



18 SEATTLE, Washington—Tom Vander Ark lowered himself into a chair at the conference table, looking a little weary but content to sit for an interview. A tall man with a quiet way, he seemed both at ease and out of place in the fine furnishings of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. For four years, he's been coming to this elegant third floor, with its stone tiles, wood paneling, and designed lighting, to help the Gates family direct hundreds of millions of dollars to the front lines of education reform.

A former corporate executive, Vander Ark was one of the first businessmen to lead a public school district when Federal Way—a city with great socioeconomic diversity—hired him as superintendent. When the Gateses established their foundation in 2000, they didn't have to look far to find the right person to guide their education philanthropy.

Sitting down with *NW Education* coeditor Denise Jarrett Weeks, Vander Ark shared his views about the role businesses should—and shouldn't—play in public education.

Do you have children in public school?

Yes, one is a high school freshman and the other, now, is a college junior. My oldest daughter went to first and second grade at a private school in an affluent, all-white suburb, but that's not how or where we wanted to raise our kids. We were quite attracted to Federal Way because it's a slice of America; it's about 40 percent kids of color, 40 percent kids that live in low-income families.

We wanted our kids to grow up with that kind of diversity. I think that's been a real blessing for our family.

What about being a school district superintendent made the biggest impression on you?

It's a lot harder to lead a \$120 million school district than it is a \$5 billion corporation. It's far more complex. I was surprised at how similar the management agenda is. You work on all the same stuff: getting the performance metrics right, setting goals, building feedback loops, data systems, facilities, hiring and developing good people. Those are issues that are on the agenda in any large organization, public or private. But there are three things that are very different: It's the people, the politics, and the economics.

The people who choose education as a profession teach because they have a calling to teach. They are motivated by different things than people who choose to work in the private sector. There's an assumption by those in the private sector that if you just create financial incentives with bonus structures and merit pay, and so forth, people will be motivated to do good and better things. But they don't recognize that the people who work in education respond to a different set of incentives. I didn't really understand those things for a couple of years. I went around setting off land mines by trying to impose business solutions in an educational setting.

The politics are intense and multilayered. Working for an elected board is very, very different from working in the private sector. It's often very political. There is often lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities. People on school boards may have an axe to grind or an agenda to advance. Parents have a lot at stake, and they want to talk to the superintendent about everything, 24/7. Your performance evaluations are on the front page of the newspaper. It's life in a fishbowl.

And school finance is the most convoluted thing I've ever seen. I'm an MBA by training. I've worked in a lot of different environments, and school finance is unbelievably com-

plicated and perverse in many ways. The money comes in little buckets with lots of strings attached. Add to that the worst budget crisis in 50 years and a federal accountability system on top of the state accountability system, which is often on top of the accountability systems that school districts build, and you've got an extraordinary challenge that we couldn't have imagined as a worst-case scenario five years ago.

What gives you hope?

I'm very optimistic about the new small high schools we've sponsored. Almost all of them are in low-income and underserved communities. These are going to be great options for kids who didn't have options before. The great challenge is that we have a lot more to learn about how to dramatically improve the performance of [existing] large, struggling high schools.

Suburban high schools are very difficult to change. First of all, they're huge. You can't get [all of the faculty] to agree on what day to take off, much less a fundamental restructuring of the school. High schools have got entrance requirements from college, work expectations from business, credit requirements from the state, and employment agreements that dictate down to the minute how things will be done. And then probably the most

TAKING THE LONG VIEW

Q&A With Tom Vander Ark of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

difficult obstacle to overcome is ourselves. The people who will read your magazine generally were successful in high school, went on to college, and have an idealized memory of that experience. Many assume that that experience will also work for their own son or daughter.

But a lot has changed since then. For most kids today, school is a big, bad place. More than two-thirds of American kids aren't getting what they need or deserve in high school; a third of them drop out, another third leave ill prepared for college and work. What we're doing is a disaster. We think high school ought to look dramatically different. Instead of a phone-book-size list of courses of varying degrees of difficulty from which kids choose with no adult guidance, we think all families ought to have two, three, maybe four kinds of schools to choose from: one that's a traditional academic school, a couple that are thematic, and one that's very individualized and supportive for kids with unique challenges or interests. So that's a very different view of choice; it's less choice at the course level, more choice at the school level.

Are there principles of good business that have a place in K–12 education?

It starts with data-driven decision-making, and we're finding out that all large organizations need a clear focus, a few compelling goals, a positive culture, and feedback on progress toward those goals. These are principles of high performance in any kind of an organization, public sector or private. There's no question that blindly applying the same tactics in [both] settings is not a good idea, but the same principles apply.

What's the best role for businesses in K–12 education?

Businesses ought to be advocates for high expectations for all kids. Closing the achievement gap is not just a workforce development issue, it's a social justice issue.

And it's a quality of life issue. Cities that are making progress have had business leadership that's had a broader view than just workforce development. They've seen education as being a priority for the health of the civic institutions and the long-term health of the community.

Businesses also can do a great deal to help create relevance in learning. They can do that in a variety of ways: Sponsor new schools or be a partner in creating math, science, and technology schools; there are health academies that partner

with hospitals; and business academies that partner with financial institutions. Schools and districts are desperate to find work-based learning opportunities for kids: internships, summer job programs, field trips. Adding relevance in that way is just something that schools can't do on their own, they need good business partners to do that.

What's the worst role?

I see a good deal of reluctance on the part of businesses to get into the issue of educational financing. [Some business groups may be] a great advocate for K–12 education, but they say "high expectations for all kids," "accountability," and then they stop at the issue of resources. Their platform is "lower business and occupancy tax," but in Washington, it's a big source of revenue. We don't have an income tax, so our tax base is the B & O tax and sales tax.

In its worst form, it's an area that businesses advocate against. Look at the tax reform package that [Governor] Bob Riley tried to pass in Alabama. It was defeated in part because of business opposition to the tax reform. I think it was much needed tax reform. We spend, as a country, about \$1,000 per student per year more on the wealthiest quartile of students than we do the

lowest quartile of students. That seems perverse to me, the notion that we spend more money on rich kids than poor kids. That's not likely to change without business advocacy. They have an important role in addressing those basic inequities.

How might businesses rise to that challenge?

Well, you have to take the long view and say, "We're not going to be able to recruit more companies and new jobs to our state without a good education system." It takes big companies with a long-term view to take that position.

What's most at stake?

If we don't improve our high school graduation rate from 70 to 80 percent in the next generation and double the number of poor and minority kids that graduate from high school and go to college, we will continue to see a decline in the voting rate. We'll continue to see stagnant family incomes. We'll continue to lead the world in the rate of incarceration. So, I think there's a lot at stake. I think it's the most important civic, social, and economic issue of the day.