

EDUCATION WEEK

Gates Foundation Puts New Focus on Transforming Teacher Prep

By Stephen Sawchuk | November 18, 2015

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will invest some \$34 million in cooperative initiatives designed to improve teacher-preparation programs' overall effectiveness.

The Seattle-based philanthropy announced the three-year grants Nov. 18. Gates awarded the funds to five consortia through a competitive process—a change from its former strategy of one-off grants to individual teaching programs.

The winners will use the funding to create “transformation centers” based on four driving principles: developing strong partnerships with school districts; giving teacher-candidates opportunities to refine a specific set of teaching skills; using data for improvement and accountability; and ensuring that faculty and mentors are effective at guiding novices into the profession.

The grantees include:

- TeacherSquared, a center that currently consists mainly of nontraditional preparation programs, including the campuses of the Relay Graduate School of Education; Urban Teachers, which operates programs in the District of Columbia and Baltimore; Boston-based Match Teacher Residency; and the teaching programs offered by the Yes Prep and Aspire charter-management organizations;
- Texas Tech University, which will head the University-School Partnerships for the Renewal of Educator Preparation National Center, or U.S. PREP, a consortium of six universities located in Southern states;
- The Massachusetts Department of Education, which will lead the Elevate Preparation, Impact Children (EPIC) center, an effort that will involve all 71 providers in that state; and
- The National Center for Teacher Residencies, which will expand its network of providers using a residency model of preparation that couples a full year of student teaching with slimmed-down coursework.

The fifth grant, to TeachingWorks at the University of Michigan, differs from the others. The group will serve as a clearinghouse for the other grantees to share best practices, provide technical support to each center, and supply teacher performance assessments.

Each grantee save EPIC won about \$7 million; EPIC received about \$4 million. The philanthropy received about 40 applications representing some 500 programs in all.

The Gates Foundation has also contracted with the nonprofit called Teacher Prep Inspection U.S., to visit each program annually and provide feedback on progress. The group is headed by longtime teacher-preparation analyst Edward Crowe. (The nonprofit that publishes *Education Week* receives support from the Gates Foundation for the coverage of college- and career-ready standards.)

Changing Practices

Gates officials said that their renewed focus on teacher preparation builds on the foundation's philanthropy in two other areas: teacher evaluation and academic standards.

"The timing is great because of having great consistent, high standards in the country and more meaningful, actionable teacher-feedback systems and some clear definitions about what excellence in teaching looks like," said Vicki Phillips, the Gates Foundation's director of college-ready programs. "Districts and prep programs can work in ways that are just much more powerful, stronger, and more targeted than three years ago, when we might have been doing more shooting in the dark."

Some of the centers plan to expand and deepen work already under way. That's the goal for the National Center for Teacher Residencies, which will expand from 17 to 37 providers, five of which will be demonstration sites that best embody the four principles around which the new grants are oriented.

Others, such as U.S. PREP, will work to scale up practices that have been successful elsewhere. Each of the participating universities in that center will begin by piloting a yearlong model for student teaching and a common tool for assessing teacher-candidate skills—initiatives first introduced at Arizona State University.

Of the grants, potentially the most wide-reaching is Massachusetts'. That state was selected partly because of the work it's done to strengthen and make more transparent its quality-control process for teacher-preparation programs. (An *Education Week* investigation earlier this year [found deficiencies in most states' review systems.](#))

Now, under the Gates grant, Massachusetts will aim to make its first-year teachers as good as those in their third year of teaching. It plans to encourage its providers to use new techniques, such as simulations to help candidates practice teaching skills in low-stakes settings, and to help districts and programs better mentor novice teachers.

"Teaching is a learning profession. It should be a steep climb. But we don't accept that a teacher can't be ready to make an impact on students on the first day he or she enters the classroom," said Heather Peske, the state's associate commissioner for educator effectiveness.

Challenges for Faculty

That doesn't mean the work will be easy. For one, Gates wants each of the centers to be able to produce up to 2,500 teachers a year, a figure that would put each of them among the largest producers of teachers in the country.

And some of the overriding expectations, the grantees said, will challenge longstanding ways of doing things. Many singled out as a difficult hurdle the requirement that grantee programs do a better job ensuring that the faculty and mentors who train the new teachers are effective.

"Historically, the clinical faculty have not been prepared or given professional development to work with emerging teachers in this field. The idea you have to be really selective about who those teacher educators are is a game changer for teacher prep," said Anissa Listak, the executive director of the National Center for Teacher Residencies.

"When you look across at how teacher educators are evaluated, the primary form is student course evaluations. ... We haven't looked at other ways to really examine their effectiveness," said Sarah Beal, who will be one of the co-directors of the U.S. PREP center.

It's an area the foundation agrees will present some tough choices.

"It really asks grantees to think very deliberately and carefully and with data about who's doing the work of preparing teachers," said Tom Stritikus, a deputy director in Gates' college-ready division. "In a system that has

heavy faculty governance and rules around academic freedom, those are sometimes difficult decisions and difficult moves for deans to make.”

Field Reaction

[The Gates Foundation's latest work comes atop of some \\$900 million it has put into teacher-quality efforts since 2008](#), giving way to criticism that it has too much leverage in the K-12 policy arena for one organization.

But the president of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education said that her members welcomed the new investment.

“I certainly did not hear anyone shrink from the challenge of competing,” said AACTE President Sharon P. Robinson. “I would hope this round of founding will permit the Gates Foundation to be more explicit that the traditional industry is ready for change, rather than promote what has been a pejorative narrative about traditional providers being impossible to change.”

As for broader impact on the teacher-prep field, that could depend on how Gates shares what it’s learned and how flexible it is with grantees, observers said.

“I think the idea of encouraging partnerships is good, but it’s also important to recognize that these are often delicate endeavors,” said David H. Monk, the dean of the college of education at Penn State University. “Anything Gates and others can do to signal an awareness of the complexity of measuring impact without backing away from recognizing its importance would be a great help to the field.”