



**WITH THE BEST OF INTENTIONS:
HOW PHILANTHROPY IS RESHAPING K–12 EDUCATION**
Edited by Frederick M. Hess

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Philanthropic giving has become an important catalyst for contemporary school reform, and many charitable foundations are now helping to shape education policy. Yet, as the work of philanthropists gains importance and influence over policy agendas, it remains little known and little understood. How much does education philanthropy matter? What kinds of reforms do donors support? How does this money affect schools? Could these investments be made more effectively? If so, how? These and other questions were the focus of an American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (AEI) conference in April of this year, and the resulting research and conclusions by expert participants are now published in a volume of collected essays, *With the Best of Intentions: How Philanthropy Is Reshaping K–12 Education* (Harvard Education Press, October 2005), edited by Frederick M. Hess, AEI's director of education policy studies.

Money from philanthropic sources constitutes only a fraction of 1 percent of total spending on K–12 education, yet it has had a huge impact on the policies followed by American school officials and teachers. Still, despite the significant role that philanthropy plays in shaping the course of school reform, the topic has received little scrutiny. Until now, neither the media nor education scholars have spent much time analyzing the impact of philanthropic educational ventures. In examining the broad world of educational philanthropy, the authors of *With the Best of Intentions* provide the first look. Their research yields a number of significant insights:

- Since the late 1990s, a new generation of philanthropists has emerged, whose members often embrace entrepreneurship, school choice, use of student achievement data, and accountability in school reform. The beliefs of these new donors have been shaped in important ways by their own entrepreneurial experiences in the business world.
- Traditional estimates of education philanthropy monies are inflated. Total gifts amount to no more than \$1.5 billion a year, in comparison to the \$500 billion spent annually on education. As a result, traditional strategies of reform may be as effective as casting buckets of water into the sea.
- The history of education philanthropy demonstrates that narrowly-conceived specialty programs—for example, specific after-school programs for delinquent youths—rarely yield the hoped-for results. Instead, broader systemic changes and programs such as Teach for America or the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards—while producing uneven results—have frequently had the most significant impact.

- A survey of education grant officers at philanthropic foundations reveals that, much like many professors in colleges of education, they are remarkably critical of mainstream practical reform efforts like accountability and school choice.

Reform-minded philanthropists have the independence and resources needed to embrace radical change in a sector rife with regulations, organizational routines, and political pressures. Yet these donors, along with policymakers, educators, and other would-be reformers, are still faced with five issues:

- First, the counterintuitive entrepreneurial approach of fostering diverse ideas by funding contradictory programs may elicit better results than would supporting a more popular single approach.
- Second, a “political economy” of evaluation exists in which researchers who are dependent on philanthropic organizations for support have good reason to provide genteel evaluations and no incentives to be critical of proposed new initiatives.
- Third, when faced with the possibility of being assaulted for their innovative reform efforts, donors may be tempted to give in to conventional, status quo proposals sanctioned by school administrators, rather than pursue more daring efforts.
- Fourth, broadening the teaching and administrative talent pool is probably the single most important gift that donors can offer. The benefits of such contributions are not easily observed at first, however, and foundation staff members prefer to give money to programs where they can see the concrete results of their philanthropic efforts. For example, individual preschool or after-school specialty programs—whose improvements are easily detected—have received much greater philanthropic attention than have more useful “pipeline” programs that recruit new teachers and administrators with non-traditional educational backgrounds—the benefits of which are less tangible.
- Finally, innovation in the past has often resulted in fads and a fascination with the newest—often unproven—trend in education reform. Today’s donors, however, are much more disciplined and more often than not demand results and accountability from the programs they support. Keeping this sensible discipline from morphing into bean-counting or an aversion to risk-taking will require a difficult and thoughtful balance.

In a sector where even the most generous gifts are no match for the money routinely spent on outdated and outmoded systems, the “new” education philanthropy’s influence will ultimately depend on its ability to change current education politics and policies that prevent meaningful reforms in the field. Taking heed of the history and political lessons that are revealed in this study is vital if philanthropists aim to fulfill their promise for twenty-first-century schooling.

With the Best of Intentions
includes

- An introduction and conclusion by the editor, **Frederick M. Hess**, director of education policy studies at AEI.
- Chapter 1: “A New Generation of Philanthropists and Their Great Ambitions,” by **Richard Lee Colvin** of the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Chapter 2: “Buckets Into the Sea: Why Philanthropy Isn’t Changing Schools, and How It Could,” by **Jay P. Greene** of the University of Arkansas.
- Chapter 3: “The ‘Best Uses’ of Philanthropy for Reform,” by **Leslie Lenkowsky** of Indiana University.
- Chapter 4: “How Program Officers at Education Philanthropies View Education,” by **Tom Loveless** of the Brookings Institution.
- Chapter 5: “Philanthropy and Urban School District Reform: Lessons from Charlotte, Houston, and San Diego,” by **Lynn Jenkins** and **Donald R. McAdams** of the Center for Reform of School Systems.
- Chapter 6: “Philanthropy and Labor Market Reform,” by **Jane Hannaway** of the Urban Institute and **Kendra Bischoff**, formerly with the Urban Institute.
- Chapter 7: “Choosing to Fund School Choice,” by **Bryan C. Hassel** and **Amy Way** of Public Impact.
- Chapter 8: “Teaching Fishing or Giving away Fish? Grantmaking for Research, Policy, and Advocacy,” by **Andrew J. Rotherham** of Education Sector.
- Chapter 9: “Lessons Learned from the Inside,” by **Wendy Hasset** and **Dan Katzir** of The Broad Foundation.
- Chapter 10: “The International Dimension,” by **Stephen P. Heyneman** of Vanderbilt University.
- Chapter 11: “Strategic Giving and Public School Reform: Three Challenges,” by **Peter Frumkin**.