



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WHO IS INFLUENCING EDUCATION POLICY AND WHY?

Several years ago, I penned a commentary, [Reforming the Reformers](#). It was a response to failed policies that I considered hurtful to public education. More accurately, I wrote that “education reform is no longer focused on students or teachers. It is focused on ancillary issues, folks who profit off the system.” That is often still the case.

I stated: “When we watch policymakers grasp at the complex issues facing public education, we realize that outside influences and political donations are having greater influence over our classrooms and often fail to connect the educator with the policy.”

We over-test our students and put a tremendous workload burden on educators in the name of accountability. In efforts to drive up student academic performance, we should never disregard an experienced educator’s insights into their student’s academic and social, and emotional growth.

We acknowledge that Tennessee has done some rather remarkable things in public education of late. It may not pay off immediately, but it should benefit future generations. Our commitment to reading, writing, and math moving forward will give Tennessee children an advantage over other states. Especially if we remain committed to helping those who cannot master proficiency in those areas. We cannot simply keep pushing kids through the system when they cannot grasp the building blocks of key subjects like reading and math. I give Governor Lee, Commissioner Schwinn, and the Tennessee General Assembly credit for recognizing that truth. Teachers have been speaking out on this for decades. Finally, someone listened.

Too many education reforms are proposed or pursued with very little evidentiary basis. Look at the millions of dollars spent by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Tennessee to shape our state policies. The Gates Foundation is deeply rooted in several advocacy groups here in the state and virtually have a media outlet to trumpet their causes. Yes, money from the Gates Foundation is influencing our classrooms. Whether that influence is positive or negative is up to you to decide. I do believe we should require a disclaimer when any person or institution who advocates for education policy is funded by the Gates Foundation or other philanthropic organizations.

The Gates Foundation [doesn’t have much to show for their spending](#). Many policies such as Common Core, were advocated by Gates’ money and have been rolled back in Tennessee. The [Washington Post](#) described the “\$575 million project partly underwritten by the Gates Foundation that used student test scores to evaluate teachers failed to achieve its goals of improving student achievement — as in, it didn’t work.” The Gates

SUMMARY

Many educators simply wish they could teach their students and subjects without a political agenda and being worried about people who profit off the system.

Foundation has been involved in Shelby County since at least [2009](#). The average student reading on grade level there in 2020 was 16%. The teacher evaluation system implemented in Memphis, created for the Gate's grant application became our state law. So, the foundation impact became the basis of all personnel decisions, from tenure to dismissal across our state. To borrow a phrase from that journalist, Valerie Strauss, "put this in the they-were-warned-but-didn't-listen category." If the Tennessee General Assembly has its way, the teacher evaluation system is likely to see changes next session. We already know who opposes those changes and where the money will be coming from to oppose them.

Here in Nashville, the most recent organization to try and shape education policy in Tennessee is a group called Education Trust. It is currently headed by a former Obama education official---now Gubernatorial candidate in Maryland---John King. It is directed statewide in Tennessee by Metro Nashville Public Schools board member Gino Pupo-Walker. The Education Trust according to Mercedes Schneider, writing for the [Huffington Post](#), is "profoundly a Gates-funded, test-driven-reform machine."

Schneider adds, "For all of the corporate reform nonprofits that I have researched for accepting Gates operating support money, none has exceeded the millions of dollars Gates has paid to Education Trust." It is astutely pointed out that "top-down, test-driven reform" will forever have a "gap" to try to "close." So, they will always have an issue to champion, or as I previously pointed out, a way to continue to profit off the system. Capital One, in their well-known advertising tagline, likes to ask: "What's in your wallet?" Perhaps we should look at WHO is paying to influence our education policy, and ask WHY?

It has long been acknowledged that a strong educational system is essential not only to the successful functioning of democracy but also to its future. Educators understand that an engaging and challenging education is the proven path to prosperity and a life-long love of learning. Children should not be at the tip of the spear in our culture wars. Many educators simply wish they could teach their students and subjects without a political agenda. However, in the name of reform and federal dollars, we have often chased ideas that didn't serve our children or educators very well in Tennessee. When will we learn?

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