



# Is the 'new' education philanthropy good for schools?

Examining foundation-funded school reform

**"Singing from the Same Hymnbook": Education Policy Advocacy  
at Gates and Broad**

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## **Introduction**

The Broad Foundation's 2009-10 Annual Report offered a sunny forecast for a federal education agenda that was increasingly supportive of the foundation's goals:

In many ways, we feel the stars have finally aligned. With an agenda that echoes our decade of investments—charter schools, performance pay for teachers, accountability, expanded learning time and national standards—the Obama administration is poised to cultivate and bring to fruition the seeds we and other reformers have planted.

These “other reformers” included the Gates Foundation, Broad's partner in spearheading major philanthropic initiatives in education reform over the last 15 years. Gates and Broad supported systemic reforms focused on leveraging education policy change through accountability mechanisms, notably teacher evaluation and national standards-based assessments. After 2008, these reforms emerged as central in the federal education policy agenda, a development that many attributed to Gates' and Broad's strategic influence; for example, one foundation official commented, “I am amazed at what they've done. Look at how education is a high priority item in this country. And it's singularly because of Gates and Broad.” While anecdotal evidence of this nature abounds in the field of education reform, questions remain as to how extensive this perceived influence actually is and how Gates and Broad came to be regarded as power players within national education policy contexts.

We address these questions through an examination of Gates' and Broad's advocacy grantmaking regarding teacher quality, a funding priority for both foundations. We primarily focus on teacher quality because the publicly available documentation

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(particularly within Congressional testimony) is rich for this issue; in contrast, there is little in the federal record on the issue of common standards. We find that after 2008, Gates and Broad deliberately pursued funding strategies that prioritized federal policy and advocacy initiatives, sometimes in partnership with one another through purposeful convergence.<sup>i</sup> Specifically, we find that since 2008, Gates and Broad shifted funds from local education groups to national advocacy organizations and from discrete project-based initiatives to systemic reform efforts. We also show that Congressional testimony on teacher quality by Gates-funded and Broad-funded grantees has increased over time, indicating that these foundations have identified this strategy as a source of significant policy influence.

Finally, we demonstrate that the foundations utilized two distinct strategies within their advocacy funding efforts. First, the foundations closely aligned themselves with high-level officials at the federal Department of Education. Second, they funded a broad range of education interest groups that provided testimony to policymakers, disseminated research, and promoted a common set of policy goals. We argue that these targeted strategies led to a dominant narrative emerging within policy debates regarding teacher quality, specifically the concept of “value-added” teacher evaluation. As one Gates official commented,

Anybody who cares to look would find very quickly that all of these organizations suddenly singing from the same hymnbook are all getting money from the same organization...we fund almost everyone who does advocacy.

While Broad and Gates took different paths to leadership within the policy realm, their aligned foundation funding for preferred reforms fueled the production of studies

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and related advocacy work by think tanks and interest groups to amplify these views across organizations on a national stage. Gates and Broad sponsored organizations that publicly endorsed specific approaches to teacher quality, as well as think tanks and research organizations that released studies and publications consistently supporting the adoption of similar reforms concerning teacher performance evaluation. These efforts contributed to a watershed shift in education policy. Starting in 2009, the federal government used the Race to the Top program, followed by the No Child Left Behind waiver process, to incentivize states to link teacher evaluations to student test score data. More than two-thirds of states have made significant changes to their methods for evaluating teachers since 2009.<sup>ii</sup> Although the widespread adoption of new teacher evaluation systems suggests a significant policy victory—one that could be partly attributed to the efforts of Gates and Broad, based on our analysis—we argue that the declaration of a policy win would be premature. We caution funders who would seek to emulate this model that the absence of robust public debate presents a weakness for policy reforms in the long term, particularly as implementation challenges will inevitably arise.

## **Data and Methods**

The goal of our research is to analyze the extent of Gates’ and Broad’s advocacy activities on teacher quality, specifically as expressed in advocacy-related grants and grantee testimony in Congress. Our research is comprised of three types of data collection and analysis. First, we collected data on grant distributions at each foundation. Second, we analyzed the testimony of foundation-funded witnesses in Congressional hearings.

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Third, we drew upon an original set of interviews with foundation officials, conducted between 2010 and 2012, to contextualize and extend our analysis.

To systematically assess advocacy grantmaking at Gates and Broad, we collected data from each foundation's 2005 and 2010 990-PF tax forms. For each grant that directly funded K-12 education, training and support for K-12 personnel, K-12 policy advocacy or research, or supplementary education services for K-12 students, we recorded the amount of each grant, the recipient, the recipient's location, and the purpose of the grant (if available). We coded each grant recipient based on the grantee's function or role, such as school districts, charter schools, or after school programs. We identified all grants that were targeted to support policy advocacy and/or research at the national level. Our definition of national research and advocacy organizations included grants for convening, contacting, or informing policymakers on a national level. We also identified grantees as national advocacy or research organizations based on their websites, organizational purposes indicated on their Form 990 tax documents, and purposes indicated by funders in tax filings. If the grant's purpose indicated support for a grantee to convene, contact, or inform policymakers on a national level, it was included in our set of national advocacy organizations. Additionally, we coded the national advocacy grants based on the issue priority advanced by the grant, using the grantee organization and the grant description to identify issue priority. Our coding scheme included seven major issue priorities advanced by Gates and/or Broad: charter schools/school choice, teacher quality, standards, high school reform, urban education, and principal leadership.

Using ProQuest Congressional, we also gathered data on foundation-funded witnesses who delivered testimony in Congressional hearings on teacher quality. We

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identified 96 hearings that contained substantive content on teacher quality. Next, we eliminated all speeches and testimony by members of Congress and federal government officials in order to focus on witnesses from outside of federal government, including school district officials, university researchers, think tank representatives, and advocacy organization leaders. After eliminating federal officials, we had a sample of more than 470 witnesses on teacher quality. We coded these witnesses to identify whether they represented an institution or organization that received a grant from Gates or Broad in the year they delivered testimony or within the two previous years. We also examined the content of the witness testimony and collected all references to research mentioned in witness testimony. Our tally included references to more than 400 separate published research items, including academic articles, think tank reports, and government reports. We identified witnesses who referenced the same reports and, using social network analysis, constructed network diagrams to show the shared references to research. References to a shared set of research sources among foundation grantees underscores the similar policy recommendations provided by these individuals.

To contextualize and extend the evidence from our data analysis and coding process, we also drew on an original dataset of semi-structured, open-ended interviews with informants from Gates and Broad, which allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of how and why foundation insiders elected to engage in advocacy grantmaking as a strategic leverage mechanism. Interview subjects were primarily current and former staff at Gates and Broad, in addition to several influential actors in the broader fields of philanthropy and education. Informants were selected to represent roughly structurally equivalent positions, comprising senior staff, program officers and policy officers in each

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foundation's education program. All statements made by interviewees are attributed anonymously with general descriptors like "the informant" or "the official."

### **A Growing National Presence**

Gates and Broad share similar origin stories in terms of their founding dates (2000 and 1999, respectively) and involvement in education as a core grantmaking priority. The two foundations differ in size (Gates' endowment is currently estimated at about \$42 billion, while Broad's assets are around \$2 billion) as well as their relative emphases on advocacy as a funding strategy. Whereas informants described Broad as unapologetically involved in policy- and advocacy-related initiatives since its inception in 1999, Gates was reticent to pursue any policy-related activities for five to six years after its founding in 2000. One Gates informant remarked that a "very strong bias" existed against policy and advocacy during the foundation's early years due to concerns about the legality of lobbying: "They didn't want to call it the 'DC Office' because they were just putting their toes in the water of getting involved in advocacy." Another Gates official attributed this hesitation to a sympathy for progressive politics at Gates, which was viewed as incongruent with a Republican administration prior to 2008: "Our program people were like, 'No, no, no. That's all of that political stuff' ... Particularly back in the day when people didn't like the Bush administration...all federal politics for people in Seattle looked like doing stuff with the Bush administration." After the election of President Obama in 2008, the foundation's focus on policy changed significantly, as one explained: "It was much more legitimate to be involved with policy post-2008 with Obama."

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Similarly, another commented, “[Advocacy] evolved with respect to its place in the organizational food chain. Its change of status was ascendant and rapid.”

In contrast to Gates’ relatively cautious entrance into policy influence, Broad informants noted that the foundation’s benefactor, Eli Broad, had viewed the pursuit of policy as a core element of his vision for the foundation since its inception. One Broad informant noted:

[Our benefactor] had always known that the operating environment in which schools function was a barrier to seeing some of the reforms happen that we initially had started out focusing on as a foundation, and so he really felt like if we could focus on the larger picture by removing policy barriers, that that would probably be the best way to leverage his dollars.

Similarly, another Broad official described changes to the foundation’s strategy in 2009 and 2010 that institutionalized policy as a core area of focus:

We recently changed our strategic defining process and so for the next three years our number one priority is policy, and we say that we’re going to be successful when we see a strong reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Another Broad informant confirmed this statement, noting that advocacy funding at Broad assumed a greater percentage of the foundation’s overall grantmaking budget after 2009, with the foundation committing more financial resources specifically to advocacy-related initiatives:

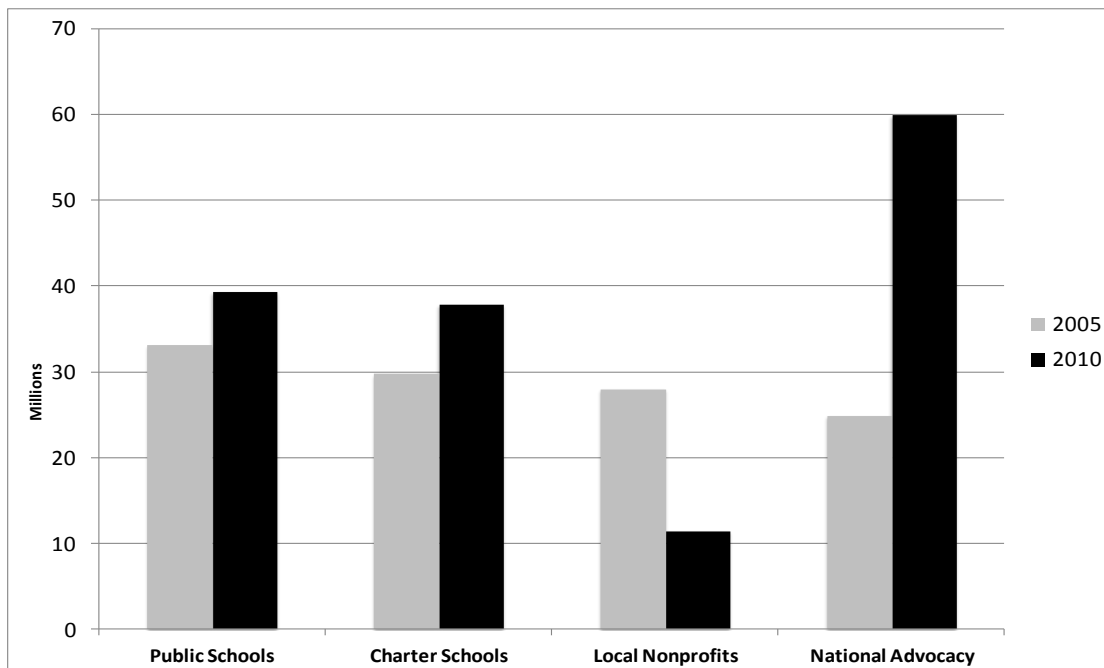
Generally speaking, in the past, our policymaking has been important ... in terms of our involvement in a lot of things, but not in terms of our investment. It’s been

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about 10 to 15 percent. We're looking at trying to do somewhere between 40 and 50 percent of our investments going forward in the policy realm.

Consistent with these statements, our analysis of grants distributed by Gates and Broad showed a shift in funding patterns related to national advocacy from 2005 to 2010. We compared grantmaking by Gates and Broad in 2005 and 2010 across major funding categories, displayed in Figure 1. We focused on four categories of grants: traditional public schools (including school districts and individual schools), charter schools (including charter management organizations (CMOs) and individual charter schools), local non-profit organizations (including locally based organizations—not organizations that are part of broader national umbrella groups), and national advocacy (including think tanks and advocacy groups).

**Figure 1: Gates and Broad: Inflation Adjusted Grant Dollars by Category**



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Although researchers have documented significant philanthropic investments in charter schools and CMOs,<sup>iii</sup> the funding patterns for Gates and Broad from 2005 to 2010 do not show a marked shift away from traditional public schools and towards charters—in fact, both categories grew in their share of funding from Gates and Broad at relatively comparable levels. Moreover, these foundations provided nearly equivalent levels of support for traditional public schools and charter schools—charter schools and CMOs received \$37.8 million from Gates and Broad in 2010, and traditional public schools received \$39.3 million—and grant dollars to both types of schools grew by about 2 percent from 2005 to 2010, adjusted for inflation. Rather, the major shift in grantmaking from 2005 to 2010 is from local organizations to national advocacy (see Figure 1).

Local nonprofits received a declining share of grants from Gates and Broad during this time period. Grant dollars for local nonprofits dropped by 59 percent, adjusted for inflation, while national advocacy funding more than doubled, growing by 140 percent. National advocacy grants reached nearly \$60 million in 2010. The types of organizations supported by Gates and Broad funding include key players in national-level education politics, such as major multi-issue think tanks (the American Enterprise Institute, Brookings, and Center for American Progress) and organizations focused specifically on education issues (Education Trust, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and the James B. Hunt Institute). The Gates Foundation also funds organizations that represent racial and ethnic minority groups, including National Council of La Raza, National Urban League, and the National Indian Education Association; these organizations received grants between \$250,000 and \$500,000.

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As Figure 1 shows, national advocacy funding grew substantially by 2010. Yet organizational-level funding does not provide the full story of convergence in national advocacy strategies at Gates and Broad. We content analyzed the purpose and grantee for each national advocacy grant distributed by Gates and Broad in order to identify major issue priorities supported by each grant.<sup>iv</sup> In 2005, there was little overlap in the national advocacy issue priorities of Gates and Broad. The dominant issue priority in 2005 was high school reform—31 percent of the national advocacy grant dollars supported this issue—and the Gates Foundation exclusively supported this issue. Broad did not provide any grants aligned with high school reform. Broad’s issue priorities varied widely, including principal leadership, teacher quality, school choice and charter schools, and urban education.

An example of a high school reform advocacy grant from Gates is a \$951,000 grant to the Alliance for Excellent Education to “support an advocacy, communications, and policy development initiative to promote effective federal high school policy reform.”<sup>v</sup> Issue alignment was negligible in 2005; both Gates and Broad did provide grants supporting organizations advocating on teacher quality, but these composed only one percent of the total national advocacy grant dollars in 2005. In contrast, by 2010, both foundations were involved in funding two major issues for national advocacy: common standards and teacher quality. Grants supporting common standards composed 26 percent of national advocacy grant dollars, and grants supporting teacher quality composed 19 percent of national advocacy grant dollars. For example, in 2010, the Broad Foundation funded the Center for American Progress to support “the Teacher Incentive Fund summit.”<sup>vi</sup> Gates provided a grant in 2010 to Brookings “to develop criteria for

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certifying teacher evaluation systems.”<sup>vii</sup> Both foundations supported the James B. Hunt Institute in 2010 to conduct advocacy related to the Common Core. Thus, the alignment of issue priorities for national advocacy grew stronger across these two foundations by 2010.

These data are supported by our interviews, which indicate growing attention to advocacy—particularly at Gates—and a shift toward emphasizing the federal and state levels rather than the local level. Gates officials explained this transition as part of a broader shift at the foundation. From 2000 to 2006, Gates’ education program predominantly focused on funding the development of small learning communities and conversion of large comprehensive high schools into smaller schools. This portfolio strategy ceased in 2004-2005, and the foundation began to focus on targeted systemic reform initiatives at a national level in 2005-2006. One Gates informant explained, “[Our staff decided] we can’t just be about giving dollars to school districts because we’ve already seen evidence that we give money and we’re not seeing results.”

One Gates informant explained that the foundation realized that educational change “involved much more than structure; it needed to involve the context, the policy context, that affected it.” With these strategic changes, policy initiatives assumed a new importance after 2006, as one Gates informant described: “Gates had a very explicit theory of action about working at the state level to create a policy environment that would be supportive of the kinds of changes that they wanted to make at the local level.” One Gates informant summarized this approach in the following way:

Starting with the governors, we’ve got to build support at the state level, and once we build support at the state level, then when the dynamics are right, which would

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have been 2008, and we get an administration—more importantly, an education secretary whose school district benefited from our support—then you’ve got the ability to drive forward and push it off balance at the federal level.

Under Stefanie Sanford, the foundation’s director of policy and advocacy during this period, Gates targeted high-level elected state officials to advance support for desired reforms, with the intention of leveraging state policy wins towards the federal level in the longer term, contingent on favorable political dynamics—which came into sharp focus during the 2008 election.

### **Federal Policy: Alignment with Insiders by Cultivating Relationships with High-Level Officials**

The 2008 presidential campaign emerged in our interviews as a pivotal event in the trajectory of national advocacy involvement by Gates and Broad. Both foundations made an initial foray into politics and policy advocacy during the presidential campaign. In 2008, Gates and Broad teamed up for the ED in ’08 campaign, an unusual instance of explicit philanthropic involvement in a presidential campaign, which attempted to situate education as a core issue area in the 2008 election. While journalists have noted that the initiative was unsuccessful in this goal, ED in ’08 had a longer-term impact as the first instance of Gates and Broad deliberately collaborating on a national policy-related initiative.<sup>viii</sup> Two of the main issue priorities emphasized in the policy documents for ED in ’08 were “American education standards”—including a proposal for a 50-state consortium to develop common standards—and “effective teachers in every classroom”—including recommendations for performance based compensation.<sup>ix</sup>

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Soon after the election, both Gates and Broad officials recognized an opportunity for alignment between their policy objectives and the Obama administration on key issues. For example, informants described the deliberate alignment of Broad's agenda with the federal government, a process that also occurred at Gates:

So, on the federal level, there are a couple of things that we think are important.

One is doing things that can educate policymakers and other opinion leaders about the importance of certain items on the administration's agenda. Things around, for example, national standards, differentiated compensation for educators, expanded learning time, growing the number of high quality public charter schools. All things that we think are important, all things that the administration thinks are important as well. And so it gives us a unique opportunity to align what we believe is important for education change and take advantage of the environment that exists.

This "unique opportunity" yielded the fertile environment for an open policy window that Gates had sought in its original advocacy strategy developed in 2006. Similarly, another Broad official noted the comparable priorities of Broad and the Department of Education:

One of those is that we have in this administration a secretary of education focused on the issues that Mr. Broad has been pushing through the foundation for the last decade. Those same things I talked about—growth at charter schools...quality of charter schools...the ESEA authorization that looks at effective teaching, the current standards, common assessments—those are all things that the Broad Foundation had been working on for the first ten years of the foundation. Brand new is that, rather than doing direct funding, the foundation is

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now looking at the policies that would create an infrastructure [at] the national level to support those things happening.

This statement was corroborated by Gates officials, who cited the appointment of President Obama’s Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan—a former Gates grantee in his capacity as superintendent of Chicago Public Schools—as a linchpin in the partnership between Gates and federal policymakers. Informants noted the similar approaches of the Department of Education and Gates staff, as one Gates informant explained: “[In] 2008, we get an administration that has an education secretary whose school district benefited from our support. When Obama came into office, you got Arne [Duncan], who says, ‘Yeah, they’re right, we need to do this.’” Another informant commented, “The support that the foundation gave to the department either directly or indirectly, both financially and through intermediaries, greatly affected how some of the early Obama education initiatives were formulated and implemented.”

Indeed, numerous Gates officials pointed to the hiring of Obama administration officials as a key factor in amplifying their advocacy funding. For example, several informants mentioned that a number of Secretary Duncan’s staff appointments were either former Gates officials or former Gates grantees. One informant noted that, “Once Obama was elected, I mean, Gates literally had people sitting at the Department of Education, both formally and informally.” These officials included Jim Shelton, assistant deputy secretary for innovation and improvement and former program director of the education program at Gates, and Joanne Weiss, director of the Race to the Top competition and a former partner at the NewSchools Venture Fund, a major Gates grantee that served as an intermediary funder for charter school management organizations. In

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addition to employing former Gates officials, Department of Education staff continued to engage current Gates officials in key discussions of importance regarding education priorities, as one informant explained: “It gives you a notion of where the field is moving because [Gates staff] have regular sessions...or phone conversations between funders and Department of Education officials including [Secretary] Duncan and including [Undersecretary] Jim Shelton.”

### **Federal Policy: Advocacy Alignment by Supporting Widely Recognized and Influential Advocacy Groups**

In addition to building relationships with high-level officials, both Gates and Broad have focused on funding well-known groups with a track record of involvement in education policy. National advocacy groups can participate in politics and policymaking through a variety of venues, including lobbying legislators and bureaucrats, commenting on rule-making, forming coalitions, drafting reports, attempting to inform or persuade the public, and testifying before Congress. Delivering congressional testimony is among the most visible and significant forms of involvement in national policymaking. Groups that testify regularly are recognized as “taken-for-granted” participants in policymaking, and the content of Congressional testimony influences policy adoption.<sup>x</sup>

We find that Gates and Broad have supported groups that participated frequently in national policymaking, and this support grew over time. We examined these groups to identify those that had representatives who testified most frequently before Congress on teacher quality. We then tabulated the amount of grant dollars these organizations received in 2005 and 2010.

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Table 1 shows the most frequent organizational representatives testifying before Congress on teacher quality.<sup>xi</sup> It is important to note that multiple appearances to testify before Congress are very rare; the vast majority of groups had only one opportunity to testify. Many witnesses from groups with multiple appearances represent longstanding and well-established participants in national education policy debates, including the Council of Chief State School Officers and the major teachers' unions (the NEA and AFT). Other influential actors, such as the Business Roundtable and Education Trust, were also frequent participants. One newer organization, The New Teacher Project, stands out with three appearances to testify, all occurring between 2009 and 2012. Representatives from the Gates Foundation also testified three times.

**Table 1: Most Frequent Witnesses Representing Organizations on Teacher Quality, 2000-2012**

<b>Witness Affiliation</b>	<b>Witness Appearances</b>	<b>Advocacy Grant \$ from Gates and Broad in 2005<sup>xii</sup></b>	<b>Advocacy Grant \$ from Gates and Broad in 2010</b>
Council of Chief State School Officers	7	\$98,000	\$3.2 million
Education Trust	7	\$890,000	\$4.9 million
National Education Association (NEA)	6	\$0	\$38,000
Education Leaders Council	5	\$0	\$0
American Federation of Teachers (AFT)	3	\$0	\$2.4 million
American School Counselor Association	3	\$0	\$0
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	3	N/A	N/A
Business Roundtable	3	\$0	\$0

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Center on Education Policy	3	\$178,000	\$580,000
Center for American Progress	3	\$0	\$785,000
Milken Family Foundation	3	\$0	\$0
The New Teacher Project	3	\$130,000	\$2 million
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>\$1.3 million</b>	<b>\$13.9 million</b>

Overall, a pattern emerged wherein Gates and Broad increased advocacy grant funding to groups that gave frequent testimony—defined as three or more appearances before Congress from 2000 to 2012. Advocacy grant dollars to these groups grew by more than \$12 million from 2005 to 2010—well above the overall growth in funding for national advocacy groups. The overall increase in national advocacy funding from Gates and Broad was 140 percent from 2005 to 2010, while the funding to those who gave frequent testimony (included in Table 1) increased by tenfold. This funding growth supports new actors, like The New Teacher Project, as well as the establishment groups, like the NEA and AFT. This suggests that Gates and Broad were pursuing a two-pronged funding strategy: diversifying the voices in the debate and extending ties to the education establishment.

Yet support for an organization that delivers testimony is not direct evidence of alignment with the foundation’s agenda priorities. In some cases, increased grant support was channeled to organizations that had already shown support for reforms such as using standardized tests to evaluate teachers or implementing performance pay systems. For example, The New Teacher Project released “The Widget Effect” report in 2009, supporting a major overhaul of teacher evaluation; since 2009, the Gates Foundation has

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committed \$13.5 million in grants to The New Teacher Project. Representatives from The New Teacher Project testified before Congress in 2009, 2010, and 2012. Meanwhile, the president of the Center for American Progress, John Podesta, testified twice in 2007 in support of linking teacher compensation to evaluation systems. The Broad Foundation began funding the Center for American Progress in 2007 and has since continuously supported the Center for American Progress with almost \$1 million in grants, including three grants focused on teacher incentives or pay for performance. Meanwhile, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has not been traditionally associated with vocal support for overhauling teacher evaluation or linking evaluations to high stakes personnel decisions. In 2010, the Gates Foundation funded the AFT to support teacher development and evaluation programs. Also in 2010, AFT president Randi Weingarten provided Congressional testimony that was relatively supportive of a new approach to teacher evaluation. Weingarten testified in favor of evaluation systems that include inputs and outputs—with outputs including test data. Moreover, her written testimony included the following:

We know that a natural outgrowth of teacher evaluation systems will be differentiated compensation systems. We know from the first-hand experience of our affiliates that differentiated compensation systems developed and implemented with the full support and collaboration of teachers can succeed.<sup>xiii</sup>

Weingarten remained strongly committed to the collective bargaining process, but she also signaled a willingness to negotiate pay for performance systems. Weingarten's fellow panelists at the hearing were eager to note their alignment with the union leader. For example, Tim Daly of The New Teacher Project observed, "Secretary Duncan and

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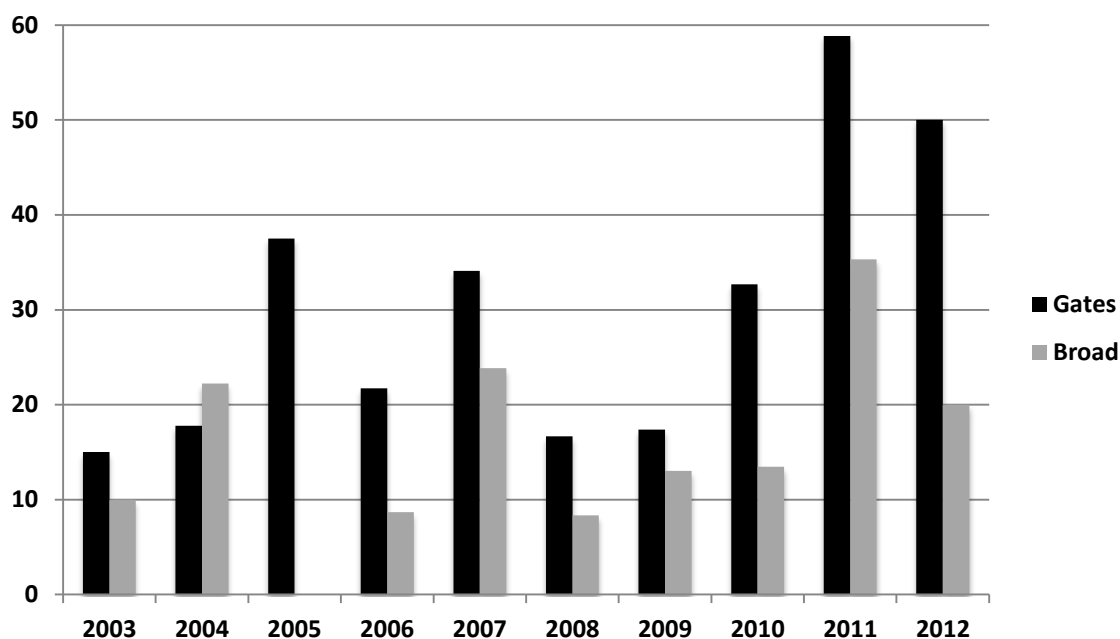
some of my fellow panelists, including Randi Weingarten, are among those calling for more rigorous evaluation systems that recognize these differences.”<sup>xiv</sup> Shortly after Daly’s testimony, Professor Thomas Kane of Harvard University (and lead researcher on the Gates-funded Measures of Effective Teaching project), commented on Weingarten’s cooperation with Measures of Effective Teaching: “Randi Weingarten deserves a lot of credit for supporting that effort, even when it was not easy.”<sup>xv</sup> Thus, the content of the Congressional testimony suggests that organizations appearing frequently before Congress and receiving foundation funds often provided aligned recommendations and perspectives on the issue of teacher quality—views that also aligned with Gates’ and Broad’s priorities.

In order to determine the extent of philanthropic funding for witnesses on teacher quality, we coded all of the witnesses who testified in the teacher quality and charter school hearings to determine whether they were affiliated with an organization or institution that received a grant from Gates or Broad in the year they delivered testimony or within the two previous years. The results of our analysis show that the share of Gates and Broad grantees among hearing witnesses has grown. Figure 2 shows the proportion of grantee witnesses in the teacher quality hearings. As early as 2004, Broad was funding more than one in five of the groups with affiliated witnesses who testified on teacher quality. Yet Gates has provided longstanding support to groups involved in this issue, with recent and substantial growth shown in 2011 and 2012. Each of the four teacher quality hearings in 2011 included at least one witness with both Gates and Broad funding. At a 2011 House committee hearing titled “Education Reforms: Exploring Teacher

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Quality Initiatives,” three of the four witnesses represented entities that recently received Gates grants.

**Figure 2: Percent of Grantee Witnesses on Teacher Quality<sup>xvi</sup>**



Overall, our data show greater support from Gates and Broad for frequent Congressional witnesses who represent both traditional and newly emerging education interests. We also show that organizations and institutions receiving Gates or Broad funding compose a growing overall share of the witnesses who testify on teacher quality. These data underscore Gates’ and Broad’s strategy of influencing policy through providing funding for a wide variety of advocacy groups that participate actively in federal policy debates.

### **Policy Research and Advocacy**

Foundations that seek to influence policy often commission intermediaries, including think tanks, academics, and advocacy organizations, to produce reports that frame

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empirical evidence in an accessible way and to share these reports with policymakers to highlight the nature of a problem or the potential impact of proposed solutions. At both Gates and Broad, program officers spoke of concerted efforts to pair their advocacy efforts with support for research. One Broad program officer explained: “It’s not just about doing good research; it’s about doing good research and putting it together in a way that’s going to have impact. As you know, there is no shortage of white papers in education.” A Gates official described the following process for producing reports that would be used to influence policy:

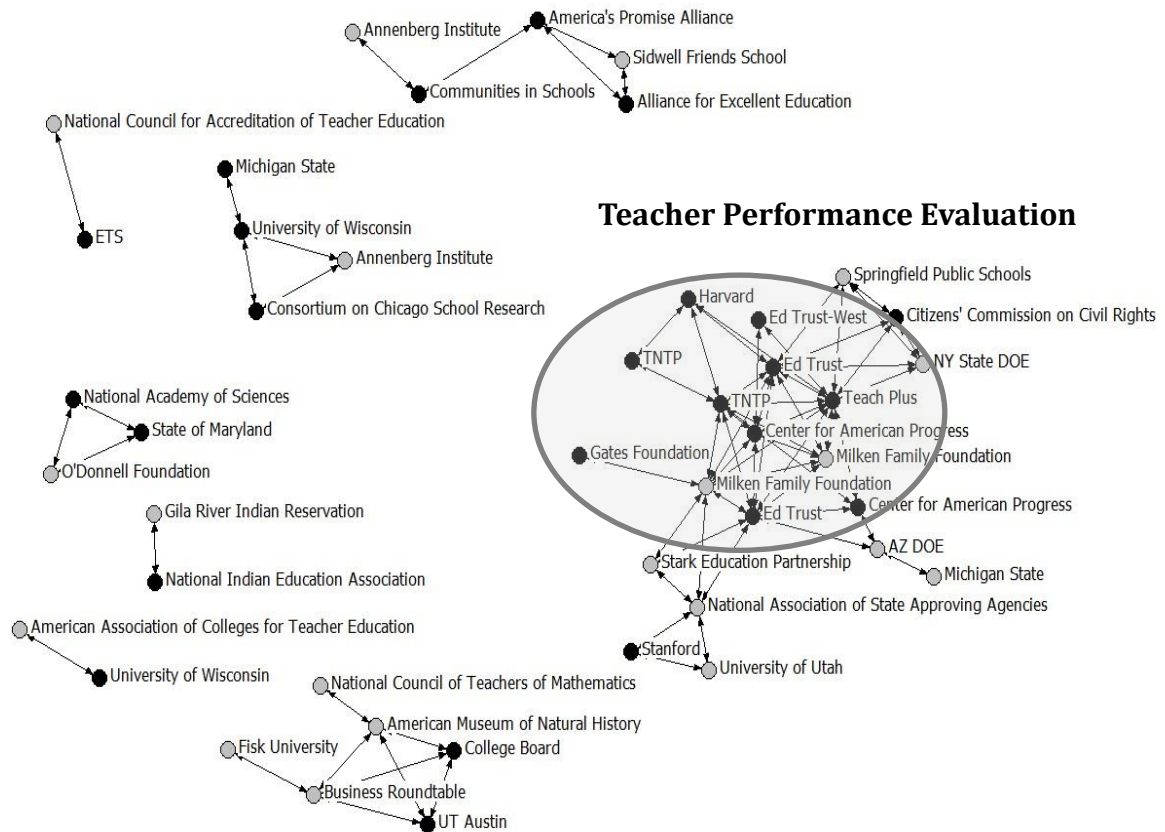
It’s within [a] sort of fairly narrow orbit that you manufacture the [research] reports. You hire somebody to write a report. There’s going to be a commission, there’s going to be a lot of research, there’s going to be a lot of vetting and so forth and so on, but you pretty much know what the report is going to say before you go through the exercise.

In order to systematically examine the content of the Congressional hearings on teacher quality, we examined the research and policy reports that witnesses referenced, with attention to what types of reforms grantees advocated for, their endorsement of particular views or policy initiatives, and the range of approaches they cited. We examined all references to research and policy reports among the witnesses in the teacher quality hearings. Our content analysis uncovered references to more than 400 separate published items, including academic articles, government reports, think tank studies, and advocacy reports. We then identified instances in which witnesses provided references to the same report.

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Based on references to the same reports across multiple congressional witnesses, we constructed affiliation networks of witnesses who referenced the same study or report in their testimony. The network (Figure 4) shows links between witnesses who share a reference to the same report. The witnesses are labeled in the network with their organizational or institutional affiliation. A circle represents testimony provided by an organizational representative, and a line between two circles indicates references to the same report. Some organizations appear more than once because they had multiple witnesses who testified. We also identified witnesses who were affiliated with groups that had recently received foundation funding. Black circles indicate organizations or institutions that received Gates or Broad grants within two years of the testimony; gray circles indicate groups that did not receive Gates or Broad grants within two years of the testimony.

**Figure 4: Citation Network: Teacher Quality Witnesses**



Overall, references to the same articles or reports are rare in Congressional testimony; only 33 out of 406 reports were cited by more than one witness. Thus, instances of shared citations represent a significant and rare degree of common ground between witnesses. By far, the most cited study in the teacher quality hearings is an article by Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain, “Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement”; seven different witnesses cited this academic research article. This article emphasizes the importance of teacher quality for student achievement and concludes with the following recommendation: “there is strong reason to believe that a closer link between rewards and performance would improve the stock of teachers.”<sup>xvii</sup>

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In the network, there is one large cluster of witnesses with many shared citations. This cluster includes major Gates and Broad grantees such as Education Trust, The New Teacher Project (TNTP), and the Center for American Progress. This cluster is labeled with a common policy recommendation shared among the witnesses: “teacher performance evaluation.” The witnesses in this cluster exhibit remarkable consistency in the content of their testimony—both over time and across organizations. For example, 2004 testimony delivered by Ross Wiener of Education Trust includes the recommendation: “support value-added data systems.”<sup>xviii</sup> In 2007, Amy Wilkins of Education Trust testified, “We think that the States need to move to value-added systems to look at the effectiveness of their teachers.”<sup>xix</sup> Also in 2007, John Podesta from the Center for American Progress testified, “To effectively determine advancements, expanded compensation for teachers and principals should be coupled with a meaningful evaluation system for them.”<sup>xx</sup> By 2010, Timothy Daly of The New Teacher Project testified, “In many cases, greater outcomes will result from mandating the public reporting of teacher effectiveness data.”<sup>xxi</sup>

These witnesses primarily share references to the Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain article, as well as to the reports by Education Trust, Brookings, and The New Teacher Project. Among the institutions and think tanks that produce reports, Education Trust has the largest number of multiple citation reports (four reports), and Brookings has the second-largest number (two reports). The Brookings and Education Trust reports draw heavily on the perspective advanced by Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain—emphasizing the importance of teacher quality for student achievement and demonstrating how high quality teachers could be identified more effectively through measurement of student

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achievement. These think tank reports also advance specific policy recommendations. For example, the 2006 Brookings report “Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job” provides five specific policy recommendations, including: “Provide federal grants to help states that link student performance with the effectiveness of individual teachers over time.”<sup>xxii</sup>

The most recently published report with multiple citations in Congressional testimony is “The Widget Effect,” released by The New Teacher Project in 2009. This report is referenced three times. The report critiques existing approaches to teacher evaluation by examining assessment practices in 12 school districts and four states, and it uses the resulting data to advocate for specific policy reforms, including: “use performance evaluations to inform key decisions such as teacher assignment, professional development, compensation, retention, and dismissal.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Several national foundations including the Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, the Robertson Foundation, and the Joyce Foundation funded the report.

In other parts of the network, there are links to reports with alternative perspectives, but none share the level of cross-referencing that appears in the group emphasizing performance measurement and evaluation of teachers. One example of an alternate perspective is the publication cited by the witnesses from University of Wisconsin and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. These two witnesses both cited “A Marshall Plan for Teaching,” a 2007 article by Linda Darling-Hammond. This article recommends policies related to teacher preparation and mentorship. Another study with multiple references (from witnesses representing the University of Wisconsin and the Consortium on Chicago Schools Research) is

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*Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago.*<sup>xxiv</sup> This book provides comprehensive recommendations for school improvement rather than focusing specifically on teacher quality or performance evaluation as a single lever for improvement. Within these smaller clusters, many of the witnesses are university-based scholars or researchers affiliated with academia rather than think tank or philanthropic organization representatives.

Across these testimonies, there are common recommendations that teacher quality should be measured with test scores, reported, used to structure professional development, and applied to high-stakes personnel decisions. The majority of these witnesses also represent organizations with substantial funding from Gates and Broad. A Gates informant elaborated on this dynamic: “For organizations with our size...and with our resources...you can make grants to lots of organizations to promote a certain message not just...with government but also with business and with the public.”

This alignment has generated concerns that ideas endorsed by Gates and Broad may be taken for granted without due critique or rigorous evaluation, for fear of alienating potential funders. The example of “value-added” teacher evaluation as a dominant approach was highlighted in a conversation with one Gates official:

You’ve got a relatively small number of pretty bright and committed people who usually base [decisions] on evidence that, if you look at it carefully, it’s dubious... So take ‘value-added’... as people get away from technical appendices and the caveats... and distill those into summaries and into PowerPoints... all that gets washed away and comes back down to... the presupposition you began with, which is, ‘Value-added is the way to evaluate and pay teachers.’”

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Within a small orbit of think tanks, some university-based researchers, advocacy groups, and philanthropic funders, an argument favoring new evaluation systems and pay for performance to transform teacher quality was widely shared and transmitted in national policy arenas. Our analysis of Congressional testimony suggests that alternate perspectives did not share the same level of coherence and cross-referencing among a broad set of actors. Thus, Gates and Broad were able to amplify a message regarding teacher performance evaluation that did not face a rigorous and coordinated critique at the federal level. As states begin to implement these new evaluation systems, the opportunity for more scrutiny is emerging as implementation challenges arise—but only after federal policy has led states to make significant investments in assessments and systems for evaluation.

## **Conclusion**

Our study of Gates' and Broad's education grantmaking revealed two main aspects of their strategic approach towards policy influence: 1) cultivating direct relationships with high-level officials and 2) supporting widely recognized and influential organizations in education, from both traditional and reform contexts, to engage in advocacy activities at the federal level. These activities engendered a shift in funding from the local level to the national level, and accordingly grantees were frequent witnesses in Congressional testimony on teacher quality, particularly as Gates' and Broad's support for advocacy increased over the course of the last several years. In particular, Gates' and Broad's purposeful convergence on advancing similar policy issues

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and organizations emerged as a key factor in marshalling their resources towards their desired outcomes.

As a caveat, our study does not claim to make a causal argument regarding foundation funding of advocacy, as it is impossible to link policy outcomes definitively to grants. Furthermore, we do not assume that foundations necessarily dictate what their grantees testify, or that witnesses' testimony is similar *because* they received grants from Gates and Broad. In fact, it is likely that Gates and Broad sought out organizations already engaged in reform initiatives that resonated with their philanthropic objectives. Rather, we emphasize that the strategic and purposeful alignment of foundation funding focused and accelerated the volume of grantees' advocacy work on key issues, which subsequently had the effect of saturating the market of policy-relevant ideas related to teacher quality and propelling the foundations' preferred models of reform onto a national stage. In effect, these actions legitimated and diffused some approaches to teacher quality over others, illustrating the power of foundations to anoint exemplars within a field of organizations.<sup>xxv</sup>

While other foundations may seek to replicate the actions of Gates and Broad in the policy realm, these strategies should not be interpreted as a recipe for policy success, as the long-term outcomes of foundation-sponsored education reforms remain unknown. In fact, several of Broad and Gates' flagship efforts in areas such as the Common Core have been met with significant political backlash from states, localities, school districts, and nonprofit organizations. These foundations have also begun to face increased critiques about the legitimacy of privately funded and managed policy actions in the context of a liberal democracy, even at times from those foundation officials who pushed

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the reforms. For example, one Gates official commented on the similarity between the federal government's plan and the foundation's agenda:

There was a twinkle in the eye of one of our US advocacy directors when the Obama administration's...education policy framework came out...this person said..."aren't we lucky that the Obama Administration's education agenda is so compatible with ours, you know?"...We wouldn't take credit...out loud even amongst ourselves....But, you know, the twinkle...

From a normative perspective, the notion of a "twinkle"—rather than claiming credit more openly—highlights one of the more problematic aspects of the concentrated influence of Gates, Broad, and other foundations in the policy realm. While these foundations advocate for specific reforms, often defined by elite experts without significant democratic input,<sup>xxvi</sup> they avoid claiming credit for their policy wins or even publicly acknowledging an advocacy role. For example, in a 2014 *Washington Post* interview, Bill Gates "grew irritated" when discussing the foundation's advocacy work on the Common Core, describing his foundation's role as funding "the research and development of new tools and offer[ing] them to decision-makers" and arguing, "These are not political things...We don't fund people to say, 'Okay, we'll pay you this if you say you like the Common Core.'"<sup>xxvii</sup>

This avoidance of attribution, and depiction of grants as apolitical, has the effect of limiting authentic democratic debate about the issues that philanthropists support, as one Gates informant critiqued: "We have this enormous power to sway the public conversations about things like effective teaching or standards and mobilizing lots of resources in their favor without real robust debate...I mean, it's striking to me, really." In

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the case of teacher quality, the development of sophisticated methods to measure teacher impacts on student learning by statisticians and econometricians presented a useful opportunity to examine the best approaches for using this data to motivate continuous improvement in teaching. Yet the policy recommendations that were advanced, amplified, and repeated to an audience of federal policymakers, particularly by foundation grantees, focused heavily on using evaluation to develop pay for performance systems rather than extensively evaluating and debating alternative uses of teacher performance data.

The circumvention of public debate is often accomplished by framing desired reforms as “evidence-based” and thus as unbiased and politically neutral based on their empirical legitimacy.<sup>xxviii</sup> Reckhow (2013) argues that this framing can result in the “sidelining” of stakeholders outside of an elite, expert-driven network.<sup>xxix</sup> However, foundations also have the power to facilitate democratic debate through their unique ability to foster pluralism and support competing views as well as different visions of social order. One informant commented on the ideal role of foundations in policy contexts:

I think what’s valuable [about] a foundation’s role ...is [that] they’re funding just zillions of different models, in real settings that really have value because they’ve worked out in communities where a lot of real social change and innovation does happen and they could provide tremendous value in learning for policy making. Thus, we argue that foundations seeking to influence education policy would be advised to purposefully facilitate this robust democratic debate that reflects a wide variety of approaches, rather than the same hymnbook.

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- <sup>i</sup> Reckhow and Snyder 2014.
- <sup>ii</sup> Center for Education Policy. 2013. <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/teacherevalreview>; Accessed on January 23, 2015.
- <sup>iii</sup> Scott 2009; Reckhow and Snyder 2014; Quinn, Tompkins-Stange, and Meyerson, 2014.
- <sup>iv</sup> Issue priority was determined based on the grantee alone, if the grantee was specifically associated with a single issue area (e.g. The New Teacher Project and teacher quality). Otherwise, we evaluated the purpose based on the description of the grant. It was not possible to assign an issue area to every grant, because some grants were made for general purposes. These grants were not coded with a specific issue area. Issue categories included: charter schools/school choice; teacher quality; standards; high school reform; urban education; and principal leadership.
- <sup>v</sup> Gates Foundation 990-PF, 2005.
- <sup>vi</sup> Broad Foundation 990-PF, 2010.
- <sup>vii</sup> Gates Foundation 990-PF, 2010.
- <sup>viii</sup> Russo 2012.
- <sup>ix</sup> “ED in ’08: Stong American Schools.” Policy Toolkit. August 2007.  
[http://mikefalick.blogs.com/my\\_blog/files/sas.Toolkit.Complete%2021208.pdf](http://mikefalick.blogs.com/my_blog/files/sas.Toolkit.Complete%2021208.pdf); Accessed on January 23, 2015.
- <sup>x</sup> Burstein 2014; Grossmann 2012; Burstein and Hirsh 2007; Baumgartner and Jones 1993
- <sup>xi</sup> Witnesses representing states, school districts, individual schools, and universities are excluded, because they are less clearly associated with representing a constituency or a particular viewpoint.
- <sup>xii</sup> Inflation adjusted for 2010 dollars.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Randi Weingarten. Testimony. Hearing on “ESEA Reauthorization: Teachers and Leaders.” Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. April 15, 2010.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Tim Daly. Testimony. Hearing on “ESEA Reauthorization: Teachers and Leaders.” Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. April 15, 2010.
- <sup>xv</sup> Thomas Kane. Testimony. Hearing on “ESEA Reauthorization: Teachers and Leaders.” Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. April 15, 2010.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Our data begins in 2003, due to limitations on data availability for Broad grants prior to 2003.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain 2005, 451.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Wiener 2004.
- <sup>xix</sup> Wilkins 2007.
- <sup>xx</sup> Podesta 2007.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Daly 2010.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Gordon, Kane, and Staiger 2006, 6.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> The New Teacher Project 2009, 29.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Bryk et al. 2010.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Quinn, Tompkins-Stange and Meyerson 2014.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Reckhow 2013.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Layton 2014.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Karl 1976.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Reckhow 2013.