Gates-Financed Initiative Faces Instructional Hurdles, Report Says

By Caroline Hendrie

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s campaign to produce small high schools is yielding schools with high academic expectations and personalized, collegial climates, a new report says, but the initiative should now turn more attention to day-to-day problems of teaching and learning.

Instructional strategies and curriculum content are two areas in which many of the small high schools started with help from the $650 million initiative would like more support.

The second installment in a planned eight-year evaluation, the report was prepared by a pair of prominent research organizations commissioned by the Seattle-based foundation to study the initiative. The program involves starting small high schools and scaling down large schools into smaller units.

"On average, personalization, high expectations, and time for teachers to collaborate as a professional community are strong in the small start-up high schools created under this initiative," says the report by the Washington-based American Institutes for Research and SRI International, based in Menlo Park, Calif. "So far, however, it is less clear how successful the foundation’s new-small-school approach will be in terms of providing high-quality curriculum and instruction for all students."

Teachers in new small secondary schools want more help in meshing a goal of engaging students through nontraditional teaching methods with the need to prepare them for standardized tests by mastering specific subject matter, according to the study.

"While models exist that successfully use project-based pedagogies to promote student engagement and skill development for students historically deemed at risk, it is clear that implementation of this approach is far from simple, and, for many teachers, it is fraught with unanswered questions," the report
says.

‘Concrete Guidance’

To tackle those questions, the report recommends that the organizations receiving grants from the foundation move beyond the "nuts and bolts of school opening or conversion" to provide "concrete guidance, supporting materials, and professional development" to shore up schools’ instructional practices.

Another challenge for many small-schools teachers, the researchers say, is figuring out how to serve students of widely varying skill levels in the same class.

That "equity issue" is tricky in large schools being converted into smaller units, in part because parents, students, and teachers sometimes perceive efforts to eliminate tracking as hurting youngsters who previously took advanced courses reserved for high achievers.

"Although the vision of small schools is one in which all students have access to the same challenging courses and are held to the same high standards, most of the schools we visited were struggling with making their school work for all students," the report says. "The survival of the conversion schools may well depend on their ability to meet this challenge."

Responding last week to the report, Tom Vander Ark, the executive director of education for the Gates Foundation, said that it takes "time, resources, and experience" for schools to develop and implement "a rigorous, relevant, coherent course of study mapped to standards."

But good schools are doing that, he said, and "our grants and professional learning communities provide the enabling conditions that at least make this a possibility."

"The alternative of mind-numbing test prep in a disconnected, tracked, and anonymous environment may provide one to two years of test-score improvement, but has no chance of helping all kids graduate college-ready," he added.

On the challenge presented by mixed-ability grouping, Mr. Vander Ark said he considered it "good news" that "people are struggling with the equity issue."

Effective schools blend varied teaching methods with supportive structures like advisory groups and extra help to address individuals' needs, he said.

Another challenge cited in the report is "the economics of sustaining small schools." Among the most successful new schools examined were the smallest, and therefore the most "fragile economically and politically," the report says.
The foundation should help schools and Gates-financed organizations "figure out how to sustain small schools on an ongoing basis," it recommends.

**On the Web**

Read "Making the Case for Small Schools," and "Making Every School a Small School," from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (Both reports require Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

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