Inequity in Education: High Impact Strategies for Philanthropy," Kevin Welner and Amy Farley examine the systemwide issues that feed the cycle of unequal educational access and opportunities faced by students from marginalized communities. Welner, director of the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Farley argue that education reform cannot take place without breaking this cycle, and this requires change in the way philanthropy directs its resources.

It's a myth to think that schools function as a meritocracy and provide universal opportunities. This is simply not the case. American students face glaring inequities in educational opportunities, and this injustice is tied powerfully to parental wealth, education, ethnicity and race. It's inexcusable for our nation's school system to operate as a tide that lifts only those boats not leaking, while leaving others in disrepair to sink to the ocean floor. Education grantmakers can and should use their financial clout to stimulate a rising tide that successfully lifts the most vulnerable to drive systemwide and long-term solutions.

Welner and Farley recommend two high-impact strategies for foundations to be more effective at transforming American education: Dedicate at least 50 percent of their education grantmaking toward supporting marginalized communities and at least 25 percent toward influencing public policy through advocacy, community organizing and civic engagement.

I support these recommendations, because one can't ignore the large population of students that is disproportionately without access to quality education. And you can't claim you're seeking reform without engaging in the policymaking process.

NCRP analysis shows that of the 672 foundations that gave at least \$1 million in education grants from 2006 to 2008, only 11 percent devoted at least half of their philanthropic dollars for the benefit of vulnerable schoolchildren. Only 2 percent allocated at least one quarter of their grantmaking for systemic change.

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, rural students and females in male-dominated fields — consistently experience public education in much less positive ways than their more-advantaged peers. As a result, they are more likely not to graduate from high school or college and in general have decreased economic potential following school. Sadly, this trend continues from generation to generation.

Collaboration between a foundation and a marginalized community it serves has many benefits. Each advances the goals of the other. But foundations must significantly raise their expectations and address systemic inequities for real, permanent change in our education system to occur.

Grantmakers fund education in a variety of ways, including providing funds for direct scholarships to students, research dissemination and curricular development. They also can prioritize programs through designated giving that advances greater opportunity and equity for marginalized students. As Welner and Farley contend, this type of giving is both targeted and universal and will result in greater impact if these twin priorities were addressed.

The report also claims that grantmakers can and should address both immediate needs and systemic, transformative reform. It's important to realize that one does not preclude the other.

Education funders have at their disposal a variety of tools, from advocacy for a campaign, a particular issue or marginalized group to organizing at the community level, voter engagement, technical assistance and other forms of policy engagement.

All children deserve a future that provides opportunities instead of thwarting dreams and possibilities. Philanthropy needs to be part of efforts to break apart an unjust system that offers better education to those who are wealthy while failing to acknowledge the needs of those in marginalized communities. Equalizing opportunities through education for all children makes us all heroes.

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