



Education reform, one classroom at a time

Melinda French Gates • February 22, 2010

Sitting on the desk of the secretary of education are dozens of ideas bold enough to finally start solving our country's education crisis. They are contained in applications by 40 states for grants from the Race to the Top fund, a \$4.35 billion piece of the [stimulus package](#) designed to dramatically improve student achievement.

[Congress](#) established strong guidelines to guarantee that states spend Race to the Top money on audacious reforms. Many states responded with equal fortitude, submitting proposals to radically improve how they use data or to adopt college- and career-ready standards — concepts that used to be considered third rails in the world of education. Never before has this country had such an opportunity to remake the way we teach young people.

One reason I am so optimistic about these developments is because, after decades of diffuse reform efforts, they all zero in on the most important ingredient of a great education: effective teachers. The key to helping students learn is making sure that every child has an effective teacher every single year.

Teachers are at the center of our strategy at the [Gates Foundation](#). Since my husband and I started investing in education 10 years ago, our foundation has partnered with more than 1,000 high schools. Our grantmaking wasn't always oriented around effective teaching, but gradually we noticed that the schools with the biggest gains were those doing revolutionary work inside the classroom.

Bill and I see evidence of this every time we visit a school. The 82 schools across the country that have implemented the Knowledge Is Power Program invariably get excellent results from the very same low-income students who tend to struggle at traditional high schools. Last year, we traveled to KIPP Houston High, where 90 percent of the

city as a whole, even though KIPP's students are poorer than their peers in Houston's public school system.

The key to this school's success is its principal, Ken Estrella, and the 44 dedicated and talented teachers on his staff. In one class, we observed three teachers leading small groups of students in integrated bio-engineering and world [health](#) exercises. By urging students to ask penetrating questions about the diseases of the developing world, the teachers were simultaneously helping them master the basics of biology. The lesson plan bore no relation to the passive lecture format that prevails in many schools.

Empirical research confirms what Bill and I have seen in classrooms nationwide. Data show that an effective teacher has more impact on student [performance](#) than any other school-based factor. If African American students could be guaranteed teachers in the top 25 percent of their profession throughout high school, the gap between their test scores and those of white students would disappear.

So why hasn't education policy focused more on raising teacher effectiveness? The country has tried a lot of (outrageously expensive) reforms that don't improve student outcomes — such as reducing class size by one or two students and paying teachers to get master's degrees. Part of the problem is that it's so hard to measure teaching. Anyone who has ever been inspired by a teacher knows that

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NO, I have some rules!

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