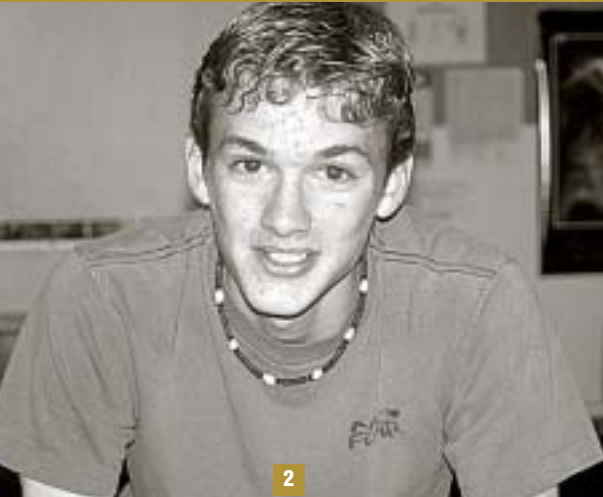


1 & 3) A grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation helped Alaska's remote Chugach School District to create a school-improvement model that emphasizes individualized learning, cultural and real-world relevance, and rigorous academics. Often, learning takes place in the district's splendid outdoors. (Photos by Doug Penn)

2) Michael Grande, a senior at Whittier Community School, went to flight school as part of his individual learning plan, something all students have in the Chugach School District. (Photo by Rhonda Barton)



4) President George W. Bush presents the Chugach School District with the 2001 Baldrige National Quality Award. With the president are, from left to right: Don Evans, Secretary of U.S. Department of Commerce; Nathaniel Moore, student; and Richard DeLorenzo, superintendent. (Photo courtesy of Chugach School District)



RIGOR, RELEVANCE, AND RELATIONSHIPS

The Three R's of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

By Denise Jarrett Weeks

SEATTLE, Washington—“Tell them to go to hell.”

As the story goes, that's what Bill Gates Sr.—the father of Seattle's famous billionaire and a regent of the University of Washington—barked when the state legislature restricted affirmative action by public agencies, including for university admissions.

Telling the story is Paul T. Hill, who directs the Center on Reinventing Public Education on the UW campus. Hill's office is across a brick plaza from the Gothic-style hall where the regents meet and steps away from Gates Hall, the new law school building named for the patriarch. So, figuratively and in the course of researching education policy and reform, Hill's path crosses the elder Gates's, and he's long observed the family's involvement in education.

Bill Gates Sr. helps to run the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for his son and daughter-in-law. Microsoft Corporation cofounder Bill Gates III and his wife, Melinda, merged two previous philanthropies to create the \$26 billion foundation four years ago. It is the largest philanthropy in the world. While boldly reaching around the globe to improve world health, the foundation keeps its education philanthropy trained almost exclusively on U.S. schools. Hill thinks it's the elder Gates's passion to see this nation's disadvantaged

kids go to college that is the heart behind that choice.

“He feels passionately about access to great universities for minority and poor kids,” Hill says. “He also knows that the fundamental problem is that they're not prepared well enough”—improving K–12 schools is the crisis that must be solved so that every young person can be prepared for college.

“He really thinks that this is a fundamental social injustice in the United States, and that maybe a really big philanthropy can do something about it,” Hill says, pausing to consider his own take on the elder Gates's motivations. “I don't have privileged information here, but I bet my car!”

Giving Back

It's a safe bet. The foundation's executive director for education, Tom Vander Ark, works closely with Gates Sr., and he says this about him: “Bill has a great heart and a great intellect. I think he feels very strongly that because his family has had the good fortune that it has, he seeks simply to do the right thing.”

A retired lawyer, Bill Gates Sr., 78, cochairs the foundation with Patty Stonesifer, a former senior vice president with Microsoft. They sit with Bill and Melinda on a four-person executive committee that makes all the funding decisions. The Gates

Foundation gives to four areas:

global health, the Pacific Northwest, library-based public access to computing, and education.

To help prepare students to go to college and succeed once they're there—particularly poor and minority students—the foundation funds scholarships and the development of small high schools where instruction can be personalized.

Like many other large family foundations, the Gates Foundation was built on the wealth of big business. Bill and Melinda Gates endowed the foundation from their estimated \$43 billion personal wealth from Microsoft. Each year, they give away about \$1 billion—directing \$413 million to education last year alone.

Bill and Melinda have said they intend to give away 95 percent of their wealth before they die. And the elder Gates has said, “From those to whom much is given, much is expected.” He insists that businesses—and individuals who make their wealth from business enterprises—have an obligation to give back to the society that made it possible for them to prosper.

“There's nowhere else in the world . . . that people can accrue the kind of fortunes that happen here,” he told Bill Moyers on the PBS show, *NOW*. “Your wealth is a function of being an American.”

Providing Air Cover

Salon magazine once wrote that the younger Bill Gates's philanthropy reveals him to be a “bleeding heart do-gooder liberal.” However that may be, it's bedrock business principles that undergird the charity. When the foundation looks to give money to education—and no, it doesn't accept unsolicited grant proposals—it chooses organizations where strong school leaders are already working with the community to improve schools through a shared vision, high standards, measures of progress and results, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

In fact, when the foundation looked for someone to head its education program, it tapped Tom Vander Ark, a former corporate executive who was superintendent of the Federal Way School District south of Seattle. Vander Ark had been a senior executive for a \$5 billion retail business before becoming one of the nation's first businessmen to lead a public school district. While at Federal Way, Vander Ark's business background both served to spark innovation and to ignite political firestorms, he says.

“I went around setting off land mines by trying to impose business solutions in an educational setting,” says Vander Ark. However, he learned that the business community can be a valuable ally to an embattled

CONSIDER THIS

16

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundationwww.gatesfoundation.org

While getting computer technology to students is one of the foundation's key objectives—it has put computers with Internet access into nearly 11,000 public libraries, taught 1,000 teachers in Washington how to use technology in their teaching, and touts high-tech high schools among the new small schools it sponsors—it isn't beholden to Microsoft Corporation, says Tom Vander Ark.

"We have more than an arm's length relationship with Microsoft," he says. "That means that we don't coordinate efforts. We don't collaborate in grantmaking or purchases. When we buy things, we either buy them at retail like everybody else or get a donation from Microsoft. So our relationship with them is like any other foundation's would be."

The foundation does expect its grantees to maximize technology's potential to facilitate teaching and learning. In the rural isolation of the Chugach School District, for example, technology is the conduit by which relationships are fostered over great distances—between teachers and students in far-flung schools, and between students and mentors who work in the cities. Technology is integrated into everything students do, but Superintendent Richard DeLorenzo stipulates: "We never said it's 'the answer,' it's just the accelerator of a good vision."

Reinventing Schools Coalitionwww.reinventingschools.org

This nonprofit works with rural school districts to implement the Quality Schools Model.

Oregon Small Schools Initiative

Employers for Educational Excellence

www.e3oregon.org

E3 is coordinating the Oregon Small Schools Initiative, a project of the Gates Foundation and Meyer Memorial Trust.

school leader, providing "air cover" by helping to advocate for high expectations for all students. "It's tough when a superintendent has to make the case to the community alone," he says.

Businesses can illustrate the changing nature of the workplace and what that means for education, he says. "High expectations are not only important for the workplace, they're important for the health of our civic institutions. Closing the achievement gap is not just a workforce development issue, it's a social justice issue," he says.

Reinventing High Schools

That only 7 percent of young people from low-income families graduate from college is an "outrage" in today's knowledge economy, the foundation states on its Web site, and it places the blame on large, impersonal high schools. "Our high schools are the least effective part of the American education system," Vander Ark wrote in *Education Week*.

Melinda Gates told members of the National Conference of State Legislatures in San Francisco last summer, "We must reinvent our high schools so that they give all students a new version of the three R's: rigor, relationships, and relevance."

In 10 years, she said, there ought to be at least 10,000 new small high schools—of no more than 400 students each—in which college-prep

curricula are the "default curricula" meant for every student. So far, the foundation has sponsored about 600 new schools and helped more than 1,100 existing high schools to restructure into smaller learning environments.

By the end of the decade, the Gateses hope to see at least 80 percent of all students graduating from college, up from today's 70 percent. "In some cities," says Vander Ark, "that means doubling the graduation rate for minority students and quadrupling the number of students prepared for college."

Oregon: Making Learning Personal

Last spring, the Gates Foundation teamed with Oregon's Meyer Memorial Trust, announcing the Oregon Small Schools Initiative, a program to create high schools that offer rigorous academics in intimate learning environments. With the Gates Foundation committing \$15 million and Meyer Memorial \$10 million, it's the largest private education grant in the state's history, according to the Oregon School Boards Association.

The five-year, \$25 million initiative will seek to restructure 18–20 large high schools and create 8–10 new small schools, keeping the student population of each to 400 or fewer.

See **RIGOR**, Page 46

QUEST

Continued From Page 23

part, to train all staff members in strategies for continuous, data-driven school improvement.

“While these are things we would have done anyway,” says Linda Clark, director of student achievement, “with our size and limited resources, we would have taken small steps over a very long time. The Albertson Foundation gave us ample funds to do it systematically, instead of in bits and pieces, so that we can impact kids who are here now.”

Taking Stock

The Albertson Foundation has been a powerful force for change in Idaho education. Clearly, they’ve got political sway. They’ve even changed public policy. But is there a downside to a private organization having this much influence in the state?

“Agendas need to fit the big picture of education,” says Marilyn Howard. “But the foundation has been very open about its agenda. It has the same goals as the state department: improving student performance and creating high performance schools.”

“It’s hard to think of a downside,” says Eric Exline, public information officer for the Meridian School District. “Every state has limited resources. The Albertson Foun-

dation has provided us with a lot of extra resources—more technology, more staff development, a better process of standardized testing. Is there a downside? It forces change and we have to work hard, but that’s OK.”

Sustainability is sometimes an issue after outside development funds disappear, Exline notes, “but we have continued to maintain all the things given to us by the Albertson Foundation, even though it’s sometimes been a challenge to do so.”

The foundation’s grant pool is directly related to the value of stock, so it does ebb and flow with the economy. A few years ago, when the economy took a dive, Jarvis says the foundation responded by becoming more focused in its efforts.

“If schools look to foundations to fill in all the pieces,” says Yankey, “then they create the possibility that those pieces will go away.”

Because the Albertson Foundation has invested in people and processes instead of simply supplying products, Yankey says, they have riches stored away, even if the funds were to disappear tomorrow.

“Being able to chart some new directions, to focus toward the future, is the huge gift of the Albertson Foundation,” says Marilyn Howard. ■

RIGOR

Continued From Page 16

Employers for Educational Excellence, or E3, has been selected to lead the initiative. E3 was formed by the Oregon Business Council, which has been a staunch advocate of education standards and has long-standing partnerships with state and other key education agencies. Its membership of 40 large businesses include Intel, Tektronix, Weyerhaeuser, Nike, Bank of America, and *The Oregonian*.

At the announcement, Vander Ark told *The Oregonian* that the success of the initiative depended on the involvement of the business community. It will be the job of E3 to bring school communities—including the business sector—together. Karen Phillips, a former North Clackamas School District administrator, was hired by E3 to manage the initiative.

“It will take all of those groups,” she says, “if what we are going to do through this initiative is to help change high schools across Oregon”—not just the 30 schools that will be part of the Gates/Meyer initiative, “but high schools as we know them.”

High schools must change utterly, she says, because “the world has changed its expectations of our children.” To succeed as adults, they will need, more than ever before, to think critically, work collaboratively, and

be self-motivated. They will need technical and personal skills they can apply to new situations—the rate of change in today’s working world spins ever faster.

And they need to go into the “real world” to learn some of these things, says E3 Executive Director René Léger. “If you want students to really understand the different opportunities in health care and what it’s really like to be a physician,” for example, have them spend time with a doctor at a hospital, he says. “There is a richness in the opportunity.”

Alaska: Sharing a Vision of Quality

Imagine West Virginia with only a couple hundred residents. That just about describes the vastness—if not the ruggedness—of the 22,000-square-mile Chugach School District in Alaska’s Chugach Mountain Range. The district serves 215 students. For years, it was one of the lowest-performing districts in the state, with achievement scores hovering around the 20th percentile on standardized tests. Today, it’s an emblem to some of all that can go right in public education.

Ten years ago, the district’s superintendent and assistant superintendent decided to recreate public education in their corner of the world. They started by asking parents, students, other educators, and businesspeople: Are our schools

preparing all of our kids for the 21st century? What's working? What's not working? And what solutions do you propose?

Then, they listened. From the first community meeting, a vision began to materialize. DeLorenzo founded the Reinvention and Quality Schools Model, grounded in standards and personalized instruction. And heavily weighted toward project-based learning. Students needed to do a better job of character development. We needed to do a better job of utilizing technology [we needed to] do a better job of accountability.

DeLorenzo was struck by the frustration he heard in the voices of the businesspeople. For years, they felt they'd struggled to get the school leaders who would listen to their views and ideas about improving schools. Now, sitting across the table from the two district administrators were the chief executives and vice presidents of national companies, such as BP, ARCO, and Exxon, as well as Federal Express, Alaska Airlines, and GCI, the state's communication provider.

It was the beginning of a remarkable relationship that would help take the men, along with their teachers and students, the nation's capital to meet President George W. Bush, to the floor of the

Forging Relationships

are really after, they assume they're after the dollar and worker bees. Rather, he says, businesses want students to become critical thinkers, problem solvers, good communicators, and adept at working independently as well as collaboratively. They want them to become adults who can contribute to both the civic and economic health of their communities. Not to say that some of the business folk who first sat down with DeLorenzo and Sampson hadn't needed their consciousness raised about a few things.

It's the first time the foundation staff had a districtwide reputation. The results are in: Scores on standardized tests rose sharply in reading, and language arts in the first five years, in some cases by as much as 50 percentage points. Students taking college entrance exams went from zero to 70 percent. In 2001, the district won a Baldrige National Quality Award, presented by the president of the United States to businesses that focus on results through strategic planning, empowering employees, customer service, and reporting progress to all stakeholders. That year, Chugach was one of two school districts to win in the new education category. Points out, "If people never think about building relationships with people," says DeLorenzo. "It takes time, and it takes a focus on what we are trying to accomplish. I think that is the best way to build a partnership."