

FOREWORD

When I joined The Pew Charitable Trusts as Education Program Director in 1990, the first thing I was asked to do was to prepare a white paper proposing a new education strategy for the foundation. As part of that exercise I did a landscape scan, both to find a distinctive niche and to identify potential funding partners who shared my interest in systemic reform, teacher policy, and the transition from high school to college and career. The big players that emerged from that scan, all of whom I would work with in one way or another over the next few years, were Carnegie, MacArthur, Rockefeller, Ford, Hewlett, and Wallace.

Seven years later, when I joined the Harvard Graduate School of Education faculty and was asked what I wanted to teach, I proposed a course on philanthropy and its role in supporting education reform. One frame I used in planning the course was to focus on three competing conceptions of school reform, each vying for primacy with the active backing of major funders. At Pew, we, along with MacArthur and Carnegie, had placed most of our weight behind the standards or systemic reform movement. Funders like Walton, Broad, and the New Schools Venture Fund had put their money mostly behind market-based reform strategies, primarily charter schools. A third set of funders, most notably Atlantic Philanthropies and Rockefeller, had placed their bets on school reform networks led by such notables as Ted Sizer (Coalition of Essential Schools) and James Comer (School Development Program).

From the vantage point of 2015, two things strike me. First, virtually all of the big players I identified in 1990 as leaders have left the K–12 education reform field, including Pew. Only Carnegie remains an active player in that world. The education funding world is now dominated

not only by Gates, but by Broad, Walton, Dell, Arnold, and several others that have come into being in the last quarter century and have living donors.

My second observation, not unrelated to the first, is that the competition among the education reform camps is essentially over. The market reformers have won the battle, at least in the eyes of the media, but that has been in some measure because their leaders and funders have come to embrace the core principles of the standards movement. The emergence of the Gates Foundation helped tip the scales here, closely followed by the Obama administration.

The education reform story of the last twenty-five years would look quite different, I suspect, if we hadn't had the emergence of a new generation of activist foundations willing to engage in the public policy arena and use all of the tools at their disposal on behalf of an aggressive reform agenda. When I started to put together a syllabus for "School Reform from the Outside In" (my HGSE course on foundations and school reform), the foundation literature was not of much help. While there were some excellent institutional histories of individual foundations active in education—I think here especially of Ellen Lagemann's volumes on the Carnegie Corporation and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching—most of the foundation literature fell into two groups: admiring profiles of the brand-name foundations and the generous benefactors who endowed them; or ideologically driven critiques from one side or the other. Critics on the right slammed foundations like Pew for having become too activist and abandoning the conservative principles and values of the founding generation, whereas critics on the left bemoaned the failure of foundations to press a more activist social justice agenda.

About a decade ago the foundation literature began to catch up with the extraordinary changes taking place in the education reform funding landscape with the publication of two excellent edited volumes. As its title suggests, the contributors to *With the Best of Intentions*, edited by Rick Hess, by and large adopt a skeptical stance in assessing the bottom-line impact of the education funding community on

the performance of American schools, but the thoughtful and diverse set of contributors recruited by Hess produced a provocative volume that made for lively class discussions. The second volume, *Reconnecting Foundations and Education*, edited by Ray Bachetti and Tom Ehrlich, is a more scholarly volume signaling a growing awareness in the academic community of how some of the more prominent newcomers to the funding world were changing the face of education philanthropy.

Megan Tompkins-Stange is among the leaders of a next generation of young scholars who are probing more deeply into the meaning and consequence of the growing tendency of the new foundations to use their dollars to try to influence public policy. The volume at hand—*Policy Patrons: Philanthropy, Education Reform, and the Politics of Influence*—is a signal contribution to the field. Tompkins-Stange sets out to help us understand these changes in outlook and orientation by contrasting the two most visible and activist newcomers, Gates and Broad, with two of the more established players in the field, Kellogg and Ford. She contrasts these foundations along four dimensions: how they frame problems; how they choose “partners” (her term for grantees); how they manage their grantees; and how they evaluate results. In her analysis, one pair frames problems as essentially technical; the other, as adaptive. One pair tends to seek out “grasstop” grantees; the other, more grassroots organizations. One pair manages its grantees in a more controlling fashion; the other, more trusting and laissez-faire. And one pair generally opts for quantitative evaluation of results; the other, mixed methods. As with any typology, one can always think of cases that don’t neatly seem to fit the frame, but on balance the frame is a useful one in analyzing the work of different types of foundations.

For me, the most interesting of the contrasts she draws is in how these foundations manage their grantees. While some of the older, more established foundations may be less strategic in their grant making than the newcomers, by and large they pride themselves on supporting ideas and initiatives that come from the field and they don’t try to micromanage their grantees. If there is a sin that besets some of the newcomers, it is hubris. They think they are the ones with the answers,

so they design their own initiatives and then seek out organizations to carry out these ideas. This approach blurs the line between contracting and grant making. If you choose a contractor and manage his or her performance against the contract, you are likely to get compliance, not creativity, and technical rather than adaptive responses to the unanticipated challenges that inevitably rise in the course of complex projects.

What makes Tompkins-Stange's book so compelling is her methodology. She somehow managed to persuade sixty foundation insiders, including senior people from these four foundations, to sit for extensive interviews, and because she promised them anonymity, they are for the most part remarkably candid. As in virtually all conversations about education funders, the Gates Foundation gets the lion's share of the attention from Tompkins-Stange's informants. Given its size and influence, Gates is endlessly fascinating to foundation watchers, and it is clear from these interviews that folks inside the foundation are asking many of the same questions that those of us outside ask, questions that get to the heart of the relationship between foundations and democracy.

While Tompkins-Stange does her best to maintain an even-handed stance, she seems more attuned philosophically to the less prescriptive, more bottom-up approach to grant making that she ascribes to Kellogg and Ford. I'm an admirer of much of what Gates and Broad have accomplished through their grant making, but with Gates especially, its sheer size can't help raising concerns when it enters the public policy arena. As the question is sometimes put, "Who elected these guys?"

Tompkins-Stange's concluding advice is for foundations at least to be aware of this normative question about the role of foundations in the democratic marketplace as they consider undertaking initiatives aimed at affecting public policy. Whatever your views about the proper role of foundations in attempting to influence public policy in education, you'll find this a stimulating and provocative read.

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