

Inside Philanthropy



The State of
American Philanthropy

Giving for
K-12 Education

Table of Contents

ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

Inside Philanthropy is a digital media site that covers the world of charitable giving. We report daily on foundations, major donors, and trends in philanthropy. Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions. Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com

ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy. The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy.

AUTHOR: Connie Matthiessen

NEW RESEARCH & UPDATES: Jessica Hoffmann

EDITOR: Michael Hamill Remaley

COPY EDITOR: Chris Packham

GRAPHICS & DESIGN: Sue-Lynn Moses

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	4
The Lay of the Land	7
Who's Giving	7
Who's Getting	9
Getting and Giving:	
A Deeper Dive	10
The Big Issues & Beyond	12
Funder Trends & Strategies	19
Perspectives on Equity	23
A Closer Look at Funder Types	27
Private Foundations	27
Corporate Giving	29
Community Foundations	30
Major Donors	31
Associations & Intermediaries	34
An Analysis of Opportunitites & Challenges	36
Resources	39

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many American philanthropists share a belief in the transformative powers of education – for individuals and society as a whole – and focus a large portion of their fortunes to support K-12 education. Overall, funding for K-12 education is robust. Private and family foundations large and small give generously to education, as do community foundations, individual donors, and corporate funders.

Philanthropists fund nonprofits seeking to improve K-12 education in a variety of ways, supporting initiatives to improve education outcomes, increase college readiness, and close the achievement gap. To advance these and other goals, philanthropists use many strategies, from fostering innovation and promoting teacher diversity to improving curriculum and tackling the persistent digital divide.

Education in the U.S. is often a volatile issue, and debates about the best ways to educate children frequently erupt in the world of education philanthropy, too. Funders and the nonprofits they support often champion, debate, and, in some cases, entirely scrap their approaches to learning. Many disagree on the merits of charter schools versus traditional public schools; others consider standards and achievement the primary lens through which education should be evaluated. Other issues that have gained increasing traction in recent years include support for the whole child (versus an exclusive focus on academics) and social and emotional learning, boosting teacher training and recruitment, alternative approaches to discipline, programs that prepare students for post-secondary success, and hybrid learning.

In this brief, we will also explore an issue that underlies and impacts all the others: the yawning U.S. achievement gap. Even though the philanthropic sector has spent billions on the education system and pursued reform after reform for decades, the educational outcomes of low-income students and students of color have consistently been lower than their white and affluent peers. Research shows that the ongoing racial segregation of U.S. public schools exacerbates the achievement gap. These inequities have blighted the futures of far too many young people, their families, and communities – and reduced the entire nation's potential.

Education philanthropists have long expressed their support for education equity, and the increasing awareness of systemic racism at every level of our society has sharpened that focus. In response, most education philanthropies have unveiled education equity initiatives.

That said, as a nonprofit leader who participated in an Inside Philanthropy survey put it, “[It is] not always clear that commitment to racial justice goes beyond the symbolic or performative. And my worry is that intersectionality is not so evident, and that issues about long-term poverty, rural under-served populations, [and] gender-related disadvantages are being overlooked as philanthropic organizations scramble to position themselves as racial justice champions.”

In this brief, we will explore this intricate landscape:

Who’s Giving

- Large private foundations lead education philanthropy.
- Community and corporate foundations also give at a high level for education, though lower than private foundations.
- Major individual donors also give big for education.

Who’s Getting

- Charter schools were top recipients of K-12 education philanthropy dollars for years, but that is starting to change as funders shift to other priorities.
- Teach for America, NewSchools Venture Fund, Math for America, and the Strada Education Fund, which fortifies the link between education and employment, are other leading recipients of education philanthropy dollars.
- STEM is a major focus for many corporate funding dollars, a priority that is both self-interested and practical given these companies’ dependence on workers with skills in the areas of science, technology, engineering and math.

The Big Issues and Funding Trends

- Many grantmakers name transformation of the education system as a top funding priority, though there is a lot of variation in how they define transformation, Grantmakers in Education reports.
- Education “innovation” is a major priority for many of the country’s largest education philanthropists, and it takes many forms—from intensive tutoring for disadvantaged students to new school models.
- More education philanthropists today are including community members in funding decisions in an effort to bring more voices to the table—particularly the voices of those most directly affected by program decisions.
- Advocacy is another strategy that many major education philanthropists use to educate the public and promote their priorities.

Equity in the Sector

- Racial equity in education is a major focus for education funders, who support a range of strategies — from boosting the number of Black educators and increasing the number of students of color in STEM fields, to employing alternative forms of discipline to avoid suspensions, and eliminating police in schools.

- Some major education funders are also working to diversify their own staff and boards.
- Despite the current emphasis on racial equity in education, many groups still warrant greater attention from education funders, including Native American students, immigrants, LGBTQIA students, and students with disabilities.

An examination of the tremendous sums education philanthropists spend every year forces the question: Where is all this money going, and how is it making a difference?

Education philanthropy clearly plays a positive and vital role, considering the many diverse organizations and programs that receive funds—programs that are helping students all over the country in real time. But in the bigger picture, funders appear to be ignoring the elephant in the room—or at least doing their best to work around it. Many of those who spend time examining our education system recognize the biggest challenge it faces: poverty and the growing gap between the education this nation provides to the rich and to the poor. Are the tremendous sums education philanthropists spend every year addressing that fundamental issue, or merely tinkering around the edges?

It will be tough for education philanthropists to address these deeper issues without supporting policy reforms that would reduce their own wealth and power — the creation of a fairer tax code, for example, and school funding formulas that more equitably distribute resources so that zip codes don't determine education quality. Not addressing poverty and inequality will mean we're likely to see only incremental and siloed improvements in our education system. Recent history underscores the importance of providing all students a quality education, one that provides knowledge and critical thinking skills to fortify against prejudice, demagoguery and manipulation. As educator Horace Mann put it, "Education is our only political safety. Outside of this ark all is deluge."

Introduction

Education and its capacity to improve lives and strengthen communities has always animated philanthropy, and today, it continues to be a focus for foundations large and small, and for individuals – from small donors to billionaires. American philanthropies support initiatives to improve K-12 education outcomes, increase college readiness, and close the achievement gap. To reach these goals, philanthropists support many approaches, from fostering innovation and promoting teacher diversity to improving curriculum and tackling the persistent digital divide.

Education philanthropy is a landscape where new approaches to learning are often championed, debated, and, in some cases, scrapped. A couple decades ago, for example, many education experts were alarmed by U.S. students' standardized test results, which were lackluster compared to peers in other developed countries. Backed by major philanthropists, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, many states adopted new "Common Core" academic standards in 2010. The goal of the new standards was to introduce a rigorous approach to learning that would be consistent across states. The Common Core Standard Initiative was rolled out with considerable fanfare, but implementation and advocacy were poorly executed. The Common Core met a strong backlash from factions on both sides of the political spectrum, as [IP has reported](#). Today, the effectiveness of the Common Core Standards [is considered mixed, at best](#). Many states have [since revised](#) the standards; some have [dropped them altogether](#).

Another volatile topic in education circles is charter schools. A decade ago, many of the country's largest education philanthropists were lined up in support of charters, while many union leaders and local communities opposed them. More recently, widespread opposition, problems with some charter systems, and the failure of the approach to scale have caused some in the philanthropic community to cool on charters, but support remains high among many major funders, as well as some parents and the public in general.

Other education issues that have gained increasing traction in recent years include support for the [whole child](#) (versus an exclusive focus on academics) and social and emotional learning, improving teacher training and recruitment, alternative approaches to discipline, programs that prepare students for post-secondary success, early childhood development, and [hybrid learning](#) (an area that gained increased attention after the COVID-19 pandemic forced classes online).

All of these issues are critical to any discussion of education philanthropy, and we will be exploring them further in this brief as we present an overview of the education philanthropy landscape in the U.S. today. Overall, funding for K-12 education is robust. In 2022, institutional grantmaking for K-12 education in the U.S. totaled about \$9.8 billion, according to Candid data based on 990s. A 2022 Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors report on [trends in global philanthropy](#) found that 55% of respondents named education as their primary focus area, followed by community and economic

development (45%) and health (36%). Most respondents support more than one focus area, but “globally education was the top or tied for the top cause.”

For family foundations, education was the top giving area indicated in [Trends 2020](#), a survey by the National Center for Family Philanthropy. That said, philanthropic dollars are dwarfed by government funding for K-12 education. Federal, state and local governments spent a total of \$871 billion in the school year 2019-2020, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

One issue that underlies all the others is the fact that a yawning achievement gap [persists in the U.S.](#), despite all the dollars heaped on education over the years. Even as the philanthropic sector pursued reform after reform for decades, our nation has consistently produced lower education outcomes for low-income students and students of color compared to their white and affluent peers.

The ongoing racial segregation of U.S. public schools exacerbates the achievement gap, according to a report by the [Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis](#), which found that “the desegregation efforts of the late 1960s and early 1970s did not last; public schools today remain highly segregated both by race and class.” The report concluded, “The association of racial segregation with achievement gaps is completely accounted for by racial differences in school poverty: Racial segregation appears to be harmful because it concentrates minority students in high-poverty schools, which are, on average, less effective than lower-poverty

schools.” These inequities threaten to blight the futures of far too many young people, their families, and communities.

The way the U.S. funds its K-12 public schools contributes to this inequity. Federal, state and local governments all provide funding for public schools, as mentioned earlier, but huge differences in the amount of that funding persists across districts and states. As [the Education Trust](#) observed in a 2022 report: “Across the country, districts with the most students of color on average receive substantially less (16%) state and local revenue than districts with the fewest students of color, and high-poverty districts receive 5% less state and local revenue than low-poverty districts.”

Historically, philanthropy for education equity focused on students’ socioeconomic status; today, grantmakers are increasingly applying a racial equity lens in their education funding, according to a 2022 [report](#) by Grantmakers for Education. “Where 2018-2019 data suggested 41% of foundations were applying a racial/ethnic lens in their education funding, now up to 72% may be doing so,” GFE found.

Concern among philanthropists may be high, but a 2024 [report](#) by the Schott Foundation for Education found, “Both racial equity and racial justice remain drastically underfunded by the K-12 philanthropic sector.”

Will equity initiatives lead to a substantial change in priorities (and the direction of actual dollars) among education philanthropists going forward? Do the new racial justice programs so many foundations have unveiled signal a

determination to tackle the deeply rooted and complex issues that fuel our unequal education system, or are they just window dressing?

As one of the nonprofit leaders who participated in IP's survey put it, "[It is] not always clear that commitment to racial justice goes beyond the symbolic or performative. And my worry is that intersectionality is not so evident, and that issues about long-term poverty, rural under-served populations, gender-related disadvantages, are being overlooked as philanthropic organizations scramble to position themselves as racial justice champions."

Education in America –and how to do it best– is an extraordinarily complicated and controversial topic, replete with competing factions and impassioned debate, and the world of education philanthropy reflects that complexity. Many philanthropists have found common ground on the importance of racial justice in education, but exactly what that means and how to advance it is likely to remain a subject of debate well into the future.

The Lay of the Land

Who's Giving

Fixing the U.S. education system is a daunting project, but that has never dissuaded philanthropists from tackling it. The list of K-12 funders is a star-studded line-up of the globe's wealthiest individuals – past and present – and their heirs. From Bill Gates, who for years topped the list of the [world's richest people](#), to the Waltons, heirs to the Walmart fortune and the [wealthiest family](#) in the U.S., many billionaires deploy some of their vast wealth to improve the education of American children. This is not a new trend: In the last century, legacy foundations built by industrialists and entrepreneurs like Andrew Carnegie and W.K. Kellogg have made education a funding priority. Today, many new tech billionaires support education through vehicles like the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, or their own funding vehicles, like the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, a charitably dedicated LLC built on Facebook's—now Meta Platform's—eye-popping profits.

Private and family foundations are by far the largest philanthropic funders of K-12 education. Community foundations are another source of education funding, and many corporations also provide funding in the education space, but give less than private and family foundations.

An analysis of Candid data shows that education funding from top funders increased steadily in the 2010s. But by 2024, education funding was in a state of flux, with reports of major funders dialing back their funding or shifting priorities, as IP has [reported](#).

10 K-12 Education Funders to Know

[Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#)

[Walton Family Foundation](#)

[Silicon Valley Community Foundation](#)

[W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#)

[Wallace Foundation](#)

[Carnegie Corporation of New York](#)

[Charter School Growth Fund](#)

[Arnold Ventures](#)

[Hewlett Foundation](#)

[Eli & Edythe Broad Foundation](#)

[Ballmer Group](#)

[MacKenzie Scott](#)

Most education funders also give to a variety of other causes – from global health and women's entrepreneurship to criminal justice reform and the arts.

Significant giving for K-12 education happens through donor-advised fund managers including Schwab, Fidelity, the National Philanthropic Trust, and the National Christian Charitable Foundation. These are essentially pass-through vehicles for individual giving.

Beyond the top funders, there are many major funders supporting K-12 education that

fundraisers and followers of philanthropy should pay attention to. Since its founding in 1999, the [Michael and Susan Dell Foundation](#) has been funding K-12 education for low-income students in the U.S., India and South Africa. The [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), which has a mission to alleviate child poverty, focuses its education efforts on closing the achievement gap. The [Paul M. Angell Family Foundation](#) shares the Casey Foundation's anti-poverty mission, and to that end, supports K-12 education, particularly early intervention for low-income and disadvantaged young people. Public school reform to make schools more accountable and effective has been a major emphasis of the [Robertson Foundation's](#) K-12 funding.

Some funders have a regional focus and are particularly influential in those areas. The [Joyce Foundation](#), for example, supports educator effectiveness and college readiness in the Great Lakes region. The [Charles Stewart Mott Foundation](#) also prioritizes education, primarily in its hometown of Flint, Michigan, but also in other low-income and underserved communities around the country. The [Kresge Foundation](#) has a national focus, but prioritizes its education funding in certain cities and states, and in South Africa.

Education is an area that many newly minted billionaires have gravitated toward in recent years, as well, including tech philanthropists like Mark Zuckerberg, Reed Hastings, Jeff Bezos, MacKenzie Scott, Laurene Powell Jobs and Elon Musk. The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation, built on the profits of International Data Group, which published Infoworld, Macworld, and the "For Dummies" book series, has given large donations in support of [diversity in STEM education](#).

The Silicon Valley Community Foundation is another leading education funder. While other community foundations do not have the enormous tech wealth that SVCF does, there are more than 750 community foundations in the U.S., and most support local K-12 schools, along with a range of other causes. The Seattle Foundation, for example, supports a variety of organizations in the Seattle area that are working to strengthen schools. The Tulsa Community Foundation provides school supplies to elementary schools in high-poverty communities of the area, and also provides college scholarships. Community foundations' financial assets vary widely, with most of them falling in the wide range from "less than \$100,000 to more than \$1.7 billion," according to the [Council on Foundations](#). (SVCF, the nation's largest community foundation, is an outlier, with assets of more than \$13 billion as of 2022.)

Many corporations also provide K-12 funding—from the [Albertsons Companies Foundation](#), built on profits from the vast chain of supermarkets, to [Wells Fargo](#), which invests in financial literacy programs for children. Funding for science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) is a priority for many corporations.

Individual donations for education through crowd-sourcing websites allow individuals to supplement skimpy school budgets and fund classroom projects with small donations. This collective giving isn't insignificant: [DonorsChoose](#), the largest classroom funding site, has raised over \$1.6 billion since it was founded in 2000.

Who's Getting

A wide variety of nonprofits benefit from the philanthropic dollars showered on K-12 education. In fact, some major education organizations would likely not exist, at least as currently constituted, without donations from education philanthropies. The galaxy of education nonprofits that have grown over the last 25 years both depends on philanthropic dollars and helps shape these funders' education priorities. Funders, in turn, gain a better sense of the issues through their relationships with nonprofits, and share credit for their accomplishments. It's a symbiotic relationship that, at its best, nurtures talent and innovation, and at its worst, creates an echo chamber that reinforces shared prejudices and stale ideas.

Charter schools have received a substantial share of education philanthropy in recent decades. The Charter School Growth Fund (an intermediary that is also a top grantmaker) and large charter school systems including the KIPP Foundation, Success Academy Charter Schools, and Summit Public Schools have been top recipients of grant dollars. That said, as some education funders are starting to shift priorities, we may be at (or past) an [inflection point](#) when it comes to philanthropy for charter schools, IP has reported.

Countless other nonprofits benefit from education philanthropy dollars. Some of these organizations, like [10,000 Degrees](#) and [iMentor](#), help low-income and first-generation students on the path to college, and continue to provide support during college. [Equal Opportunity Schools](#) works with school districts to get more low-income students and students of color into Advanced Placement and International

K-12 Education Grant Recipients to Know

[Charter School Growth Fund](#)

[Teach for America](#)

[DonorsChoose](#)

[New Schools Venture Fund](#)

[Success Academy Charter Schools](#)

[City Year](#)

[Communities in Schools](#)

[City Fund](#)

[Math for America](#)

[Narrative 4](#)

[Strada Education Network](#)

Baccalaureate classes, and The Calculus Project boosts the number of BIPOC and underserved students in high-level math classes. The [Center for Black Educator Development](#) and the [Black Teacher Collaborative](#) are dedicated to building the pipeline of Black educators. Other nonprofits, like [PAVE](#) (Parents Amplifying Voices in Public Education), based in Washington, D.C., provide tools to help parents advocate for their children's education. Many school districts receive support from nonprofits that raise money to supplement local school budgets; [Spark* SF Public Schools](#), for example, leverages donations from a broad range of corporate and foundation [partners](#) for the San Francisco Unified School District.

Many education nonprofits focus on specific populations. The [First Nations Development Institute](#), for example, uses a range of strategies—including grants, technical support, training and advocacy—to strengthen Native American communities throughout the U.S. [Girls Who Code](#), which works to close the technology gender gap, receives support from a variety of corporate partners. The [Last Mile Education Fund](#) helps women in engineering and tech programs—many of them from underserved communities—overcome financial barriers that too often get in the way of a degree. [Generation Hope](#) helps teen parents get to and stay in college.

This brief cannot name every influential or innovative education nonprofit making an impact on every aspect of education reform today. The next section does, however, begin to start drawing the connections between certain

areas of education work, the nonprofits leading within those categories, and the work that different types of funders gravitate toward.

Giving & Getting: A Deeper Dive

The top K-12 funders include marquee names in the philanthropy world, like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as well as lower-profile funders like the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. The Walton Family Foundation (built on the Walmart fortune), is another large K-12 donor.

The Silicon Valley Community Foundation (SVCF) is the only community foundation that gives to education at the same scale as large private foundations, in terms of dollar amounts. [SVCF](#), which is a conduit for the giving of many wealthy donors from tech and other industries, is the largest community foundation not only in the U.S., but in the entire world. It prioritizes giving in Silicon Valley and the Bay Area, and, as [IP previously reported](#), it has a flexible and at times controversial approach to giving.

Most of the top education funders include other causes besides K-12 education in their funding portfolios. The Charter School Growth Fund is an exception: As its name suggests, charter schools are its primary focus. This nonprofit is both a top donor and a top recipient of grants for education. An intermediary that operates as a venture capital fund, it has received monies from a long [list of philanthropies](#), including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Foundation, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. According to its [website](#), the Charter School Growth Fund to date has funded 1,600 schools that serve nearly 725,000 students in 32 states.

K-12 Education Funding Priorities
Educational System Transformation
Educational Equity
“Whole Child” Approaches
School Choice
Teacher Preparation and Development
Charter Schools
Curriculum
STEM Education
Advocacy

As mentioned above, a substantial portion of grants for K-12 education have been going to charter schools for years. Along with the Charter School Growth Fund, specific charter networks, including Summit Public Schools, the KIPP Foundation, and Success Academy Charter Schools, Inc. are top grant recipients.

The Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida (Tampa area), the largest district in Florida and the eighth-largest in the country, has been a darling of education funders because of its innovative approach to education. In 2009, it received a \$100 million grant to improve teacher quality from the Gates Foundation, a project that was widely considered a failure, as IP has [reported](#). In 2011, the district also received funding from the [Wallace Foundation](#) for a program to help school [systems develop better](#)

[systems](#) for hiring and training school principals. Despite this support from large funders, the Hillsborough County school district is currently [facing severe budget shortfalls](#), like many of its peers around the country. And yet, after all this “innovation” and philanthropic support, the county’s schools continue to experience the same kinds of challenges and inconsistent educational [outcomes](#) as other similarly composed districts across the United States.

A current darling of big-name funders is Narrative 4, a nonprofit focused on nurturing compassion and empathy in students through storytelling. As IP has [reported](#), Narrative 4 has received transformative gifts from both the Bezos Family Foundation and MacKenzie Scott. Chuck Feeney’s Atlantic Philanthropies is another big supporter.

Grantee Spotlight



According to the Girls Who Code website, the percentage of female computer scientists is decreasing and the organizations is on a mission to reverse that trend by 2030. Girls Who Code has reached 500 million people, served 580,000 girls, women and nonbinary people through its programs and clubs. Over half of the girls it has served are from historically underrepresented groups, including those from Black, Latinx and low-income communities.

[Grantmakers for Education](#) (GFE) provides a more detailed picture of the issue areas that animate education funders. GFE regularly surveys its members regarding their funding interests and priorities, and provided us with some of the findings from its most recent survey. (Note: Not all GFE members participated in the survey, and the results reflect only an unrepresentative subset of the total population of education funders.)

GFE’s 2023 survey showed “educational system redesign/transformation” as the top funding priority stated by respondents making grants for K-12 education, followed by leadership, teacher preparation and development, curriculum and pedagogy, and literacy/reading skills. School choice, including charter schools, ranked much lower as a stated funder priority in 2023.

However, when looking at where the dollars are flowing, both system redesign/transformation and school choice received 7% of K-12 grant dollars given by those surveyed.

Corporations are also major K-12 education funders but don't give as much as family and private foundations. Top corporate funders of K-12 education nonprofits include tech titans like Salesforce, Amazon and Google, and traditional corporate giants like Wal-Mart and AT&T. AbbVie Inc.'s Contributions Program and the steel and mining company ArcelorMittal USA LLC's corporate giving program have also made substantial grants for K-12 education. The area of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) is a priority for many corporate funders.

Inside Philanthropy maintains an extensive list of [STEM education funders](#) that is a valuable resource for nonprofits working in this space.

The Big Issues & Beyond

To cover all the big issues in education philanthropy would necessitate a discussion beyond the scope of this brief, but the most important identified by the experts IP interviewed are racial justice; charter schools; "hybrid" learning and the digital divide; teacher recruitment and training; social-emotional learning/trauma-informed education; early childhood learning; and an issue intertwined with all the others, student achievement.

Racial Equity. Racial justice and equity in education is identified as a top priority for funders surveyed by [Grantmakers for Education](#) (GFE). While education equity has long been a concern, the issue gained increased public

attention because of the events of 2020, including the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police, and racial discrepancies in health outcomes revealed by the pandemic. Most education funders now identify racial equity as a top giving priority, and approach the issue in a variety of ways, discussed at greater length in this brief's Perspectives on Equity section.

Funder Spotlight

STUPSKI FOUNDATION 

Stupski's support for education is informed by real life experience. Larry and Joyce Stupski were first-generation college students. The foundation was established after Larry's passing in 2013. It has dedicated nearly \$5 million in "student-advising grants" to the Oakland and San Francisco unified school districts, and three of their community-based partners. The grants support first-generation college students, students of color and students from low-income households.

Charter Schools. Decades after charter schools were first introduced, support remains high among a large segment of education funders, but momentum has slowed in recent years. Some reasons for this include opposition from teachers' unions and local communities, as well as charter schools' failure to scale. Some funders are disappointed that the charter movement failed to catalyze the system-wide transformation many supporters hoped for; others don't like the strict discipline that prevails

in some charter systems. Charter critics also charge that some charters maintain high academic profiles by pushing out students with academic or/and discipline issues, although [research](#) on Newark charter schools found no evidence of such practices.

When the first law authorizing charter schools was introduced in Minnesota in 1991, the movement had broad bipartisan support, and it was a Democratic president, Bill Clinton, who signed the federal Charter School Program in 1994. But charter debates have become increasingly partisan in recent years. This trend was sharpened by President Trump’s unpopular education secretary, Betsy DeVos, whose vocal support for charters may have caused some funders to back away. (After DeVos left office, her assistant secretary [recalled](#): “When the DeVos team asked charter-school advocates how we might be helpful, their explicit entreaty was that we mention charter schools as little as possible.”)

A [2020 study](#) by the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas found that philanthropic support for charter schools was 46% less than for traditional public schools, and that funders directed most of their dollars to a small number of charter school systems.

Meanwhile, many in the education funding world have grown wary of charters, as Grantmakers for Education (GFE) found. In its [2023 benchmarking survey](#), GFE found that while charter schools continue to account for a notable share of philanthropic support, this is not an area that is attracting much new funding. Many education funders remain steadfast in their support for charter schools, including longtime charter champion the Walton Family Foundation. Marc Sternberg, who directed the Walton K-12 Education Program for eight years before leaving in 2021 to found A-Street Ventures, calls opposition to charters counterintuitive, given the research showing [high academic outcomes](#), particularly for disadvantaged students. “The evidence that is based on performance of charter schools—especially those serving the hardest to serve kids in areas of the country that are quality school deserts and have been for so long— the data is so persuasive and so overwhelming,” he said. (More on the [shifting charter landscape](#).)

Celine Coggins, a former executive director of Grantmakers for Education, pointed out that parents’ enthusiasm for charter schools and the flexibility they provide remains high. “I wouldn’t say the moment for charters is over by any means, because parent demand drives these



“I wouldn’t say the moment for charters is over by any means, because parent demand drives these kinds of things. And also the imperative for innovation. If we go down the path of building schools that address hybrid learning in new ways, for example, charters tend to have more flexibility to do those kinds of things. So my sense is that some funders are going to invest in that work, and some are going to stay away from it.”

—Celine Coggins, former executive director, Grantmakers for Education

kinds of things,” she said. “And also the imperative for innovation. If we go down the path of building schools that address hybrid learning in new ways, for example, charters tend to have more flexibility to do those kinds of things. So my sense is that some funders are going to invest in that work, and some are going to stay away from it.”

Hybrid Learning and the Digital Divide.

The term “hybrid learning” refers to a combination of in-person and remote learning. This and the digital divide were hot issues even before the 2020 pandemic highlighted the potential and the challenges of technology in education. (Educators and experts use both the terms “hybrid learning” and “blended learning,” often interchangeably, but blended learning usually applies to in-person classes that use online materials, while hybrid learning applies to classes that include remote learning.) When schools were forced to teach classes online, administrators had to scramble to make sure students had the technology and connectivity required to participate in virtual classrooms, and educators had to adapt in-person classes to the virtual world. It was a bumpy transition for many schools, and some districts around the country were still working out the kinks months after the initial lockdowns.

Still, many educators believe that hybrid learning in some form is going to be a permanent part of the education landscape going forward. “There is no going back now,” as one school superintendent told [Education Week](#). There are early indications that, while many students didn’t adapt well to remote classes, some [excelled](#). Meanwhile, many parents, educators and

administrators are enthusiastic about the potential of a hybrid approach.

The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI), funded by Facebook (now Meta) billionaire Mark Zuckerberg, was an early champion of remote learning, and was quick to step in with new initiatives during the pandemic.

A few years later, 28% of grantmakers who responded to GFE’s [2023 benchmarking survey](#) said they provide funding related to remote/online/hybrid learning, accounting for 0.3% of K-12 giving.

A-Street Ventures’ founder Marc Sternberg believes hybrid learning could help schools move away from the one-size-fits all approach that has characterized education in the U.S. “COVID has created an opportunity here,” he said. “Every school district is now digitized. This creates the opportunity to not just make school portable, but to change how students learn and teachers teach.”

The pandemic also underscored the [digital divide](#) in the U.S., and its role in exacerbating the achievement gap. A [report by Columbia University](#) found that low-income and minority students were more likely to be learning remotely during the pandemic than their white and more affluent peers, even though they were less likely to have access to features that make remote learning successful, including technology and connectivity, support from parents or tutors, and access to a quiet study space. And in a [2020 survey](#) by the Pew Research Center, 59% of low-income parents surveyed said their children faced digital obstacles to completing their schoolwork. Another Pew report found that

Black, Hispanic and low-income students were more likely to lack connectivity than their white and higher-income peers.

In response, many education funders stepped in to try to narrow the digital divide, accelerating progress in an area that had been neglected for years. Philanthropists teamed up with corporations to create public-private partnerships to promote remote learning in [Philadelphia](#) and [California](#).

Inside Philanthropy Survey

“I think that more attention should be paid to teacher training than to class room improvement. If you train a teacher well you influence a large number of students every year for many years while if you teach a classroom you only influence about 20 students once.”

—Nonprofit volunteer, Los Angeles, California

Teaching Quality, Training and Professional Development. Teachers are a key ingredient for effective schools, of course, and many education funders underwrite programs for teacher recruitment and training. Teach for America (TFA), a top recipient of philanthropic giving in this sector, recruits and trains teachers to work in low-income communities around the country. More than 70,000 people have participated in the program since it started in 1990, according to the TFA website, and today thousands of corps members work with students in schools across the U.S.

The Gates Foundation has funded initiatives to enhance [teacher preparation](#), and partnered with professional learning organizations to [better equip teachers](#) to work with specific populations.

Many education philanthropists today are devoting funds to increase the diversity of the teacher workforce in the U.S. [A majority of teachers are white](#), and slightly more than half of public school students are nonwhite—despite [evidence](#) that students of color do better in school when they have teachers who look like them. (Black students who have a single Black teacher in elementary school, for example, are more likely to graduate and enroll in college). But only 7% of U.S. teachers are Black. A 2021 study by the [Black Teacher Collaborative](#) found that over 40% of Texas schools have no Black teachers at all; the same was true for 40 school districts in Tennessee. Hispanic teachers make up 8.3% of the teaching workforce.

Major funders, including the Gates, Walton Family and W.K. Kellogg foundations, City Fund and NewSchools Venture Fund, have promoted efforts to boost the diversity of the teacher pipeline. Kellogg funded a program to increase STEM training for [Native American teachers](#), for example. And the Walton Foundation recently partnered with the Cleveland Avenue Foundation for Education to support the [1954 Project](#), which is raising funds to foster and support Black leaders across the education landscape, as [IP reported](#).

“Whole Child” Approaches/Family Engagement/Social-Emotional Learning. Many education funders support programs going beyond academics to address the needs of the

“whole child.” As Grantmakers for Education concluded in its [2023 benchmarking survey](#): “A majority of respondents are investing in social and emotional learning and/or mental health and trauma-informed care, as well as wraparound social service supports for children and families.”

A growing body of research, grassroots demand, and the cultural moment have all contributed to increasing support for social and emotional learning (often included under the “whole child” umbrella). At its core, social and emotional learning (SEL) emphasizes the soft skills kids need to succeed—skills like managing emotions, feeling empathy for others, forming relationships and making responsible decisions. The focus on SEL comes as more funders focus on the nexus between education and poverty, looking to address the factors outside school that so often undermine student success, as [IP reported](#). Increasingly, [GFE reports](#), funder support for SEL “includes addressing trauma and the negative impacts of racial injustice.”

The Gates Foundation has thrown some of its considerable funding muscle behind social and emotional learning initiatives, as has the NewSchools Venture Fund and the [NoVo Foundation](#). Meanwhile, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, a relative newcomer to the education philanthropy scene, has taken a leading role in funding the [whole child](#) approach to learning.

The Wallace Foundation, another top education funder, includes social and emotional learning in its funding priorities. It also supports quality after school and summer programs, which are often underfunded and resourced, particularly in disadvantaged communities. [Research](#) suggests

that summer learning loss, which is higher among low-income students, contributes to the achievement gap.

School Discipline. In recent years many funders have sought to reform school discipline policies to tackle—and end—the notorious school-to-prison pipeline, as [IP has reported](#). These efforts are rooted in [research](#) showing that students of color and low-income students face suspension at higher rates than other students, and that suspensions increase the [likelihood of incarceration](#).

city fund

“We need innovative school options to respond to the needs of all students. One kid could thrive in military school, another might thrive in an art school. We focus on cities that have moved away from one-size-fits-all education and showed that different kids thrive in different environments.”

—Neerav Kingsland, founder, City Fund

Today, many funders are also promoting [trauma-informed education](#), including promoting alternative forms of school discipline, as awareness of the long-term health and psychological impacts of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) become more widely understood. Increasingly, mental health and trauma and its consequences are rising to the attention of community advocates and foundations working in both health and education. Researchers have found that

interventions like positive interactions with a trusted adult and lessons that teach kids how to manage emotions can build a child’s resistance to the effects of trauma. Harsh and exclusionary discipline measures, in contrast, alienate and retraumatize children and teens. Initiatives that eliminate punitive disciplinary measures (including in-school policing, zero-tolerance policies and suspensions) and implement creative alternatives (restorative justice measures, for example) have been shown to keep kids in school –and out of the school-to-prison pipeline.

College Readiness and Bridge Programs.

Programs that boost college readiness, particularly for low-income, first-generation college students and students of color, also receive considerable support from education funders. These programs provide advising services, help students navigate the college application and scholarship process, and even provide mentorship during college, in many cases. The Gates Foundation is a major supporter of college readiness programs, as is Steve Jobs’ widow, [Laurene Powell Jobs](#), who co-founded the nonprofit College Track. Blackstone billionaire Jonathan Gray and his wife, Mindy, also fund [college readiness programs](#) like Year Up, and

Breakthrough New York. The [Kresge Foundation](#) and the [Lumina Foundation](#) also participate in this space.

Grantmakers for Education’s recent survey of funders found strong support for “postsecondary and career pathways.” Some major funders prioritize this area for funding, including [Bloomberg Philanthropies](#), [JPMorgan Chase](#) and the [General Electric Foundation](#). Education experts Bruno Manno and Lynn Olson wrote an op-ed, “[A New Bipartisan Education Agenda](#),” advocating for the creation of more vocational and work-based training opportunities for students. This approach would “expand students’ opportunities to acquire critical knowledge, skills and social networks by abandoning a ‘bachelor’s-degree-or-bust’ mentality in favor of multiple pathways to opportunity based on students’ passions and purposes...,” they write.

Defining Student Achievement. All education funders say they support student achievement, but it is a nebulous issue for funders because there are so many ideas about what it is and the best way to get there. Does it mean good grades and high test scores? Job readiness? Attainment of knowledge and skills

Grantee Spotlight



National Parents Union (NPU), empowers parents who have traditionally had little influence in the education system, including parents of color, low-income parents, formerly incarcerated parents, parents in recovery, single parents, and grandparents. After the pandemic hit, NPU used funds from the VELA Education Fund to help parents in disadvantaged communities create “pandemic pods” to keep kids learning. NPU was one of four partners VELA selected to distribute the funds.

that equip a young person to be a good citizen or a life-long learner? We're including student achievement last in this list of big issues not because it is the least important—quite the reverse—but because it intersects with all the other issues, and is heavily influenced by all of them.

In the last several years, GFE has found a shift in attitudes toward reforms meant to boost student achievement that many education funders championed in the past. The findings “signal a sharp retreat from the education reform agenda that has been dominant for the past 20 years. Funders have far less of an appetite to continue spending huge sums to support controversial efforts that have drawn much criticism and seen mixed success at best,” as [IP reported](#).

“Some of the core academic issues that were the big issues of funders in the not-so-distant past are not getting attended to today,” GFE’s former executive director, Celine Coggins, told IP. “So that’s school choice, teacher quality, the issues that have to do with assessment and accountability.”

Marc Sternberg, the Walton Foundation’s former K-12 program director (now leading A-Street Ventures), believes the resistance to accountability is, at least in part, a reaction to the Obama-era “Race to the Top” approach, which put heavy emphasis on test scores and data collection. “I think there probably was too much pressure to ‘teach to the test,’ to the point where we weaponized measurement and evaluated teachers on the basis of data that was at times incomplete and unfairly applied,” he said.

Still, Sternberg is concerned about going too far in the other direction. He points out that because of COVID school closures, many states stopped measuring student performance, which leaves educators in the dark about student outcomes. “You cannot change what you do not measure,” he argued.

Sternberg is worried that turning away from assessments and accountability could result in a lowering of expectations: “We have to balance drive, rigor, knowledge, and skills acquisition with serving the whole child,” he said. “The lessons we’ve learned in education over the last half-century cannot allow us to lower expectations.”

It remains to be seen whether funders are moving away from emphasis on academics and achievement temporarily or for the long term. Perhaps some funders are simply abandoning approaches that haven’t worked and funneling support in other directions. Student success can be promoted or impeded when the key issues are either addressed or ignored — including racial equity, school choice, teacher recruitment and training, the digital divide, the whole child and social and emotional issues, college readiness, and early education.

While early childhood education doesn’t technically fit in the K-12 education bucket, most education experts today agree that the early years of a child’s life pave the way for everything that comes later, and in recent years, it has received increasing attention from funders. IP addresses funding for [early childhood education](#) in a separate brief.

Funder Strategies and Trends

Foundations and major donors support a wide range of strategies, many of them overlapping, to improve K-12 education and boost student success. These strategies include identifying and promoting innovation, direct support for education infrastructure, supporting education research, developing community-based leaders and voices, education advocacy, and creating innovative funding models.

Supporting Innovative Models. Identifying and promoting education innovation is a high priority for education funders, and it takes many forms. Sometimes, innovation means entirely new school or curriculum models; it can also mean the integration of new tech tools in the classroom or enhanced support for students.

Funder Spotlight



The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, based in Flint, Michigan, donated Chromebooks and laptops to local schools after they switched to remote learning, and supported community centers that provided safe, supervised spaces where children could learn remotely. To address the state's digital divide in a more permanent way, Mott provided funds for an initiative that aims to make broadband internet access available to all students and educators in Michigan.

Most education funders would likely say they support education innovation, but it is typically the largest players who have the capacity to take the biggest funding risks. Gates, the largest education funder of all, stands out as a leader, supporting big experiments that seek solutions that can scale. Some of these big experiments have flopped, including its Intensive Partnerships for Effective Teaching Initiative, intended to increase student access to effective teachers. As an IP report [concluded](#): “The moral of the story here isn’t that the Gates Foundation shouldn’t take big risks—let’s hope that it keeps doing exactly that—but that it needs to operate in a more conscientious and collaborative way. The good news: As a ‘learning organization,’ it appears that Gates is already well along in internalizing some of the hard lessons of its past K-12 work.” To its credit, despite such high-profile setbacks, Gates continues to make what it calls “[big bets in innovation](#).”

Education funding giant the Walton Family Foundation also prioritizes “breakthrough innovation,” and in 2021 vowed to double down on that commitment: “With more dedicated resources, dramatically increasing our support for innovation over the next five years, we’ll support revolutionary solutions to harness and accelerate opportunity and mobility for all children, with a focus on those most in need,” according to the WFF website.

NewSchools Venture Fund supports innovative public schools, which it [defines broadly](#): “Most existing schools were designed for a different time and purpose. We need to redesign schools so they work better for today’s students. Innovation can and should take many forms, including combining new ideas with proven practice.”

Innovation is also a top funding priority for [City Fund](#), an intermediary funder that receives support from Laura and John Arnold, the Hastings Fund, and a host of other funding heavyweights. According to former managing partner Neerav Kingsland, “We need innovative school options to respond to the needs of all students. One kid could thrive in military school, another might thrive in an art school. We focus on cities that have moved away from one-size-fits-all education and showed that different kids thrive in different environments.”

Leadership Spotlight



The Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) was among the first education funders to make advancing racial equity in public education the focus of its funding strategy. Nick Donahue, former NMEF president and CEO said :

“We’re not the first to do this, and it’s just one step in the fight against anti-Black racism. I have some hopes that this is a trend in philanthropy, but I don’t think there is enough demand to make that a slam dunk. The reality is that this still looks like it could be a boutique moment for some philanthropies. But the idea that you can make things just and good for all people without confronting how white supremacy confuses the public systems we’re trying to change—and confuses the philanthropies trying to change those systems—that just seems unrealistic to me.”

Innovation in education sometimes means expanding access to tried-and-true techniques. For example, the Walton Family Foundation, the Gates Foundation and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation have all pitched in to support a project that seeks to make [intensive tutoring available to disadvantaged students](#). Tutoring is an effective way to help struggling students, and research backs them up. But hiring a tutor is usually out of financial reach for low-income families.

Many education experts believe that expanding access to high-quality tutoring would not only reverse learning loss caused by COVID school closures, but narrow the education gap overall.

Creating New School Buildings. Some education funders provide direct support for education infrastructure, including brick-and-mortar school buildings, and, in some cases, the creation of brand-new schools. Charter school administrators have a particularly hard time finding school buildings, which is why the Walton Foundation launched its [Building Equity Initiative](#) in 2016. The initiative seeks to make it easier and more affordable for public charter schools “to find, secure and renovate facilities,” according to a [foundation report](#), and will enable charter schools to serve an additional 250,000 students by 2027. As [IP has reported](#), Walton provides the funding and the building projects are managed by Civic Builders, a nonprofit organization that focuses exclusively on charter school facilities and how to build, expand, refurbish and pay for them.

Other funders support the creation of new schools, including Walton, which has funded many [charter startups](#). The NewSchools Venture

Fund also funds new schools, along with lesser-known philanthropists, like equity billionaire Jonathan Gray, a big supporter of Harlem Village Academies, where he now serves on the board.

Funding Education Research and Dissemination. A significant number of philanthropies underwrite education research to test out theories and spur innovation. The [Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation](#) helped create the Broad Center at Yale to conduct research and develop leaders to improve public school systems. The [Wallace Foundation](#) conducts research by trying out programs and closely monitoring the results.

In terms of K-12 education, the foundation's priorities include school leadership, afterschool, summer programs, arts education, and social and emotional learning.

The Gates Foundation conducts extensive education research, tracks data from its many K-12 projects, and shares information and resources, including [studies on a wide range of topics](#). [Arnold Ventures](#), built on Laura and John Arnold's hedge fund fortune, uses a data-driven approach to education research, which informs how and where it directs its giving and which education policies it champions.

Powering Community Voices for Change.

One strategy that has gained traction in philanthropy is an emphasis on going to the source, that is, consulting local communities, advocates and others on the ground when shaping and implementing funding priorities. If this sounds like it should be obvious, early philanthropists took a "noblesse oblige" approach to funding, often seeing themselves as

the wise dispensers of largesse to their less-enlightened fellows. Andrew Carnegie, considered the father of modern philanthropy, fervently believed that the wealthy should give their money away, writing: "The man who dies thus rich, dies disgraced." He also believed that philanthropists, from their vaunted position, should be, as he wrote in "[The Gospel of Wealth](#)," "the mere agent and trustee for his poorer brethren, bringing to their service his superior wisdom, experience and ability to administer, doing for them better than they would or could do for themselves."

Carnegie wrote that in 1889; attitudes have changed a lot since then, of course, but contemporary philanthropy has too often been tinged with paternalism and a sense that those giving the money know best how it should be used. That's begun to change in recent years, and progressive funders increasingly work directly with those on the ground in communities. This approach is evident in new programs many philanthropists are unveiling.

In its [2025 Strategic Plan](#), the Walton Family Foundation emphasizes incorporating community voices in its funding priorities (the plan's tagline: "Learning and Leading Together"). According to Caryl Sterns, Walton's executive director at the time the plan was created, "It's our intentionality that has shifted, not our core values. We will continue to be who we are and to do what we are good at. But we'll be increasing our efforts to ensure seats at the table for all voices, and to amplify those voices from our podium."

[City Fund](#) supports parents, pointing out that they are too often left out of conversations about

their children’s education. For example, Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE), a City Fund grantee based in Washington, D.C., helps parents develop the knowledge, voice and skills to work with and influence education policy.

Whether this “listening and learning” approach signals a new humility among funders or a passing phase remains to be seen. One of the nonprofit leaders who participated in IP’s survey was skeptical. When asked if there is a trend toward democratization of philanthropy (that is, more diversity among decision-makers, more influence on grant-making priorities from the field, and more instances of participatory grant-making practices), the respondent replied, “Happening and useful, but not yet clear how widespread and whether it will ‘stick’ or be a fad like much in philanthropy ends up being.”

Expanding the number of voices at the table and nurturing and growing new leaders intersects with another funder strategy: support for education advocacy. The New York Community Trust, for example, supports the Education Donor Collaborative. The collaborative [advocates](#) progressive education policy reform in New York state, including more equitable school funding, discipline reform, and support for low-income parents, parents of color, and immigrant families.

Funding Advocacy. More than half of respondents to Grantmakers in Education’s [2023 benchmarking survey](#) said they support public policy and advocacy in the education field.

The Walton Foundation consistently supports advocacy efforts, primarily in support of charter schools. It has [bankrolled charter lobbying](#)

efforts at the state and national level, and funded [minority groups advocating for charter schools](#), as IP has reported. Other funders that support political advocacy to achieve their ends include Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Broad Foundation.

Grantee Spotlight

TEACHFORAMERICA

Teach for America (TFA) is “committed to profound systemic change” in education and that change must be shaped by those “who are most directly impacted by educational inequity.” TFA recruits and trains teachers to work in low-income communities around the country. According to its website, over 70,000 people have participated in the program since it started in 1990, and over half of its corps members and alumni identify as people of color and come from low-income backgrounds.

The Schott Foundation for Public Education sees advocacy as a major part of its mission. It describes itself as a “bridge between philanthropic partners and advocates to build movements to provide all students an opportunity to learn” and supports grassroots groups pushing for education equity. Schott CEO John H. Jackson urged the Biden administration to adopt a “racial equity stimulus” to narrow the Black-white wealth gap.

Public/Private Partnerships. New funding mechanisms often come and go in the education

philanthropy space, but the pandemic and school closures accelerated the pursuit of alternative funding models as funders scrambled to respond. COVID-19 triggered a spate of public/private partnerships between philanthropists and local governments and school districts to build the technology infrastructure school districts required to support the sudden shift to online learning and also to provide students with meals when schools were closed and many parents were out of work. It remains to be seen how much these partnerships will endure, but they established some working models and partnerships that could impact education philanthropy moving forward.

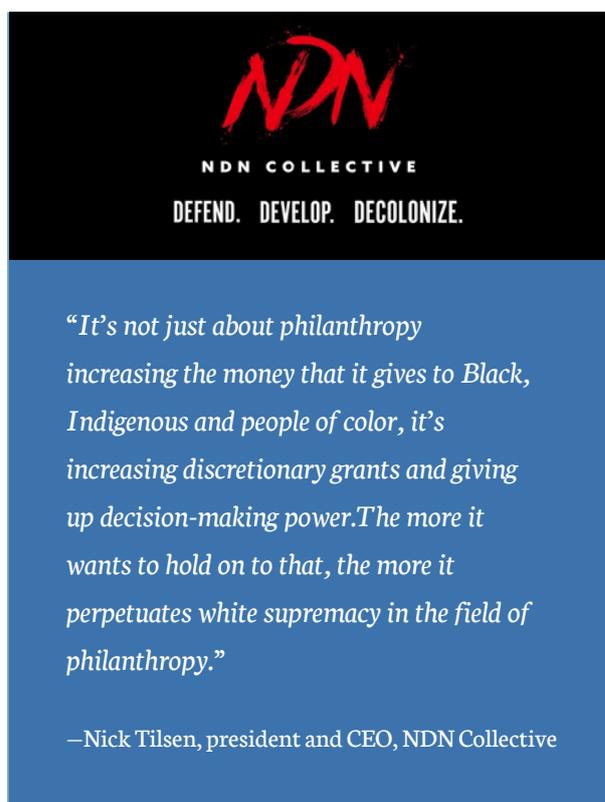
Perspectives on Equity

Equity and education have always been inseparable concerns, but renewed awareness of structural racism in all education systems has been growing among educators and the public for the past decade. This awareness, and demands for change, were heightened further after millions took to the streets following the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic outcomes sharply underscored racial and income health disparities.

A 2022 [report](#) by Grantmakers for Education found that while historically, equity-minded education funding had focused on socioeconomic status, funders are increasingly applying a racial equity lens. “Where 2018-2019 data suggested 41% of foundations were applying a racial/ethnic lens in their education funding, now up to 72% may be doing so,” GFE noted after a 2021 field scan.

Celine Coggins, GFE’s former executive director, applauds funders’ focus on racial justice, citing [Ed Build](#) findings that school districts serving children of color receive \$23 billion less than those serving white students, despite educating the same number of children. As Coggins [told IP](#): “For me, personally, that is the cornerstone of all of the changes we need to see. The fact that schools that are majority Black and brown receive basically \$23 billion less a year in funding than schools that are majority white is the most pressing problem that we need to solve in education.”

But as we indicated earlier, [a report](#) by the Schott Foundation for Public Education and Candid found that education philanthropy directed just a fraction of its funding for racial equity and racial justice. In an op-ed summarizing the results, the Schott Foundation’s Leah Austin and Edgar Villanueva calculated that “the philanthropic investment in racial justice works



The graphic features the NDN Collective logo in red, consisting of the letters 'NDN' in a stylized, brush-stroke font. Below the logo, the text 'NDN COLLECTIVE' is written in white, uppercase letters. Underneath that, the tagline 'DEFEND. DEVELOP. DECOLONIZE.' is displayed in white, uppercase letters. The entire graphic is set against a black background. Below the graphic, a blue background contains a quote in white, italicized text, followed by the attribution to Nick Tilsen, president and CEO of NDN Collective.

“It’s not just about philanthropy increasing the money that it gives to Black, Indigenous and people of color, it’s increasing discretionary grants and giving up decision-making power. The more it wants to hold on to that, the more it perpetuates white supremacy in the field of philanthropy.”

—Nick Tilsen, president and CEO, NDN Collective

out to less than \$2 per student.”Is that changing? Today, most of the largest education funders include racial equity in their list of priorities.

Education funders are advancing a range of racial equity strategies. In a nation where local real estate taxes largely determine school resources and a child’s zip code is a major determinant of educational outcomes, many advocate for addressing education funding disparities. Other approaches include: replacing suspensions with alternative disciplinary programs; promoting diversity in hiring teachers and appointing school boards; requiring cultural awareness and implicit bias training for educators; hiring trauma-informed guidance counselors; installing

culturally inclusive curricula; renewing efforts for school desegregation; and eliminating police in schools.

The [Nellie Mae Education Foundation](#), New England’s largest education funder, intentionally diversified its staff and board in recent years, and increased its support for [organizations promoting racial equity](#).

When the NewSchools Venture Fund added “Diverse Leaders” and “Racial Equity” as new investment areas for 2021-2023, then-CEO Stacey Childress made clear that NewSchools is practicing what it preaches. She [announced](#) the appointment of Frances Messano, a woman of color, as the organization’s new president. “We believe it’s crucial who leads the way into this future—which is why we will continue to focus on supporting a new generation of brilliant leaders of color,” Childress said. NewSchools also announced a [\\$1.5 million round](#) of grants to advance equity in education, with decisions made by a [diverse council](#) of community members.

City Fund has committed to diversifying its staff and board, and to steering investments to organizations headed by BIPOC.

It’s not hyperbole to say that schools are ground zero for examining all forms of inequity. While racial equity in education is an essential goal—and a major focus for funders at the moment—education philanthropy also continues to support initiatives for many groups of students who have historically been underserved by or marginalized within the educational system, including disabled students, English language learners, immigrant and undocumented

Funder Spotlight



The Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) is challenging racial inequities in New England to ensure “all youth have access to excellent and equitable public education.” NMEF awards grants out of five funds focusing on supporting organizations led by BIPOC, advancing community-school partnership, amplifying the youth voice, building grantee capacity, strengthening partnerships, and championing student-centered learning. Recent grantees include the CT Black & Brown Student Union, and Greatest MINDS.

students, girls and women, and LGBTQ+ youth. As a nonprofit leader who participated in IP’s survey observed, “Most philanthropic professionals have come to believe that racial justice should be near the top of every funder’s list of considerations in [the] decision-making process, but taking into consideration concepts of intersectionality, philanthropy should also devote serious time and resources to equity related to gender, LGBTQIA, immigration status, disability and other identities.”

Most funders agree, as Grantmakers for Education’s report [Trends in Education Philanthropy: Benchmarking 2023](#), makes clear: “nearly all respondents (93%) indicated a focus on one or more historically underserved populations in their funding, compared to 71% in the 2018 survey. More than two-thirds of respondents (68%) reported actively investing in education equity.”

But despite this consensus, funding for equity continues to fall short. The third edition of the Schott Foundation’s report [Justice Is the Foundation: Assessing Philanthropy’s Commitment to Racial Equity and Justice in Education](#), published in 2024, found that “while K-12 education philanthropy grants totaled \$18.9 billion from 2019 to 2021, only \$2.7 billion of that, or 14%, went to racial equity, and \$63 million – just 0.3% – went to racial justice.”

Special education students and English language learners, populations that are underserved at the best of times, were particularly hard hit by COVID-related school shutdowns, according to a report by the [General Accounting Office](#). While a coalition of large funders stepped forward to help

people with disabilities during the pandemic, as [IP reported](#), the gift was notable in part because it was unusual: “As with most funding for a specific minority group, funding for people with disabilities—the largest minority in the world—is disproportionately low.

According to a search of Foundation Center data carried out in August 2020, grants that served people with disabilities between 2008 and 2018 totaled about \$22 billion, or about 3.5% of the \$623 billion foundations gave out in that time frame.”

Trends in Education Philanthropy
BENCHMARKING 2023

“Nearly all respondents (93%) indicated a focus on one or more historically underserved populations in their funding, compared to 71% in the 2018 survey. More than two-thirds of respondents (68%) reported actively investing in education equity.”

—Grantmakers for Education

If creating an education system that is accessible for all students remains an aspiration, it isn’t hard to find examples of funders doing the legwork. The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation, for example, nounced in 2021 [\\$4.1M in grants](#) to diversify the pipeline of students in the computer science field. The gender gap in computing has actually grown worse in recent years: 37% of computer scientists were women in 1995; today, that number is 24%. The McGovern

Foundation hopes to boost the number of girls and people of color who have access to computer science training. “Diverse minds at the design table of technology will not only yield greater innovation, but will also create more equitable and representative technology solutions for a broader scope of challenges facing our communities and our planet,” said Ruthe Farmer, founder and CEO of the Last Mile Education Fund, one of the grantees.

In another example, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative included Native American youth in a \$7M round of grants to advance racial equity, strengthen tribal identity, and improve youth well-being. Native Americans have been routinely overlooked by philanthropy, as [IP has reported](#).

Leadership Spotlight: Frances Messano **NewSchools**

“At NewSchools, we believe that racial equity is the work. When you look at student outcomes—you just aggregate them by race or ethnicity—and the fact that academic results are predictable by race, that says the system is designed in a particular way to get the outcomes we see. The fact that 50% of public school students are students of color, and 40% are Black or Latino, that says we need to do our work differently so that it will meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. So yes, racial equity is the work.”

—Frances Messano, CEO, NewSchools Venture Fund

A Closer Look at Funder Types

Private Foundations

Private and family foundations are the largest private funders in the education space. The institutions that donate staggering sums were founded by some of the wealthiest people on the planet. Bill Gates, whose foundation donates enormous sums to K-12 education causes, is estimated to be worth about **\$127 billion** as of this writing, a fortune built on Microsoft earnings. Heirs to the Walmart empire are the richest family in the U.S., with an estimated worth of **\$267 billion**; their Walton Family Foundation is another top education funder.

It's difficult to imagine wealth of this magnitude, just as it's hard to grasp the distance between planets, or the enormity of geologic time. Possessing a mind-boggling fortune locates one on an ethereal plane of power and privilege that is out of reach for the majority, and it may be this inaccessibility that insulates the .1% from troubling questions about where that wealth comes from and why it's so unequally taxed and distributed. Philanthropy is another way to stave off such questions, and there is no disputing that America's richest families give generously to education and other causes. Still, as large as the Gates and Walton foundations' investments in K-12 education are, they represent just a small fraction of the extraordinary wealth these billionaires have accumulated.

The Gates Foundation has been a leading education funder for many years. In 2022, they announced a plan to spend \$1.1 billion to

improve math education in the U.S., [IP reported](#). Some in the field are concerned that what may be a boon for math education could signal a loss for other areas of education previously funded by the Gates Foundation. It's an indication of how much the entire field can be affected by a change in strategy of a large grantmaker.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, another top education funder in the U.S., is fueled by an older fortune. In 1906, W.K. Kellogg founded the Battle Creek Toasted Corn Flake Company, now the Kellogg Company. Known as the "Cereal King of America," Kellogg was committed to the welfare of children, and his foundation carries on that mission. According to the organization's website, "Children are at the heart of everything we do at the Kellogg Foundation." Kellogg is a major supporter of [early childhood development](#) and [K-12 education](#), and focuses primarily on disadvantaged children and communities.

Another large and influential education funder, the [Wallace Foundation](#), was created by DeWitt and Lila Acheson Wallace, who founded Reader's Digest in 1922. The foundation's giving aligns with the Wallace family's primary interests: education, youth development, and the arts.

The [Carnegie Corporation of New York](#) is also a top education funder. Established in 1911 by railroad magnate Andrew Carnegie, its mission is "to promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding." Carnegie prioritizes education as one of its four main program areas. The foundation's education grants go to a wide range of education nonprofits and to education media outlets including The 74

and Chalkbeat. Carnegie’s focus areas [promote college and career readiness](#), and aim to strengthen teaching and school leadership.

The Lumina Foundation is another education funder with an [ambitious goal](#): “to ensure 60% of adults will have a college degree, certificate, industry certification, or other credential of value by 2025.” To this end, the foundation prioritizes college and career readiness initiatives, with a particular focus on programs that support Black, Native American and Latino students.

With so many private foundations giving some portion of their funds to education, it is difficult to make generalizations about their interests, but geography and founders’ sociopolitical perspectives often play a big role.

The Surdna Foundation, based in New York City, supports K-12 education through its [Thriving Cultures](#) initiative and “seeks to foster the conditions in which artists, culture-bearers, designers and media-makers of color can maximize their potential as leaders, agents of social change and designers of just systems and communities.”

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation runs four funding programs through its [education program](#). [Advancing Afterschool](#) seeks to increase access to quality educational and extracurricular activities for students from low-income families or underserved communities. Mott’s [Graduating High School College and Career-Ready](#) initiative also prioritizes low-income students and invests in college readiness, career skills training and financial literacy

programs. The Youth Engagement program supports programs that help students become and stay involved with their schools and communities, including entrepreneurship and mentoring programs. Mott’s education special initiatives fund K-12 education broadly by responding to “new strategies, unique opportunities and changing social, economic and political contexts.”

Private Foundation Spotlight



The Raikes Foundation envisions an “equitable education system where race, class, gender, language, and ability-status no longer hold any predictive power over a student’s chance of graduating from high school, being suspended, or completing a post-secondary degree.” Grantees include the NewSchools Fund for its Racial Equity Funder Community of Practice, and Education Counsel for its Advancing K-12 Resource Equity Agenda initiative.

The Raikes Foundation supports school reform, research and advocacy toward improved K-12 education. The foundation works “toward a just and inclusive society where all young people have the support they need to reach their full potential.” The foundation’s [education](#) program names equity, research-based learning and the development of responsive schools as areas of

interest. Its grants have supported charter school development, research on learning and development, advocacy and teacher education.

Big-name private foundations often fund education reform efforts in their own backyards. The [Hewlett Foundation](#) does education reform grantmaking in California, and its [K-12 Teaching and Learning](#) and [Open Education](#) programs award grants nationally. The [James Irvine Foundation](#) focuses exclusively on California, and works to strengthen the path from high school to college and/or career, and to improve training and build opportunities for low-wage workers. The [Skillman Foundation](#) focuses exclusively on Detroit, its hometown, where it funds K-12, afterschool, and pathways to college and career for local children and youth. The [Nellie Mae Foundation for Education](#) is the largest philanthropy in New England to focus solely on education. The [Stupski Foundation](#), started by former Schwab president and COO Larry Stupski and his wife, is a spend-down that supports education and other causes in California and Hawaii.

Find more K-12 education funders [here](#).

Corporate Giving

Corporations give less to education than private and family foundations do, but their donations are still significant. STEM is a major focus for many corporate funders; a priority that is both self-interested and practical, given these companies' dependence on workers with skills in the areas of science, technology, engineering and math. As many experts have pointed out, the rapid pace of technological change in recent years has left unskilled workers behind, and many

companies without a sufficiently trained workforce. A report by the [Council on Foreign Relations](#) observed, "As technology disrupts industry after industry, the United States needs better ways to help Americans access the many new opportunities technology is also creating, in particular by strengthening the link between education and employment prospects."

Supporting STEM education is one way corporations have tried to improve this situation.

Top corporate funders of K-12 education include Kaiser Permanente's Southern Region Corporate Giving Program; AbbVie, and steel and mining company ArcelorMittal. All of them prioritize STEM education.

Corporate Funder Spotlight



The Cisco Foundation's education strategy focuses on K-12 STEM education and literacy; however, it also gives widely to increasing access to quality education for all students. The Cisco Networking Academy helps prepare millions of students worldwide for careers in technology. Grantees include Code.org, in support of its work expanding access to computer science education in schools and increasing diversity in STEM; and MIND Research Institute, which received a grant for the conversion of its ST Math software to an online format. This allowed Mind Research to extend its reach from 12,000 to 1.3 million elementary students.

The philanthropic arms of tech titans Amazon, Salesforce and Google are also substantial supporters of education nonprofits. In one initiative, Google supported two programs aimed at helping underrepresented students connect with computer science and hone their coding skills, as [IP reported](#). Google.org has invested in global groups that work to increase access to computer science education. Support aimed at students includes a \$6 million grant to the youth development organization [4-H](#), which helps 1 million youth nationwide acquire computer science skills and training, and \$3 million to the Kapor Center to found an [Equitable Computer Science Curriculum Initiative](#) that sets teaching standards for culturally relevant learning. STEM education and workforce development are also top Google priorities.

[Salesforce](#) has emerged as a big education funder, stepping up to help schools in the cities where many of its employees live.

Many other corporate funders give to education causes. The [Allstate Foundation](#), started by the insurance giant, supports social, emotional and service learning. The [Bank of America Charitable Foundation](#) supports K-12 education by fostering economic mobility, funding college readiness, apprenticeships and financial literacy.

Additional corporate funders that support STEM education include the [3M Foundation](#), [Boeing](#), [Cisco Systems Foundation](#) and [Genentech Foundation](#). IP maintains a long list of [STEM funders](#).

Community Foundations

There are approximately 900 community foundations in the U.S., according to the [Council on Foundations](#), and the vast majority have program areas dedicated to education, along with other issues including healthcare, housing, the environment and the arts, primarily in their local regions. Community foundations are mainly vehicles for giving by individual donors, although some also have their own discretionary funds.

The [Silicon Valley Community Foundation](#) (SVCF) is the largest community foundation in the country and is an outlier among community foundations, making grants for education at a level near that of large private foundations. SVCF's hefty bottom line is no surprise, given the tech money fueling Silicon Valley. A number of tech leaders have used SVCF as their funding vehicle, among them Mark Zuckerberg (before he created his own philanthropic LLC, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative). SVCF gives for early childhood and K-12 education, and provides scholarships for students bound for college, graduate school and vocational programs. The Big Lift, one of the K-12 programs SVCF supports, is working to increase reading proficiency among third graders in San Mateo County. The Big Lift is backed by government, education, nonprofit and foundation leaders.

The California Community Foundation, which serves the Los Angeles area, provides college application support and scholarships to students based on need, rather than merit, and continues that support throughout students' college years.

The Oregon Community Foundation (OCF) has made “closing the opportunity gap” in the state a major priority. It has also focused on Black student achievement through the Oregon Black Student Success Community Network, an advisory think tank made up of grassroots education leaders.

Community Foundation Spotlight



Every year, the SVCF awards nearly 700 scholarships totaling more than \$4.5 million. High school seniors, two and four-year college students, graduate students, re-entry students, non-traditional students and vocational and tech school students are eligible to apply to the scholarship program.

Major Donors

Billionaires make education a funding priority for reasons that are political, cultural and highly personal—perhaps first among them the widely held belief that education has the potential to improve both individual lives and society as a whole.

As Eli Broad put it when he and his wife, Edythe, signed the Giving Pledge: “We both attended public schools and credit education as the foundation of our success. But we were dismayed by the state of America’s K-12 public education system, and we wanted to work to restore it to greatness. We are convinced the future of the middle class, our standard of living, our economy

and our very democracy rests on the strength of our public schools. And we have a long way to go.” (Broad, who founded the Fortune 500 companies KB Home and SunAmerica, and created the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, died in 2021).

Mega-donor MacKenzie Scott supports K-12 education on multiple fronts, with a focus on equity shown in donations to groups including Breakthrough Collaborative and Brothers Empowered to Teach. Scott has also supported charter schools and charter networks. In 2022, Scott surprised the Fresno Unified School District—the nation’s second-most-impoverished major urban school district—with a \$20 million gift.

Others who have trained some of their dizzyingly large fortunes on education include Laura and John Arnold, who made billions in finance, and created their foundation, now called [Arnold Ventures](#), in 2008.

Former Microsoft CEO and Los Angeles Clippers owner Steve Ballmer and his wife, Connie, are major donors to education. K-12 Education is one of the priority giving areas of their [Ballmer Group](#), which is dedicated to improving economic mobility for children and families in the U.S. Their K-12 giving focuses on eliminating inequities, with grants going to charter schools and programs aimed at creating a more diverse pipeline of educators, among others.

[Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan](#), whose Meta fortune grows larger by the day, made education a philanthropic priority for years. The couple’s first foray into education philanthropy, a

controversial \$100 million gift to fund a charter school initiative in Newark in 2010, had mixed results and the couple was bashed for the CZI's top-down approach to giving. Since then, CZI has taken a more circumspect approach, supporting local schools and more targeted education areas like early education, personalized learning, addressing the needs of the whole child and [remote learning](#). In 2023, they significantly cut back their education program, and it's not clear what the future of CZI's education funding might be, [IP reported](#).

Competing billionaires [Elon Musk](#) and Jeff Bezos also give to education causes. For Musk, STEM education appears to be a priority. He gave \$5 million to the education platform Khan Academy in 2021, and donated [\\$20 million for STEM education](#) to schools in the area of Cameron County in South Texas, where his SpaceX launch site is located. [EdSurge](#) described the donation as part of Musk's plan to build "the futuristic workforce" he'll need to carry out his SpaceX plans. Bezos's K-12 funding strategy is less clear, [IP has reported](#). His education funding to date has focused more on early education, especially through Bezos Academy preschools.

Another tech leader, [Marc Benioff](#), who founded Salesforce, has become a powerful figure in the education philanthropy world. Unlike many education funders, Benioff's Salesforce Foundation has been a stalwart supporter of [public schools](#), particularly in San Francisco, Oakland and other cities where its employees live, as [IP has reported](#).

[Laurene Powell Jobs](#), Steve Jobs' widow, supports education-related issues through her group, the Emerson Collective. She works closely with

Major Donor Spotlight: Laurene Powell Jobs



Laurene Powell Jobs and Russlynn Ali co-founded the XQ Institute in 2015 with the overarching goal of "unlocking the American promise of a high-quality education for everyone." XQ is now the country's leading organization challenging and changing the "high school experience so that every student graduates ready to succeed in life." In 2015, Powell Jobs announced the XQ: Super School Project, a \$50 million competition to help prepare students for the modern day challenges of college, careers, and life in general.

College Track, the nonprofit she started, which provides tutoring and mentorship to students in underserved communities. [Reed Hastings](#), who built Netflix, is also a major education philanthropist. He and his wife, Patty Quillin, are major supporters of charter schools and education reform, and their [Hastings Group](#) teamed up with Arnold Ventures to create the [City Fund](#).

[Bloomberg Philanthropies](#), started by Bloomberg L.P. founder and former New York City Mayor

Mike Bloomberg, is another major education funder, focusing on improving K-12 education, expanding college access, and supporting career and technical education. Bloomberg believes education is a local issue, and prioritizes investments “to state, city and district work.”

[Dalio Philanthropies](#), which was created by Ray Dalio, who founded Bridgewater Associates, the world’s biggest hedge fund firm, shares Bloomberg’s local education funding approach. Dalio’s wife, Barbara, heads the foundation’s [education initiative](#), which focuses exclusively on Connecticut schools.

The [Robin Hood Foundation](#), which was created by billionaire hedge fund manager Paul Tudor Jones, practices venture philanthropy, with the mission of alleviating poverty in New York City. Among other programs, Robin Hood supports the charter school system [Achievement First](#), which has 17 public charter schools in Brooklyn. [Tipping Point](#), another regional funder, was started by Daniel Lurie, who previously worked at the Robin Hood Foundation. Tipping Point works to eliminate poverty in the Bay Area and Northern California; they direct their education

funding to increase the number of economically disadvantaged, first-generation students who graduate from college.

The Robertson Foundation, another hedge fund progeny, is a major contributor to K-12 education with a focus on “bringing high-quality education to all Americans,” providing funding to both public and charter school initiatives, focusing on underprivileged and underserved communities. The majority of its grants have been directed toward [K-12 public school reform](#). Two sub-initiatives, “reform from within” and “drive change by generating external pressure,” have supported public and charter school systems, respectively. With the passing of Julian Robertson in 2022, the future of the foundation’s giving is as yet unknown. The foundation has paused grantmaking and is “currently reviewing its strategy to guide years of impactful giving,” its website stated in 2024.

Many funders outside tech and finance give to education causes, too. [Charles Butt](#), whose mother started the H-E-B grocery store chain in Texas, is committed to K-12 public education in that state, and emphasizes improving school

Major Donor Spotlight: LeBron James



LeBron James, who moves his philanthropy through the LeBron James Family Foundation, established the I Promise School in Akron, Ohio, in 2018. Though this public elementary school is supported by taxpayer dollars, the foundation gives over \$1 million in support each year. When COVID-19 forced the school shutdowns, the foundation provided care packages containing basic necessities like toothpaste and toilet paper, to the students’ families and also started “Taco Tuesdays,” a program that provided meal packages to all I Promise students.

leadership. Many celebrities include education in their charity portfolios, including director and producer [J.J. Abrams](#), who gives to K-12 education causes in Los Angeles; [LeBron James](#), who helps students in his native Akron, Ohio; and author [Isabel Allende](#), who supports college readiness and other education programs, with a focus on girls and women.

Associations & Intermediaries

[Grantmakers for Education \(GFE\)](#), which does not manage collaborative funds or disperse any grants itself, is the best-known philanthropy-serving organization in the education space. Founded in 1995, GFE calls itself “the nation’s largest and most diverse network of education grantmakers.” The organization conducts research, shares information, and creates networking opportunities for education funders to improve education outcomes for all students.

Education philanthropy also features a number of intermediary, or “pass-through,” funders that receive money from philanthropies and distribute it to other education nonprofits.

The [Charter School Growth Fund](#) is both a top recipient of philanthropic funds and a leading grantmaker for education. The fund receives donations from other leading education funders, including the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), the [Broad Foundation](#) and the [Carnegie Corporation of New York](#). According to its [website](#), this multifunder effort “identifies the country’s best public charter schools, funds their expansion, and helps to increase their impact.”

Another multifunder organization, the City Fund, was created with \$200 million in combined

investments from [Laura and John Arnold](#) and the [Hastings Fund](#), as IP has reported. This intermediary has since received support from an A-list of philanthropists, including the [Ballmer Group](#), [Arthur Rock](#), the [Susan and Michael Dell Foundation](#) and the [Walton Family Foundation](#). In a brief window of time, City Fund has catapulted into the ranks of the largest K-12 funders in the U.S., having granted more than \$125 million to local education organizations across the country. City Fund is a big supporter of the charter school and school choice movement, focusing heavily on innovation and giving parents a bigger voice in public education.

Intermediary Spotlight



The Schott Foundation for Public Education receives funding from the likes of the Ford, Bill & Melinda Gates, Hewlett, Nellie Mae and Raikes foundations, as well as the American Federation of Teachers, the NEA Foundation and others. Schott then regrants funds to grassroots organizations that are promoting equity in public education and pushing back against conservative attacks on public schools. Schott also publishes an annual report called *Justice Is the Foundation*, which assesses philanthropic support for racial equity and justice in education.

The Schott Foundation for Public Education is an intermediary that has received funding from the Ford, Bill & Melinda Gates, Hewlett, Nellie Mae and Raikes foundations, as well as the American Federation of Teachers, the NEA Foundation and others. Schott regrants funds to a range of grassroots organizations that are pushing back against conservative attacks on public education and promoting equity in public education. Schott also publishes an annual report called Justice Is the Foundation, which assesses philanthropic support for racial equity and justice in education.

Also focused on supporting public schools and resisting politicized attacks on inclusive public education is the Education Future Fund, a community of funders that includes Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies, Pivotal Ventures, and the W. K. Kellogg, Lozier, Raikes and Hewlett foundations. They back policy and advocacy to fight book bans, intimidation laws, and other attacks on inclusive education, [IP has reported](#).

The Education Funder Strategy Group, a coalition of funders that calls itself a “learning community,” focuses on improving public education. One of its goals is to increase equity in education; another is to “Build public confidence and commitment to public education as a public good.”

NewSchools Venture Fund and New Profit both practice “venture philanthropy,” that is, they use a venture capital approach to giving and investing in promising projects and entrepreneurs. NewSchools focuses exclusively on education, while New Profit has a broader investment portfolio.

DonorsChoose and similar crowdfunding platforms make it possible for even those of modest means to support education. On these platforms, donors can contribute small or large amounts to fill classroom needs—from snacks to lab equipment and math manipulatives. Since DonorsChoose was started by Bronx public high school teacher Charles Best in 2000, it has raised over \$1 billion and funded close to 2 million school projects.

Inside Philanthropy Survey

“No matter what philanthropy does, the growing and now entrenched inequality affects so many aspects of peoples lives that we are always trying to catch up. Philanthropy may be able to find a cure for a disease, or create a new technology to help the poor, but until we can work with governments to manage inequality we will always be playing catch up.”

—Foundation professional, Northeast Ohio

An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

As we've illustrated in this brief, the education philanthropy landscape is dominated by some of the world's wealthiest people and their heirs, who donate sizable portions (although still only a fraction) of their extraordinary wealth each year to advance their vision of improving our nation's schools. Many consider it a worthy goal, but a look at the tremendous sums education philanthropists spend every year forces the questions: Where is all this money going, and is it making a substantial difference?

We've described some of the ways education funders are spending their money, from creating new schools to helping more kids reach college and career goals. Philanthropists fund tangible programs like the construction of school buildings, expanding internet access, and recruiting more teachers of color. They also devote millions to initiatives that are harder to measure, like promoting whole-child education and creating a more equitable education system. To achieve these goals, funders draw from a large toolkit of strategies, from researching and investing in education innovation, to adopting alternative funding strategies and supporting on-the-ground advocacy.

Education funders have been slammed over the years because their estimable spending gives them outsized influence—with mixed results, as was the case with the Gates Foundation's Effective Teaching initiative, and Mark Zuckerberg's support of charter schools in Newark. Other critics have urged funders to be more transparent and collaborative in their

efforts to influence education. In her 2013 book, "Follow the Money," Michigan State University political scientist Sarah Reckhow argued that such an approach would make funders more effective: "Foundation-funded reforms will have greater staying power if they can prosper with transparency and lively democratic process."

There are signs that many education philanthropies are adopting a more transparent and collaborative approach to giving. Initiatives to involve more voices and points of view in the development of funding initiatives gained greater urgency with the events of 2020, which sharpened awareness of the many inequities baked into all our social institutions. Today, virtually all of the top education foundations are promoting racial equity programs, emphasizing the need to incorporate diverse voices, and adopting a more collaborative, community-centered approach in their funding initiatives, as we've discussed elsewhere in this brief.

As for how much of an impact education philanthropy is having, on the one hand the answer is "a lot," considering the many organizations and programs that receive funds—programs that are helping students all over the country in real time. But from a wider perspective, funders appear to be ignoring the elephant in the room—or at least doing their best to work around it. Many of those who spend time examining our education system recognize the biggest challenge it faces: Poverty and the growing gap between the education this nation provides to the rich and to the poor. Are the

tremendous sums education philanthropists spend every year addressing that fundamental issue, or merely tinkering around the edges?

Jack Schneider, a professor of education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, argues that philanthropists look at the cause-and-effect relationship between education and inequality the wrong way. “Our approach to inequality in this country has been pretty narrow for the last generation or two,” he said. “Philanthropists are no different from other Americans in that they’ve been led to believe that the way you solve poverty is through education. They have certainly contributed to that idea: They have elevated that rhetoric and embraced that theory.” Schneider challenges the notion that we can create a better education system—and a better country—without directly addressing poverty and inequality. As he put it in a recent tweet, “if we were to address inequality directly, our schools would have a much better shot at doing what we ask of them.”

Nick Hanauer, founder of Civic Ventures, made a similar argument in *The Atlantic*: “If we really

want to give every American child an honest and equal opportunity to succeed, we must do much more than extend a ladder of opportunity—we must also narrow the distance between the ladder’s rungs. We must invest not only in our children, but in their families and their communities. We must provide high-quality public education, sure, but also high-quality housing, healthcare, child care, and all the other prerequisites of a secure middle-class life. And most important, if we want to build the sort of prosperous middle-class communities in which great public schools have always thrived, we must pay all our workers, not just software engineers and financiers, a dignified middle-class wage.”

It will be tough for education philanthropists to address these deeper issues without supporting policy reforms that would reduce their own wealth and power—for example, the creation of a fairer tax code and school funding formulas that more equitably distribute resources so that zip codes don’t determine education quality.

Meanwhile, philanthropy’s influence on education policy can change with the political

Inside Philanthropy Survey

“One area that I think the section needs much improvement on is the collaboration between family foundations. So many nonprofits rely heavily on a few big funders, and luckier ones have more. Working with non-profits and schools, I see daily how the mega-rich control so much of the money that is distributed through their family foundations and how that leaves a lot of organizations out simply because they perhaps are not seeing/hearing about them. So many organizations working in racial justice and equity need funds especially those in education and health where the racial equity gap right now between black and white children/students/adults is staggering and deplorable.”

—Fundraising consultant, San Francisco, California

winds. As Matt Barnum points out in [Chalkbeat](#), during the Obama Administration, education policymakers and philanthropists were often on the same page, but the Biden administration has different priorities. The Biden administration has close ties to the teachers' unions; it has also steered money to high-poverty schools and pushed states to improve funding formulas. "Those priorities mark a break from many big education philanthropies, where spending more public money for schools has not been a top goal; instead, their focus has typically been on overhauling how schools are run or creating alternatives to district public schools," Barnum writes. The Trump administration, on the other hand, saw Betsy DeVos at the helm of the Education Department, "[using] her bully pulpit to champion religious education, push for school choice and help private schools in financial turmoil" ([NPR's Morning Edition](#)).

In 2024, education philanthropy looks to be in flux. Major funders have shifted priorities, and nonprofits are reporting funding cuts, as [IP has reported](#). This at a time when K-12 schools are key battlefronts in raging culture wars. In the face of increasing polarization and the failure of charter schools and other heavily funder-backed initiatives to already provide hoped-for transformation, some education funders are losing steam or shifting gears.

It's too early to know exactly what shape U.S. education policy or philanthropy will take in the coming years. In the meantime, one thing is clear: Not addressing poverty and inequality will mean we're likely to see only incremental and siloed improvements in our education system.

City Fund's former managing partner Neerav Kingsland, for one, acknowledged this larger picture as he considered the odds stacked against the students City Fund works with: "These odds are grounded in economic mobility, and we're sober about how much further we have to go," he [told IP](#). "We didn't get into this work simply to raise test scores. We got into this to help families get out of poverty, to increase wages and opportunities and to see families achieve their dreams."

Resources for K-12 Education Funding

Reports & Data Sets:

Auxier, B., Anderson, M. (March 16, 2020). [As schools close due to the coronavirus, some U.S. students face a digital ‘homework gap’](#). Pew Research Center.

Barrett, N., McEachin, A., Mills, J., Valant, J. (November 20, 2017). [What are the Sources of School Discipline Disparities by Student Race and Family Income?](#) Education Research Alliance of New Orleans.

[Building Equity Initiative: 3 Year Report](#). (January 24, 2019). Walton Family Foundation.

[Challenges Providing Services to K-12 English Learners and Students with Disabilities during COVID-19](#). (November 19, 2020). U.S. General Accounting Office.

Cohodes, S. (2018). [Charter Schools and the Achievement Gap](#). The Future of Children.

DeAngelis, C., Wolf, P., Maloney, L., May, J. (November 19, 2020). [Charter School Funding: Inequity Surges in the Cities](#). Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, Department of Education Reform.

Dixon, R.D., (2021). [A Critical Quantitative Exploration of Black Education](#). Black Teacher Collaborative.

Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., Viruleg, E. (December 8, 2020). [COVID-19 and Learning Loss—Disparities Grow and Students Need Help](#). McKinsey & Company.

[Equal Is Not Good Enough: An Analysis of School Funding Equity Across the U.S. and Within Each State](#). (November 2022.) The Education Trust.

Gilmour, A., Shanks, C., Winters, M. (2021). [The Effect of Charter Schooling on Student Mobility and Classification Status](#). Wheelock Educational Policy Center

[Global Trends and Strategic Time Horizons in Philanthropy 2022](#). Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors.

Gershenson, S., Hart, C., Hyman, J., Lindsay, C., Papageorge, N. (November 2018). [The Long-Run Impact of Same-Race Teachers](#). National Bureau of Economic Research.

[Global Trends and Strategic Time Horizons in Family Philanthropy](#). (2020). Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and Campden Wealth Limited.

Hanson, M. (August 2, 2021). [U.S. Public Education Spending Statistics](#). EducationData.org.

Hanushek, E., Pertson, P., Talpey, L., Woessmann, L. (April 15, 2019). [US Achievement Gaps Hold Steady in the Face of Substantial Policy Initiatives](#). VOX, CEPR Policy Portal.

[Justice Is the Foundation: Assessing Philanthropy’s Commitment to Racial Equity and Justice in Education](#). (2024.) Schott Foundation.

Kho, A., Zimmer, R., McEachin, A., (February 4, 2021). [Evaluating Claims that Charter Schools Practice Cream-Skimming and Pushout](#). Education Next.

Morgan, I., Amerikaner, A., (2018). [Funding Gaps: An Analysis of School Funding Equity Across the U.S. and Within Each State](#). The Education Trust.

[New Trends in Philanthropy to Support Racial Equity and Learners of Color](#). (2022.) Grantmakers for Education.

[Nonwhite Schools Districts Get \\$23 Billion Less than White School Districts.](#) (February 2019). Ed Build.

Ong, P. (December 9, 2020). [COVID-19 and the Digital Divide in Virtual Learning.](#) UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge.

Parolin, Z., Lee, E. (March 18, 2021). [Large Socio-economic, Geographic, and Demographic Disparities Exist in Exposure to School Closures.](#) Nature Human Behaviour.

Quinn, D., Polikoff, M. (September 14, 2017). [Summer Learning Loss: What is it and What Can We Do About It?](#) Brookings Institution.

Reardon, S., Weathers, E., Fahle, E., Jang, H., Kalogrides, D. (September 2019). [Is Separate Still Unequal? New Evidence on School Segregation and Racial Academic Achievement Gaps.](#) Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis.

[The Big Vision for the Next Stage of Education Philanthropy.](#) (December 9, 2020). Grantmakers for Education.

[The Work Ahead: Machines, Skills, and U.S. Leadership in the Twentieth Century.](#) (April 10, 2018). Council on Foreign Relations.

[Trends 2020: Results of the Second National Benchmark Series of Family Foundations.](#) (n.d.). National Center for Family Philanthropy.

[Trends in Education Philanthropy: Benchmarking 2018-19.](#) (n.d.). Grantmakers for Education.

[Trends in Education Philanthropy: Benchmarking 2023.](#) (n.d.) Grantmakers for Education.

Vogels, E. (September 10, 2020). [59% of U.S. parents with lower incomes say their child may face digital obstacles in schoolwork.](#) Pew Research Center.

Websites and Pages With Key Information

[A Brief History.](#) (n.d.)Wallace Foundation.

An, S., Cardona-Maguigad, A., (December 3, 2019). [Common Core: Higher Expectations, Flat Results.](#) National Public Radio.

Austin, L., Villanueva, E. (February 25, 2021). [Why Education Sector Philanthropy Must Embrace a Racial Justice Lens.](#) NonProfit Quarterly.

Barnum, M. (May 13, 2021). [After a High Point in the Obama Administration, Philanthropies No Longer Drive Education Policy.](#) Chalkbeat.

Barnum, M. (April 29, 2019). [Nearly a Decade Later, Did Common Core Work? New Research Offers Clues.](#) Chalkbeat.

Carnegie, A. (June 1889). [The Gospel of Wealth.](#) Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Chait, J. (January 5, 2021). [Unlearning an Answer - Charter Schools Deliver Extraordinary Results, But Their Political Support Among Democrats has Collapsed. What Will Biden Do?](#) New York Magazine.

Childress, S. (January 26, 2021). [Big News! NewSchools Venture Fund Announces New Strategy and New Leadership.](#) NewSchools Venture Fund.

[Community Foundations.](#) (n.d.). Council on Foundations.

[See Our Impact Nationwide.](#) (n.d.). Donors Choose.

[Education Future Fund.](#)

[The Wallace Approach to Creative Philanthropy.](#) (n.d.). Wallace Foundation.

Articles:

Adeniji, Ade. (March 19, 2024.) [An Innovative Storytelling Platform Is Bridging Divides - And Landing Big Name Funders.](#) Inside Philanthropy.

Gilman, A. (October 3, 2020). [Remote Learning Has Been a Disaster for Many Students But Some Kids Have Thrived.](#) Hechinger Report.

Goldstein, D. (December 6, 2019). [After 10 Years of Hopes and Setbacks, What Happened to the Common Core?](#) *The New York Times*.

Hanauer, N., (July 2019). [Better Schools Won't Fix America.](#) *The Atlantic*.

Herold, B. (January 7, 2021). [No Going Back From Hybrid Learning, Districts Say.](#) Education Week.

Manno, B., Olson, L. (July 20, 2021). [A New Bipartisan Education Agenda.](#) Future Ed.

Matthiessen, Connie. (October 25, 2022.) ["Game-Changing" Gifts from MacKenzie Scott Boost Educators' Ambitions - And Hopes for the Future.](#) Inside Philanthropy.

Matthiessen, Connie. (March 27, 2024). [This Coalition of Funders Aims to Cool the Culture War Flames and Protect Public Schools.](#) Inside Philanthropy.

Matthiessen, Connie. (March 1, 2024). [What's Going on in Education Philanthropy? Here are the Currents Shaking Up the Field.](#) Inside Philanthropy.

Morial, M., Jackson, J. (March 18, 2021). [The Black-White Wealth Gap is Widening—A Racial Stimulus Can Narrow It.](#) The Hill.

Reilly, Caitlin. (March 27, 2019.) [Inflection Point: Taking Stock of Philanthropy and the Charter School Movement.](#) Inside Philanthropy.

Rojc, Philip. (November 15, 2022.) [MacKenzie Scott's Far-Reaching Giving Continues to Grow. What Impact Is She Having?](#) Inside Philanthropy.

Sokol, M. (January 12, 2021). [Hillsborough Needs Drastic Steps to Tame School Budget, Officials Say.](#) *Tampa Bay Times*.

Tamez-Robledo, N. (May 11, 2021). [Elon Musk Needs a Futuristic Workforce for SpaceX. Will His \\$20M Pledge to Schools Help?](#) EdSurge.

Will, M. (April 14, 2020). [Still Mostly White and Female: New Federal Data on the Teaching Profession.](#) Education Week.

Books

Callahan, D. (2017). *The Givers. Money, Power, and Philanthropy in a New Gilded Age*. Alfred A. Knopf.

Reckhow, S. (2012). *Follow the Money: How Foundation Dollars Change Public School Politics*. Oxford University Press.

Photo Credits

Lebron James. Erik Drost. (August 8, 2014). [Lebron James Homecoming](#). Used with permission under [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic \(CC BY 2.0\)](#).

Laurene Powell Jobs. [Rhododendrites](#). July 21, 2018. Used with permission under [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International \(CC BY-SA 4.0\)](#).

Thank You

Thank you to these individuals who were interviewed:

Leah Austin, former director, National Opportunity to Learn Network, The Schott Foundation for Public Education; President and CEO, National Black Child Development Institute

Meredith Boak, former Senior Vice President of Development, Teach for America; Assistant Dean, Clinical and Experiential Education and Pro Bono Programs, Harvard Law School

Celine Coggins, former Executive Director, Grantmakers for Education

Nick Donahue, former President and CEO, Nellie Mae Foundation

Jody Friedman, Executive Vice President for Advancement, Success Academy Charter Schools

Paula Hunchar, Senior Advisor, Success Academy Charter Schools

Neerav Kingsland, former Managing Partner, City Fund

Janelle Lin, Vice President of Business Development, DonorsChoose

Laura Meli, Chief Development Officer, Girls Who Code

Frances Messano, CEO, NewSchools Venture Fund

Shawn Morehead, Vice President for Grants, New York Community Trust

Jennifer Nguyen, Director of Post-Secondary Success, Stupski Foundation

Sarah Reckhow, Professor, Department of Political Science, Michigan State University

Michael Roberts, President and CEO, First Nations Development Institute

Keri Rodrigues, President and Co-founder, National Parents Union

Marc Sternberg, Founder of A-Street Ventures and former Director of the K-12 Education Program at the Walton Family Foundation

Jack Schneider, Professor of Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Liz Thompson, CEO, Cleveland Avenue Foundation for Education

Ridgway White, President and CEO, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

Feedback?

The State of American Philanthropy is an ongoing project, each SAP brief will be updated periodically to integrate new information, additional data and evolving perspectives. If you have comments or information you'd like to share with us, please email us at managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.com.