

The Gates Foundation's Latest Move to Help Teachers Become More Effective

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The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation [wants to partner](#) with professional learning organizations in its quest to align teacher professional development opportunities with high-quality curricula that have proven track records. Applicants could qualify for grants of up to \$1 million each.

The request for proposals comes a little more than a year after Bill Gates announced a major shift in the foundation's education strategy. Under the new strategy, about Gates set aside \$1 billion to support new curricula and networks of schools that band together to identify and address local challenges.

As part of the change, Gates said it would abandon new projects that supported teacher evaluation, though the foundation still funds teacher prep work, including with this round of grants.

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For an education funder as prolific as Gates, a strategy shift can have huge implications for the field. A little more than a year into the shift, things are starting to solidify. In the fall, Gates revealed the first cohort of schools participating in the foundation's network-based work.

This latest set of grants accounts for a tiny portion of the overall \$1.7 billion Gates pledged in late 2017 to education over the next five years. However, it's still useful to track grants like these because of what they reveal about the mega-funder's priorities.

This set of grants is about helping educators become more effective teachers for black, Latino and low-income students and students learning English as a second language. In the call for proposals, the Gates Foundation said that there are early indications that training educators on teaching a specific curriculum boosts student performance more than training programs that are more general in their focus.

However, the foundation has found programs that offer curriculum-based training face an uphill battle when it comes to attracting clients. For starters, building a professional learning course around a specific curriculum can be expensive. There's the cost of licensing the curriculum from its authors. Building internal expertise in a given curriculum also costs money.

On top of that, professional learning providers court a set of clients—schools, districts and states—with tight budgets. Often, curriculum alignment isn't a deciding factor when cash-strapped education leaders choose a professional development provider for their teachers.

Gates is interested in funding grantees that are working with curricula focused on middle or high school English, math or middle school science.

The work builds on the foundation's past support curriculum standards. Most notable among those were the Common Core State Standards, which became a contentious political football in many of the states where they were implemented.

Gates is looking for six to 10 partnerships centered on the professional learning provider. That could be a partnership among several providers, or with a district or a curriculum author. A big thing the foundation is looking for is proof that these partnerships are sustainable beyond the life of the grant.

The grants of up to \$1 million each are up for grabs and will likely span about two and a half years with some additional time for evaluation, the foundation said. Gates is especially interested in partners that work with students in California, Florida, Georgia, New York and North Carolina, though districts in other states that serve at least 50,000 students are also welcome to apply.

Gates wants to figure out the answers to a few big questions. First, it wants know what else can be done to support teachers working with black, Latino and low-income students.

Second, how can cash-strapped schools and districts be persuaded to invest in curriculum-based professional learning? What can providers do to make themselves more attractive to education leaders with tight budgets without sacrificing quality or long-term sustainability? How should professional learning providers compete against lower-cost, lower-quality competitors?

These grants share a few common elements with Gates' other education work. For one, like so much of Gates' education giving, these grants boil down to supporting black, Latino and low-income students. To qualify, applicants must serve middle or high schools where black or Latino students, or students learning English make up at least half of the student body.

The foundation's commitment to preparing teachers is also on clear display here. Under the new strategy, Gates discontinued its support of teacher evaluation—probably the most criticized aspect of its work with teachers. However, the foundation's work to better prepare teachers to succeed in the classroom has continued. As recently as December, Gates [gave](#) about \$9 million to improve the quality of teacher prep programs across the country.

There's also the support for standards around curriculum. For this set of grants, the foundation doesn't mandate which curriculum professional learning providers settle on, just that it be considered high quality by organizations that rate curricula, like EdReports.org, Student Achievement Partners or Achieve.

Gates has run into opposition before when it got involved with what's taught in classes. This initiative tackles the issue a lot more indirectly. The foundation is working to make teachers more effective when it comes to using high-quality curricula.

Finally, Gates' new strategy bets big on networks as a unit of change. A big part of the foundation's new work is centered on networks of schools and their partners, which decide on a local level what challenges they face and how best to use Gates' money to solve them.

This new set of grants isn't explicitly part of Gates' network-based work, but the configurations the foundation describes in its call for proposals also emphasize collaboration and cross-sector cooperation.

Interested organizations should apply by March 8. Grantees will be announced in April.