

Inside Philanthropy



The State of  
American Philanthropy

Giving for  
K-12 Education

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## **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](https://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](https://insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy).

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# 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 and on the rise, as we illustrate in this brief. Private and family foundations large and small give generously to education, as do community foundations 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 events of 2020 – including the increasing awareness of systemic racism at every level of our society – sharpened that focus. In response, most education philanthropies have unveiled education equity initiatives. It remains to be seen if these programs will lead to a substantial change in priorities (and the direction of actual dollars) going forward. Do funders’ racial justice proclamations signal a determination to tackle the deeply rooted and complex issues that fuel our unequal education system, or are they just a trendy touch-up on business as usual?

As a nonprofit leader who participated in a recent 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

- Private foundations dominated the top 10 list of education funders from 2014 to 2018. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was the largest funder, and the Walton Family Foundation came in second.
- An analysis of Candid data shows that education funding from the top 10 funders increased steadily from 2014 to 2018, reaching almost \$7 billion in 2018.
- Community and corporate foundations also gave at a high level for education, though at a lower than private foundations.

### Who’s Getting

- Charter schools were top recipients of K-12 education philanthropy dollars from 2014–2018, according to Candid data, including California-based Summit Public Schools, the KIPP Foundation, and Success Academy Charter Schools; the Charter School Growth Fund, a pass-through organization, topped the list.
- Teach for America, NewSchools Venture Fund, Math for America, and the Strada Education Fund, which fortifies the link between education and employment, were also 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

- 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.

### Fundraising Now

- In the early days of the pandemic, education nonprofits scrambled and questioned whether funder support would shift elsewhere. But most were able to pivot and make the case for funding dedicated to increasing capacity around remote learning and updating technology to maximize impact.
- Many of the larger organizations had done a considerable amount of fundraising through events and galas, which were put on hold, or adapted to online events. Still, fundraising has remained steady, and many fundraisers have said they will use what they learned to do even more creative virtual fundraising in the future.

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.

It is too early to know exactly what shape U.S. education policy will take under the Biden administration; it's also too soon to predict if its anti-poverty efforts will be sustained over time. 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. 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. Over a decade 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 and on the rise, according to a close analysis of Candid data. In 2014, total giving for education from the top 10 funders in the U.S. was more than \$4 billion; by 2018, it had increased to almost \$7 billion.

For family foundations, education was the top giving area, according to [Trends 2020](#), a survey by the National Center for Family Philanthropy. This is consistent with a Rockefeller Foundation [survey of family foundations](#) around the world, which found that "education was the No. 1 area families cited giving to globally, constituting 29% of the average philanthropic portfolio, followed by health (14%) and art, culture, and sports (10%)."

Philanthropic dollars are dwarfed by government funding for K-12 education. Federal, state and local governments spent a total of \$736 billion in the school year 2016–2017, 27% more than in the 2000–01 school year, 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 2019 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 2018

report: “Nationally, funding inequities continue to be large. The highest-poverty districts in our country receive about \$1,000 less per student than the lowest-poverty districts. The differences are almost twice as large – roughly \$1,800 per student – between districts serving the most students of color and those serving the fewest.”

Nonprofit leaders surveyed by IP in August, 2020, identified racial justice as a priority they believe most philanthropists share. Awareness is particularly high among education-focused funders, according to a recent report by Grantmakers for Education (GFE). For the report “[The Big Vision for the Next Stage of Education Philanthropy](#),” GFE surveyed its members and found that racial justice in education was their highest priority: “When asked to select the overarching thematic area they believe is most important for education funders to focus on over the next one to three years, the single largest share of respondents (39%) chose racial justice in education,” according to the report.

Concern among philanthropists may be high, but recent data released by the Schott Foundation for Education show that giving is low. Working with Candid, Schott analyzed philanthropic giving for racial equity and racial justice between 2017 and 2019, and found both to be “drastically underfunded”: Of the \$14 billion in total funding, just 10% went toward racial equity and 0.8% supported racial justice, as [IP reported](#).

Will the events of 2020 – including racial discrepancies in the toll of the pandemic and high-profile murders of Black Americans at the hands of the police—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 are unveiling 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 our 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](#) (he now ranks No. 4), 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 eye-popping profits.

Private and family foundations are by far the largest funders, making up most of the top 10 donor list. 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 the top 10 funders increased steadily from 2014 to 2018, reaching almost \$7 billion in 2018. Most of these funders give to a variety of other causes besides K-12 education – from global health and womens' entrepreneurship to criminal justice reform and the arts.

### Top 10 K-12 Education Funders 2014 - 2018<sup>1</sup>

Grantmaker	Dollar Value of Grants Awarded
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	\$1.32B
Walton Family Foundation	\$954.11M
Silicon Valley Community Foundation	\$907.29M
W.K. Kellogg Foundation	\$310.99M
Wallace Foundation	\$194.20M
Carnegie Corporation of New York	\$196.87M
Charter School Growth Fund	\$184.10M
Arnold Ventures	\$180.00M
S.D. Bechtel Jr., Foundation	\$162.98M
Eli & Edythe Broad Foundation	\$142.91M

Source: Candid

Note that even though they move hundreds of millions of dollars to nonprofits, the following donor-advised fund managers are not included in this list of top 10 K-12 funders because they are pass-through vehicles for individual giving, and it is nearly impossible for fundraisers to cultivate their donors. In the 2014–2018 period, Schwab moved \$472.83 million to education nonprofits; The National Philanthropic Trust gave \$214.98 million; the National Christian Charitable Foundation (NCCF) gave \$196.13 million; and Fidelity's contributions totaled \$1.18 billion.

Beyond the top 10 list, 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 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 is a major emphasis of the [Robertson Foundation's](#) K-12 funding.

## Inside Philanthropy August 2020 Survey

*"Schools do not have the resources to keep up with technology advancements and changing issues in response to advanced global economy in terms of jobs and career exploration. Curriculum requirements are not adjusted fast enough to have students at the cutting edge of knowledge to be prepared for their future 10 years in advance."*

—Fundraiser, North Miami Beach, Florida

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, Lauren 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](#).

Only one community foundation, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, which benefits from the technology dollars that flood the region, made it into the list of top 10 education funders. But 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, which range from "less than \$100,000 to more than \$1.7 billion," according to the [Council on Foundations](#).

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. From 2014 to 2018, the top 10 corporate funders gave over \$23 million. Funding for science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) was 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: [Donors Choose](#), the largest classroom funding site, has raised over \$1 billion since it was founded in 2000.

## Who's Getting

A wide variety of nonprofits benefit from all the philanthropic dollars showered on K-12 education. In fact, some major education organizations would likely not exist, at least as currently constituted, without bountiful donations from education philanthropies. The galaxy of education nonprofits that have grown over the last 20 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.

### Top 10 K-12 Education Grant Recipients 2014 - 2018<sup>2</sup>

Recipient	Dollar Value of Grants Received
Charter School Growth Fund	\$313.58M
Teach for America	\$252.12M
New Schools Venture Fund	\$218.32M
Summit Public Schools	\$169.28M
School District of Hillsborough County Florida	\$150.72M
KIPP Foundation	\$126.83M
Strada Education Network	\$124.68M
Success Academy Charter Schools, Inc.	\$115.93M
Math for America	\$114.05M
Council of Chief State School Officers	\$96.14M

Source: Candid

Overall, charter schools fared well in terms of their share of education philanthropy dollars from 2014 to 2018. The Charter School Growth Fund (which also appears on the Top Grantmakers list) topped the recipients list, and large charter school systems including the KIPP Foundation, Success Academy Charter Schools, and Summit Public Schools (based in California and Washington state) made it into the top 10, as well, underscoring philanthropy's broad support for charter education.

Teach for America was the second-largest recipient of K-12 philanthropic funds from 2014 to 2018. Math for America, another nonprofit that focuses specifically on teaching (STEM teachers, in this case), was also in the top 10. The NewSchools Venture Fund, which supports a variety of education initiatives and innovations, was third on the recipient list.

The Strada Education Network, Inc., which promotes the link between education and employment, also made the top 10, as did the Council of Chief State School Officers, an organization of state education officials.

Countless nonprofits that didn't make it onto the top 10 list 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 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 Nation’s 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 10 K-12 funders include marquee names in the philanthropy world, like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (which tops the list, and gave

\$1.32 billion between 2014 and 2018) as well as lower-profile funders like the Ely and Edythe Broad Foundation (No. 10 on the list, with donations totaling almost \$143 million). The Walton Family Foundation (built on the Walmart fortune), was the second-largest K-12 donor, giving over \$954 million during that period.

Subject	Amount Funded
Secondary Education	\$5.99B
Charter School Education	\$3.58B
Elementary Education	\$2.14B
Middle School Education	\$944.94M
STEM Education	\$804.19M

Source: Candid

The Silicon Valley Community Foundation (SVCF) was the only community foundation to make the top 10 funder list. **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 donor and a recipient: It made both top 10 lists for philanthropic giving and receiving from 2014 to 2018, according to Candid. It gave away \$184.10 million, and topped the K-12 grant recipient list at

\$313.58 million. An intermediary that operates as a venture capital fund, it receives monies from a [long list of foundations](#), 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 1,075 schools that serve nearly 500,000 students in 31 states.

As mentioned above, charter schools featured prominently in the list of top K-12 grant recipients from 2014–2018. Along with the Charter School Growth Fund, specific charter networks, including Summit Public Schools (which received \$169.28 million), the KIPP Foundation (\$126.83 million), and Success Academy Charter Schools, Inc. (\$115.93 million) were all included in the top 10.

The Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida (Tampa area) was the only school district included on the top 10 K-12 recipient list. The district is the largest in Florida and the eighth-largest in the country, and it’s been the 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 Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a project that was widely considered a failure, as IP has [previously 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.

[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).

Year	Dollar Value of Grants	Grantmakers	Grants Awarded	Recipients
<b>2014</b>	\$4.09B	24,157	125,662	28,386
<b>2015</b>	\$5.95B	29,059	185,068	64,522
<b>2016</b>	\$6.46B	28,856	198,525	38,023
<b>2017</b>	\$6.84B	27,179	128,404	31,743
<b>2018</b>	\$6.75B	27,983	133,665	34,459

Source: Candid



In the category of Academics, the three interest areas identified by the largest number of GFE members were Literacy and Language, Integrated STEM, and the Arts (in that order). In the category of Pedagogy, Standards and Assessments was the top interest area, followed by Workforce/Career and Technical Education, then Blended and Online Learning. In the School Models category, New School Models/Designs was identified as an interest area by almost twice as many funders as Charter Schools/Charter School Networks, and by 14 times more funders choosing Alternative Education. In the category of School Level and Student Support, a large majority of funders selected OST [Out of School Time]/Expanded Learning/Extended Learning (e.g., summer and after school), Dropout Prevention/Disconnected youth came in second, and Student Mentoring was third.

Corporations are also major K-12 education funders but don't give as much as family and private foundations. The top 10 corporate funders gave over \$23 billion between 2014–2018. These companies included tech titans like Salesforce, Amazon and Google, and traditional corporate giants like Wal-Mart and AT&T. The top funder was Kaiser Permanente; its Southern California Corporate Giving Program donated over \$6 million. Next in line was the AbbVie Inc. Contributions Program (\$5 million), and the steel and mining company ArcelorMittal USA LLC, which gave over \$3 million through its corporate giving program. The area of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) was a priority for many corporate funders. Donations in this category totaled close to \$1.5 million from top 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 in education was identified as a top priority for funders in a [recent survey](#) 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.

**Charter Schools.** Three 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 recently published [research](#) in 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 [recent survey](#). One-quarter of funders surveyed thought school choice was an area where philanthropists risked playing a negative role.

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, the executive director of Grantmakers for Education points 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 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.”



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—Celine Coggins, executive director, Grantmakers for Education



**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.

### Funder Spotlight

#### STUPSKI FOUNDATION



The Stupski Foundation’s support for education is informed by real life experience. Larry Stupski was a first-generation college student; so was his wife Joyce, who established the foundation after her husband’s death in 2013. Jennifer Nguyen, director of post-secondary success at Stupski, knows that applying to college and figuring out how to pay for it can be challenging for first generation students. That’s why Stupski channeled almost \$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 on the path to college.

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.

Education philanthropists are also excited about an expanded role for hybrid learning going forward. Grantmakers for Education’s [recent survey](#) of education philanthropists identified “Improvements to online and hybrid learning” as one of six priority areas that “offer the strongest opportunities for systemic change.”

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

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 has 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 recent [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 August 2020 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), which was the second-largest recipient of education philanthropy dollars between 2014-2018, recruits and trains teachers to work in low-income communities around the country. More than 64,000 people have participated in the program since it started in 1990, according to the TFA website, and today 5,450 corps members work with 367,011 students in 2,450 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 [2018-2019 Benchmarking report](#): “A focus on the whole learner has ramped up funder

support for social and emotional learning and family and community engagement. Funders will continue to increase investments in many learning approaches, including personalized learning or learner-centered learning, with some of the strongest growth in support for social and emotional learning. Similarly, funders will continue to expand investments beyond the K-12 classroom that ensure learners have the support from family and community they need to be successful.”

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](#).

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 philanthropy that made the education funder top 10, includes social and emotional learning in its funding priorities. It also supports quality after school and

## 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, managing partner, City Fund

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](#).

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 “workforce development and career technical education programs,” and 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 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.

## 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.

GFE's recent survey of education funders 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 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. "We're staring down a second consecutive school year where most states won't measure student performance, and to me, that is terrifying. When I first started teaching in 1995, schools and

districts didn't have to publish data about performance of subpopulations. So the kid of color with special needs sits in the back of the class and gets nothing. I am pretty sure we don't want to go back to that."

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."

### Funder Spotlight



The 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 Michigan'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.

It remains to be seen whether the shift in priorities reflected in the GFE survey indicates that education funders are moving away from emphasis on academics and achievement. 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 will address 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.

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 recently 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 Neerav Kingsland, who heads 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."

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. The Foundation [describes its approach](#) as follows: “Wallace identifies important knowledge gaps in our areas of interest; funds real-world test to yield answers to fill those gaps; and then disseminates what has been learned to policymakers, influential thinkers and those who

### 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 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.*”



work in the fields we cover.” In terms of K-12 education, the foundation’s priorities include school leadership, afterschool, summer programs, 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 today 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 the events of 2020 and increasing awareness of racial and income inequities brought the need to work directly with those on the ground front and center. This approach is evident in new programs many philanthropists are unveiling.

In its new [2025 Strategic Plan](#), the Walton Family Foundation emphasized incorporating community voices in its funding priorities (the plan’s tagline: “Learning and Leading Together.”) According to Caryl Sterns, Walton’s executive director, “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.”

## Inside Philanthropy

### August 2020 Survey

*“[Funders] need to understand the many elements that make remote learning effective or not effective and recognize that there is a major disruption to both K-12 and college education underway, and if funders care about preserving what’s essential and critical in public education, they will need to step in to help. Funders seems so intent on innovation in education that they fail to see what’s valuable about “traditional” public education, the amazing work that teachers do, etc. The risk is that education will become more privatized, less democratic, and less of a true public good.”*

—Grants development consultant, United States

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.

### 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 64,000 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.

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 2020 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.** The Walton Foundation also 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.

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 recently urged the Biden administration to adopt a “[racial equity stimulus](#)” to narrow the Black-white wealth gap.

**Responding to the Pandemic with 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 in cities including [Chicago](#) and [Philadelphia](#).

In Los Angeles, the schools superintendent teamed up with philanthropist Anthony Pritzker to create [L.A. Students Most in Need](#), which raised money from wealthy donors to provide meals to students and their families facing hunger after shuttered businesses put many out of work. In [San Francisco](#), local political and education leaders announced an initiative to address COVID learning loss and improve school quality overall. The city supervisors who designed the plan are seeking philanthropic support to kick off the ambitious \$2 million plan, and if it is successful, they hope it will increase public pressure to boost school funding throughout California.

The [VELA Education Fund](#) is a funding vehicle that the Walton Family Foundation created in collaboration with the Charles Koch Institute. The fund, which will support “innovative, out-of-system, student-centric opportunities,” kicked off with a “Meet the Moment” grant program that provided “fast grants in response to COVID learning disruptions.” The “fast grants” were distributed with a minimum of red tape, and supported community-generated projects like “[pandemic pods](#)” in [disadvantaged communities](#), organized by the National Parents Union.

## Perspectives on Equity

Race 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 half-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.

As noted earlier, education funders [surveyed by Grantmakers for Education](#) ranked racial justice in education the No. 1 thematic area they believed most important for education funders to focus on over the next one to three years.

### 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 six 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 Ms. P. Taught Me: Uprisings.

Celine Coggins, GFE’s 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 out to less than \$2 per student.”

Is that about to change? Today, most of the largest education funders include racial equity in their list of priorities. The Gates Foundation, for example, kicks off with racial equity on its website, describing its [goal as follows](#): “To significantly increase the number of Black and Latino students and students experiencing poverty who graduate from high school, enroll in a postsecondary institution, and are on track in their first year to obtain a credential with labor-market value.”

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.

Some foundations pivoted before the events of 2020 to make racial justice more of a focus, including the [Nellie Mae Education Foundation](#), New England’s largest education funder. The foundation intentionally diversified its staff and board in recent years, then further increased its support for [organizations promoting racial equity](#) after George Floyd’s murder and the beginning of the pandemic.

When the NewSchools Venture Fund recently added “Diverse Leaders” and “Racial Equity” as new investment areas, 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, which will be chosen by a [diverse council](#) of community members.

## Leadership Spotlight: Frances Messano



newschools  
venture fund

*“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, president, NewSchools Venture Fund

City Fund has made an internal commitment that its team and board will be majority Black and Latinx by 2023, and that it will steer the balance of its 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 other students that struggle within the educational system, including those with disabilities, English language learners, immigrant and undocumented students, girls and women, and LGBTQ+ youth. As a nonprofit leader who participated in IP's August, 2020, 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 a report on a Grantmakers for Education survey titled "[Trends in Education Philanthropy, Benchmarking 2018-19](#)," makes clear: "Seventy-five percent of respondents targeted funding with an explicit focus on low-income populations, ethnic or racial minorities, people who identify as LGBTQ, immigrants and refugees, women and girls and/or people with disabilities. Among respondents, efforts to promote educational equity primarily focused on providing resources to communities least-well-served to increase equitable learning opportunities for youth."

But despite this consensus, support for these least-well-served communities continues to fall short. For example, 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."

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, announced [\\$4.1M in grants](#) to diversify the pipeline of students in the computer science field. The

## Research Spotlight

### Trends in Education Philanthropy Benchmarking 2018-19

*"Seventy-five percent of respondents targeted funding with an explicit focus on low-income populations, ethnic or racial minorities, people who identify as LGBTQ, immigrants and refugees, women and girls and/or people with disabilities. Among respondents, efforts to promote educational equity primarily focused on providing resources to communities least-well-served to increase equitable learning opportunities for youth."*



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 recent round of grantmaking. Native Americans have been routinely overlooked by philanthropy, as [IP has reported](#). The CZI funding will support programs to promote language preservation and intergenerational connections for Native American youth.



*“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

# A Closer Look at Funder Types

## Private Foundations

Private and family foundations are the largest funders in the education space, giving a total of almost \$7 billion between 2014 and 2018. The people who donate these staggering sums are among the wealthiest people on the planet. Bill Gates and Melinda French Gates, whose foundation donates the largest amount to K-12 education causes, are estimated to be worth [\\$128.3 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 [\\$247 billion](#) and the Walton Family Foundation is second on the top 10 education funders list.

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 plain 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 (\$1.32 billion and \$954.11 million respectively between 2014 and 2018), they represent just a small fraction of the extraordinary wealth these billionaires have accumulated.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, another on the list of top 10 education funders 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. According to the foundation website, "Wallace today aims to better the lives of disadvantaged children in America's urban areas and foster the vitality of the arts for all. In particular, we focus on [school leadership](#), [afterschool programming](#), [summer learning](#), [expanded learning](#), [building audiences for the arts](#) and [arts education for young people](#)."

The [Carnegie Corporation of New York](#) is also a top education funder. It donated \$196.87 million between 2014–2018, according to Candid. 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’ socio-political 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 Funder 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” and makes grants in the areas of [education](#), [youth homelessness](#) and [impact-driven philanthropy](#). 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, as discussed earlier, 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.

The largest corporate education funder from 2014 to 2018 was Kaiser Permanente's Southern Region Corporate Giving Program, which donated over \$6.2 million. AbbVie, a pharmaceutical giant, is the next largest corporate education donor, donating \$5 million. The two largest corporate donors prioritize STEM education.

The steel and mining company ArcelorMittal USA, which is third on the list of corporate education donors, gave \$3.4 million between 2014 and 2018, and also made STEM a priority.

The next largest corporate education funders are tech titans Amazon, Salesforce and Google. In one recent 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 more than \$80 million 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

## Inside Philanthropy August 2020 Survey

*"One area that I think the sector 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

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. [STEM education and workforce development](#) are also top Google priorities.

Many other corporate funders give to education causes. The [Allstate Foundation](#), started by the insurance giant, supports social emotional and service learning, and aspires to “Reach 25 million young people per year with SEL and service-learning resources by 2022.” The [Bank of America Charitable Foundation](#) supports K-12 education by fostering economic mobility, funding college readiness, apprenticeships and financial literacy.

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

## Community Foundations

There are approximately 750 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 the only one to make the top 10 list of education funders, according to Candid data, coming in third after ed funding giants Gates and Walton. SVCF’s hefty bottomline is no surprise, given the tech money fueling Silicon Valley. A number of tech leaders have used SVCF as their funding vehicle, among them Marc Zuckerberg until he created his own LLC for grantmaking, 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.

### Corporate Funder Spotlight



The Cisco Foundation’s education strategy mainly 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. Foundation 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. The conversion allowed Mind Research to extend its reach from 12,000 to 1.3 million elementary students.

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, as IP reported.

The Oregon Community Foundation (OCF), number five on the list of top education funders in the community foundation category, 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.

Because of their regional focus and local connections, community foundations, at their best, can respond quickly to unexpected crises. OCF was one of many community foundations to respond to requests for support in the wake of COVID lockdowns, as IP reported.

Many community funders around the country shifted focus to help students and school districts adapt to remote learning, according to another IP report: “The community foundations interviewed here have changed their education giving strategies, funding efforts they normally would not—such as

meal distribution for students and their families or providing computers and internet access for children to log onto remote learning platforms.”

## 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).

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was the largest education funder in the U.S. from 2014 to 2018, as we’ve discussed, with the [Walton Family Foundation](#) coming in second. 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. Stephen Bechtel created the eponymous global engineering and construction company, and the [S.D. Bechtel Foundation](#), a spend-down foundation that promoted STEM education. The Bechtel Foundation invested all its assets and closed its doors at the end of 2020.

Other billionaire education donors who didn't make it onto the top 10 list include [Mark Zuckerberg](#) and [Priscilla Chan](#), whose Facebook fortune grows larger by the day. K-12 education is a priority for the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI). 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](#).

Tesla CEO [Elon Musk](#), who is vying with Amazon's Jeff Bezos to qualify as the richest man in the world, also gives to education causes. Musk's wealth grew by \$150 billion in 2020 alone—three times the annual budget of the NIH, as [IP reported](#), and while it's unclear what direction Musk's philanthropy will take, STEM education appears to be a priority. He gave \$5 million to the education platform Khan Academy in 2021, and also 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.

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](#). After the pandemic closed schools in March, 2020, Salesforce stepped in with donations to [school districts across the country](#).

## 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.

[Laurene Powell Jobs](#), Steve Jobs' widow, supports education-related issues through her group, the Emerson Collective. She works closely with 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 are directed toward [K-12 public school reform](#). Its two sub-initiatives, “reform from within” and “drive change by generating external pressure,” support public and charter school systems, respectively. In New York City, the foundation has supported the public school reform agenda Children First, as well as the [New York City Charter School Center](#).

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 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.

## 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.

## 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 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**, which was seventh in the list of major education funders in the U.S. from 2014–2018, was the top recipient of philanthropic funds during that same time period. The fund received donations from others in the education philanthropy top 10, including the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**, the **Broad Foundation** and the **Carnegie Corporation of New York**, evidence of education philanthropy’s frequently incestuous approach. 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 about \$125 million to nearly 90 local education organizations across the country and made \$52 million in grant commitments for 2022. 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.

### Inside Philanthropy August 2020 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

In contrast with these groups, 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.

**Donors Choose** 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 and PPE to lab



equipment and math manipulatives. Since Donors Choose 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.

NPX is a newcomer to the education philanthropy scene. The for-profit company is pursuing a pay-for-success model with its donor impact funds. “Nonprofits are tired of the gala model of fundraising, and donors are, too,” NPX’s Lindsey Beck told [Inside Philanthropy](#). “Donors say, ‘I don’t know the impact of my giving. Is this community better off after all the donations?’ In many cases, the answer may be no, but the bigger problem is that we just don’t know. With the donor impact fund, your money doesn’t move until impact happens. Money and impact are explicitly linked.” To choose the education organizations that would receive funding, NPX started with a group of about 50 nonprofits, and ultimately selected three. During the five-step selection process, NPX gathered information from the nonprofits, consulted outside experts and conducted due diligence.

## Intermediary Spotlight

### Education Funder Strategy Group

Education Funder Strategy Group (ESFG) is a “learning community of leading foundations,” that focuses on the entire spectrum of education from early childhood to college and career readiness. Among its many goals, it aims to increase deeper learning outcomes to adequately prepare students for the modern world; help build the public’s overall commitment to public education; and to dramatically improve learning outcomes for all students. ESFG works with a number of nonprofits, including the Gates Foundation, Albert Shaker Institute, the Ford Foundation, and the National Education Association Foundation.

## Fundraising Now

Americans still believe that education is the key to a good life, but the pandemic and social unrest further highlighted the enormous funding needs—and disparities—in the K-12 education sector. Much of the giving in this arena during 2020 was a matter of damage control, trying to curb learning loss through a combination of greater interconnectivity for remote learning, one-on-one tutoring, at-home learning pods and more. At the same time, education nonprofits became more aware than ever of the deep and lasting shortfalls in schools, specifically the inequities facing BIPOC students and lower-income communities.

After COVID-19, no one can doubt the increasing importance of technology in American lives. Girls Who Code is on a mission to increase the number of women in technology careers. Laura Meli, vice president of development, said the nine-year-old nonprofit saw increased small-dollar and family foundation giving in 2020. “We quickly pivoted our flagship Summer Immersion Program to a virtual model and served over 5,000 young women during the pandemic year, and we started a new program called Code at Home with over 30,000 downloads. Over half of the girls we serve are from historically underrepresented groups, and these girls needed our support more than ever. We are on track to see record growth in 2021.”

Teach for America, one of the most prolific fundraisers in the nonprofit K-12 education space, saw a resurgence of support from its core donors and alumni. It reported steady, even slightly higher fundraising results for 2020. The organization’s mission is to recruit and select college graduates from top universities to serve as teachers in 52 low-income communities across the country. “We were

lucky. The pandemic brought to the forefront how important schools are, and exacerbated the inequities, encouraging our donors to double down, and we couldn’t be more appreciative,” said Meredith Boak, senior vice president of development. “It was a twin pandemic for us—COVID and racial inequity.”

With some 3,000 to 4,000 new teachers recruited annually and over 60,000 alumni, Teach for America can call on a wide range of potential donors nationwide. Boak said the organization was about to launch its annual in-person, on-campus training session when COVID hit. “We had eight weeks to pivot to virtual training and provide housing, food and online learning to our new recruits,” said Boak, noting that these were new college graduates with no other sources of income. Fortunately, the Robertson Foundation stepped up with support.

Boak says it was humbling to see how donors supported Teach for America during a trying and unstable financial time. Individual giving is up, as the organization said it was sometimes easier to meet one-on-one with major donors. “This is purely logistics,” said Boak. “These are some of the busiest people who now had time to meet in person, giving us more ability to connect during the pandemic.”

Family foundations and donor-advised funds also held steady, and Boak was surprised by the number of corporations that stepped up their giving, presumably because they recognized how important schools are to their employees, clients and customers. Foundations saw Teach for America’s needs, trusted the organization, asked the right questions, and loosened restrictions to provide urgent funding to the organization.

Teach for America's held its largest gala in the New York-Connecticut-New Jersey area online in 2020, with a weeklong event featuring a fireside chat, a trivia contest and a virtual celebration that raised more money than ever before. She expects that the nonprofit will move to some sort of hybrid gala now that people are able to meet in person while retaining some forms of the online gala. "We need to keep in mind, what are the objectives, what do we want to accomplish with our events," she said.

## TEACHFORAMERICA

*"We were lucky. The pandemic brought to the forefront how important schools are, and exacerbated the inequities, encouraging our donors to double down, and we couldn't be more appreciative. It was a twin pandemic for us—COVID and racial inequity."*

—Meredith Boak, senior vice president of development, Teach for America

Success Academy Charter Schools is one of the nation's largest recipients of charitable K-12 education funds. Founded by CEO Eva Moskowitz in 2006, the charter school operator now has 47 schools serving 1,700 students in New York City, funded by local taxpayers and philanthropic donations.

In the early part of the pandemic, its leaders witnessed donors moving huge amounts of funding to healthcare and basic needs like food, but by May of 2020, they had more funders seeing the need to shift toward education funding. "Now, we're more comfortable reaching out digitally," said Paula Hunchar, senior managing director of advancement. "We have more confidence to face a crisis that hopefully won't happen again. After the deer-in-the-headlights moment, we went into fourth gear, and we now know that urgency and crisis bring our donors together."

"We hesitated at the beginning, like other nonprofits, but realized that none of this made school less important to our kids and families," said Jody Friedman, Success Academy's executive vice president for advancement. "We were very upset and worried, like every other nonprofit and for-profit company, when the pandemic hit. We saw the need for more philanthropy than before and found our approaches to donors were welcome. We now know communicating strongly, clearly and consistently is key."

Foundations in particular stepped up with new challenge grants and an easing of required paperwork and deadlines, said Friedman. Former supporters who were no longer active came back to the fold, saying "this is one way I can help, this is something I can do." Like other organizations, Success Academy's 2020 April gala was canceled, but most of the funding had already arrived, and pledges were fulfilled, keeping the nonprofit in a good position. Its 2021 gala and commencement were completely virtual, and although supporters missed being together, donations came in from 49 states and 14 countries.

Many other donors chose to support K-12 education by contributing to community foundations that directly support families and students where they live. New York Community Trust helps the nation's largest school system by advocating for better schools and improved literacy, training teachers, and making schools better for English language learners, among other strategies. "The pandemic had a universal and profound impact on K-12 education," said Shawn Morehead, vice president for grants. "Our grants to nonprofits helped the school system transition to remote learning and assessment, provided online access to families in homeless shelters, and helped

families of students with disabilities. We also established an unprecedented collaboration of arts organizations to create online arts education curricula available to all city schools.” One of its grants even created online instructional materials that were adopted throughout the country.

There were a few education causes in particular that resonated the most with donors to NYCT during the pandemic—the lack of digital access, including hardware and internet access, and widespread food insecurity for many children who formerly received meals at now-closed schools, according to Morehead. NYCT saw the urgency and responded with speed. The trust worked with a group of donors to create the NYC COVID-19 Response and Impact Fund in March 2020, which quickly moved funds to nonprofits in the human services, arts and culture sectors. The foundation also created the New York Community Trust Emergency Response Fund, which supported other areas, including education.

DonorsChoose, which was founded in 2000 by a high school teacher in the Bronx, continues to be the education charity of choice for many donors large and small because it allows them to support a specific request from public school teachers for much-needed classroom materials for their students. Janelle Lin, vice president of business development, said DonorsChoose didn’t have its final numbers yet, but that fundraising results likely held steady for 2020. “Even during a tough year, teachers saw more than 336,000 of their DonorsChoose projects get funded between 2020 and 2021. I think this really speaks to how dedicated our teachers are to creating innovative classroom and virtual experiences for their students, even in the midst of so much readjustment.”

Tops on donor “give” lists were books (18,376 teacher requests funded; \$29.7 million); educational kits and games (13,260 funded, \$24.7 million); and classroom basics (11,945 funded, \$14.8 million). With the backdrop of COVID-19 and social unrest, Lin said donors were keen on funding projects responding to the moment. Teachers had to request multiples of basic school supplies since students could no longer share. Donors supported requests for new technology and remote learning kits with items like notebooks and earbuds to help teachers engage their students from afar. Before the pandemic, teacher materials were shipped directly to schools, and now, these materials go directly to the teachers’ homes, easing their worry during a stressful time.

The nonprofit also had over 256 matching gifts during the past year, coming from philanthropists, companies and foundations, which helped raise \$38.2 million from citizen donors. Partners like Ford, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Sonic Drive-In also sponsored donation-matching events on the site. Lin said the nonprofit has also seen a shift in corporate and foundation funding

### Fundraiser Spotlight

## **DONORS CHOOSE**

Founded in 2000, Donors Choose has grown to nearly 5 million supporters who have funded over 2 million projects. When COVID-19 forced school closings around the country, it recognized that the “nation’s most vulnerable students faced the greatest obstacles to learning.” To address these challenges, it made shipping teaching materials more flexible, increased funding transparency, and kept up-to-date information on global supply shortages.

toward classroom projects focused on racial equity. “Nearly every company who comes to us these days wants to know how we can help them celebrate diversity and build more inclusive and anti-racist classrooms. They want a direct and easy way for their employees to support racial equity in the classroom.”

Over the past three years, thousands of public school teachers have chosen to share their demographic information with the nonprofit, giving DonorsChoose a direct path to supporting teachers of color or schools with predominantly Black or Latino students. Concerns about racial equity were also reflected in a survey of around 12,000 teachers on what they needed the most in

2020. One conclusion was that needs were clearly magnified for BIPOC students, “who are more likely to be learning remotely and without the necessary tools, technology and access to the internet. We’re going to be developing many new partnerships focused on addressing racial and economic inequity,” said Linn.

The second concern that emerged in the survey was that teachers felt they needed more professional development when it came to their students’ mental health and emotional learning skills. Allstate recognized that need early in 2021 and funded more than \$2 million in social-emotional learning projects. “We expect to see more focus on this need in schools,” Linn said.

### Fundraiser 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 450,000 girls through its programs and clubs. Over half of the girls it has served are from historically underrepresented groups, including those who are Black, Latinx or from low-income households.



# 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 education for the whole child, 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. Conversations with philanthropic leaders indicate that the pandemic's disproportionate impact on low-income and BIPOC communities, and the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, have triggered a tremendous amount of soul searching among funders. Today, virtually all of the top education foundations are promoting racial justice 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.

Are these permanent changes or a temporary reaction to extraordinary events? Michael Roberts, President and CEO of [First Nations Development Institute](#) in Colorado, which works to strengthen Native American communities, welcomed the less restrictive funding some philanthropies practiced in 2020. "During the pandemic, some funders came back to us and said, 'use your dollars however you like. We trust you as long term partners,'" he said. "It was crazy freeing—and such a different feeling not having to burden partners on the ground with excessive reporting demands." But Roberts doubts

this signals a fundamental shift in priorities. “I personally think this unrestricted funding is a data point, not a trend. I’d like to believe it will go into the future, but I don’t count on it. It’s the same with racial justice. I don’t have faith that in three or four years racial justice will still be a major focus for philanthropy. I hope philanthropy will prove me wrong.”

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, assistant professor of education at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, 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



*“Philanthropy can’t replace government, but we can be a catalyst for change in areas like clean water for Flint residents and closing the digital divide. That’s philanthropy’s best role, I think, to provide out-of-the-box thinking and seed funding, to lay the groundwork for a future that is more inclusive and better for all.”*

—Ridgway White, president and CEO, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

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, the shift to a new administration in Washington appears to have diminished philanthropy's influence on education policy. 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 new 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.

Barnum also suggests that pandemic stimulus dollars flowing into school district coffers could make the education system less dependent on philanthropy. As Barnum put it, "The nearly \$200 billion in one-time stimulus funds have left school districts in an unusual position—flush with cash. That makes it harder for philanthropies to dangle a small amount of money to get school systems to make big reforms." Meanwhile, Biden's sweeping proposals to lift families out of poverty, if enacted, could drastically change the landscape in which education philanthropists operate.

It's too early to know exactly what shape U.S. education policy will take under the new administration; it's also too soon to predict if Biden's anti-poverty efforts will succeed. 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 managing partner Neerav Kingsland, for one, acknowledged this larger picture as he considered the odds stacked against the students his organization 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."

## Inside Philanthropy

### August 2020 Survey

*"[The philanthropic sector is neglecting] the arts, especially in education. With a focus on STEM, we're making the arts something only rich kids get to have in school, and that's not right."*

—Fundraiser, New York, New York

# Resources for K-12 Education Funding

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# Thank You

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<sup>1</sup>Based on available grantmaker data from Candid. Excludes federal funding, funding by higher education institutions and major donor advised funds (DAFs.)

<sup>2</sup>Based on available grant recipient data from Candid. Excludes government organizations.

## 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.org](mailto:managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.org).