

Q&A Vicki Phillips

WHAT MAKES A GOOD TEACHER?

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation digs for answers with its Measures of Effective Teaching project

By Stephanie Hirsh

JSD: This issue of *JSD* is about effective teaching, with a focus on professional learning. Given that focus, what would you want readers to know about the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's investment in effective teaching?

Phillips: Great teachers are the most important school-based ingredient for student success. So we're committed to ensuring teachers have the supports and tools they need to continually improve their practice. As we do so, we're listening closely to what teachers say and co-designing and researching new approaches with them.

Through the Measures of Effective Teaching study, we're working with 3,000 teachers in seven districts around the country to look at multiple measures for understanding what makes a good teacher so that all teachers can improve. We've also made deep investments in four sites — Memphis, Tenn.; Hillsborough County, Fla.; Pittsburgh, Pa.; and a group of charter management organizations in Los Angeles — that are dramatically rethinking how they recruit, develop, and retain teachers, particularly for our need-



Vicki Phillips director of education, college ready, for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, talks with Stephanie Hirsh, Learning Forward's executive director, about the foundation's investment in effective teaching, and in particular about the role of professional learning.

iest students. In Hillsborough County, for example, novice teachers get two full years of support from accomplished mentor teachers, and that is already boosting retention rates.

We're also supporting two design collaborations, one in mathematics and one in literacy, which have been developing and piloting the formative assessments teachers need to understand where students are relative to the Common Core State Standards, the lessons to move students forward, and the rich classroom-based assignments that demonstrate student progress. These design teams involve subject-matter experts, education leaders, and classroom teachers so that the tools are grounded in the realities of teachers' classrooms. And the tools are being continually refined based on teachers' knowledge and feedback. If teachers don't shape and own changes in practice, then frankly, they're not going to happen.

JSD: Where does professional learning fit in the foundation's effective teaching agenda?

Phillips: We want to create systems that support good teachers, help average teachers get better, and ensure that new teachers learn the profession so they can become good. Like you, we believe that when educator practice improves, students have a greater likelihood of achieving results. However, we know that a lot of existing professional development does not meet teachers' needs or match Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning. Our hope is that the Measures of Effective

learning, both individually and collectively. For example, Pittsburgh has created new positions for teachers, known as clinical resident instructors, to support the development of other teachers in the district. Teams of teachers in the high schools are working collaboratively to help cohorts of 9th- and 10th-graders get off to a good start in high school and stay on a trajectory toward college. In addition, we think that technology can help reshape professional development in ways that provide teachers with much more immediate, personalized feedback and enable teachers to learn from each other, not just within a school but across schools, districts, and states.

JSD: What have you learned so far about professional learning from your investment?

Phillips: We are in the exploratory stage of our investments, testing delivery options and tools, analyzing the current offerings in the marketplace, and exploring ways to address the pressure around resource needs.

There are three things we have learned: 1) Districts want to provide meaningful, differentiated learning opportunities for teachers tied to informal and formal feedback; 2) teachers want meaningful opportunities to engage with their peers, coaches, and individually to improve their practice; and 3) despite the array of professional development programs, there's not a systemic approach to supporting teachers from induction to retirement.

VICKI PHILLIPS

In her role at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Vicki Phillips oversees work to ensure U.S. high school students graduate ready to succeed and to improve access to college. Phillips has built a strong education reform record throughout her career, at all levels — from neighborhood schools to the federal government. For nearly three decades, she has endeavored to improve education, as a teacher, state-level policymaker, leader of a nonprofit education foundation, superintendent of a large urban

school district, and now as the director of education for the foundation.

Before joining the foundation, she was superintendent of Portland Public Schools in Portland, Ore. Earlier, Phillips served as Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell's secretary of education and that state's chief state school officer. She previously served at the state level in her home state of Kentucky, helping to implement the sweeping changes demanded by the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990. Phillips has worked with the U.S. Office of Education in Washington, D.C. She has also been a middle and high

school teacher.

Born in Kentucky and raised on a small farm, Phillips was the first in her family to go to college, and earned a bachelor's degree in elementary and special education and a master's degree in school psychology from Western Kentucky University. She also holds a doctorate in educational leadership and management from the University of Lincoln in England and served as a founding member of the governing council for England's National College for School Leadership.

Teaching study will support the creation of teacher development and evaluation systems that give teachers much more accurate, fine-grained information to help improve their practice. And the sites we have invested in are examining new ways to support teachers' continued

And, we also know that teachers want to have a say in their professional learning plans and experiences.

JSD: Tell me what you're excited about in this work.

Phillips: We're really excited about what we've heard

from teachers who have been involved in the literacy and math design collaboratives about what a powerful growth experience that has been for them. More than nine in 10 teachers involved in the pilots reported that using the literacy and math tools provided them with new information about their students' knowledge and skills, including a better understanding of students' strengths and weaknesses as readers and writers, and that the resulting student work increased their expectations for what students can do.

Similarly, we've heard from teachers involved in the Measures of Effective Teaching project that the chance to look at videos of their own practice has been a powerful and sometimes eye-opening learning experience.

We're also really excited about how digital professional development tools and services can provide a vast ecosystem of support for teachers. In the past 10 years, we have seen the expansion of online professional learning and grassroots, teacher-generated, online collaboration tools, such as Edmodo. Professional learning does not have to be in a silo. It can take place across schools, districts, and globally. In addition, we are learning from the sports industry how video analysis can be used for both individual and team development. Video analysis has been adopted and sustained by every major sport, and we are learning how we can apply those lessons to education. While there are a number of innovative technology solutions, these solutions must be designed with teachers' input so the tools are not too complicated to use.

JSD: Given the many roles you've played in education — from teacher to superintendent to state secretary of education to your role at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation — how has your view of professional learning changed or shifted?

Phillips: To get dramatic changes in student outcomes, we're relying on teachers already in the profession to make significant improvements in their practice. I know from experience that's possible. When I became superintendent in Lancaster, Pa., a district in which about seven in 10 students lived in poverty, 80% of students were scoring in the bottom of state test results. The district was on the state's academic distress list. Success, at least initially, was preventing a state takeover. But it was nearly impossible to recruit new teachers. So I got to work developing the teachers I had. We gave teachers rigorous professional development, a narrowed and prioritized set of standards and common classroom assignments so that teachers could jointly examine and talk about student work. The results were incredible. One school went from less than 20% of their kids performing on standards to more than 80% at standard in both math and reading, without changing the principal or faculty. In less than three years, this district was off the state's distress list. It wasn't easy, but it also wasn't a miracle.

Teachers want to teach effectively and make a positive dif-

ference for their students, and they want to be part of a community in which their contributions are felt.

JSD: What is professional learning like at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation?

Phillips: We learn a tremendous amount from our partners in the field, although we still need to get better at synthesizing and sharing that learning both with the field and with each other. Like teachers, we never seem to have enough time. But our College Ready team meets every other month for two days to share what we're learning with each other and to bring in outside experts to deepen our knowledge. One reason the foundation is a rich place to learn is because our staff come from so many different backgrounds. They include education practitioners, academic researchers, journalists, and school leaders.

JSD: It appears to me that the foundation is betting on the power of feedback. Feedback to many in education has a narrow definition. Would you offer your definition of this concept and why you think it is key to improving teacher effectiveness?

Phillips: Feedback encompasses data from a wide variety of sources that teachers can use to adjust their instruction.

In the Measures of Effective Teaching project, for example, we're looking at multiple measures, including student growth on state tests, feedback from observations of teachers' classroom practice, student surveys, and assessments of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge. The literacy and math design collaboratives are focused on providing teachers with rich, formative assessments about how their students are doing relative to standards and how they can adjust instruction based on that evidence. Through our investments in next-generation models, we're also exploring how game-based learning, simulations, and other technology-enabled tools can provide a continuous cycle of information that allows teachers to diagnose where their students are, tailor their instruction accordingly, get real-time feedback as their students engage in the learning tasks, and then adjust instruction some more.

JSD: There is now a sharp focus on teacher evaluation, but that is only one aspect of teacher effectiveness. How do we get education leaders to understand that professional learning is critical to teacher effectiveness, unrelated to teacher evaluation?

Phillips: I think we have to understand that the only way for students to improve is if their teachers are also learning and improving all the time, not just when they're being evaluated. In November, for example, we launched an online community for teachers using the literacy and math tools so they can share lesson plans, talk about what's working and what's not, and collaborate with their colleagues — not just in their own schools and districts, but nationally.

JSD: Last year’s Gates Foundation-sponsored survey in partnership with Scholastic (2010) pointed out how much teachers value collaboration in learning and solving problems. How do you see systems managing the dual priorities of individual teacher evaluation and expectations for learning communities?

Phillips: These aren’t mutually exclusive. What we’ve seen in Hillsborough is that the results from individual teacher evaluations also highlighted areas where the district needed to shift its focus. For example, the district was spending a lot of professional development money on classroom management when its teachers needed more support in higher-order questioning skills. Similarly, you could see professional learning communities in schools tackling common areas of strength and weakness, sharing videos and examples of student work, and helping the whole team to get better.

JSD: I know that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is now investing significantly in innovative professional development. Can you tell us about the theory of action behind this strategy?

Phillips: We think technology has the ability to make teachers’ learning both more individualized — better tailored to individual teacher’s needs — and more collective.

Research shows that professional learning can have a powerful effect on teacher skills and knowledge and on student learning. To be effective, it must be sustained, data-informed, focused on important content, and embedded in the work of collaborative professional learning teams that support ongoing improvements in teachers’ practice and student achievement (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

We also know that teachers need to be actively involved in informing and designing their professional learning, and this is especially important for new innovative professional development tools. Many teachers indicate that much of the technology does not meet their needs or is hard to navigate.

Through the innovative professional development initiative, we intend to demonstrate that teachers can get better, faster, more effective technology-enabled support in a cost-effective manner, despite budget pressures. Ultimately, we expect our investments to result in student gains and increased efficiency in delivering supports to teachers.

In a recent teacher survey, 73% said their most recent evaluation did not identify any areas for development, and of those who did, only 45% said they received useful support to improve. Innovative professional development focuses on integrating the appropriate data and professional development resources to support teachers. For example, districts are building professional development portals that connect observation and assessment data to professional learning options geared to an individual teacher’s needs.

Innovative professional development also focuses on improving the mode of delivery within key areas: mentoring, coaching, simulations, and online collaboration. These tools need to exist within a greater ecosystem that offers teachers feedback on their practice and student achievement. In isolation, these offerings will not be much different than one-day workshops. We are investing in rapid prototyping to understand the potential of these models.

We plan to evaluate our investments by looking at implementation and outcomes related to teacher effectiveness and student learning. And we’ll stop investing in approaches that don’t work.

JSD: In that burgeoning work, can you tell us if you are seeing any game-changers yet?

Phillips: We’re seeing an array of promising practices. Here are just two examples:

The TeachME™ Lab (Teaching in a Mixed Reality Environment) at the University of Central Florida is to our knowledge the only lab in the country using a mixed-reality simulation environment to prepare or retrain teachers. The lab lets teachers learn skills and craft their practice without placing real students at risk during the learning process. Through game play, teachers perform situation-specific activities that model or replicate the real world of classrooms. There are currently 10 universities using TeachME as part of their teacher training and professional learning programs, and there is a wait list of more than 20 colleges that would like to sign up.

Tutor.com started as an online tutoring service for students, but now has a pilot to support teachers. It includes on-demand, one-on-one content and instructional practice that links what students are struggling with to supports for teachers through digitized textbooks and workbooks. It’s developed a repository of easily searchable learning modules and high-quality lesson plans by partnering with content providers so that master tutors have relevant content to share with teachers seeking help. And it tracks metrics based on usage, feedback, student outcomes, job satisfaction, performance evaluations, and retention.

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Stephanie Hirsh (stephanie.hirsh@learningforward.org) is executive director of Learning Forward. ■