

Too Close for Comfort?

Big Philanthropy and the White House

by Richard Tagle and Rachel Gwaltney

IN PROVIDING QUALITY SUPPORTS FOR YOUNG people during school and nonschool hours, public partnerships are essential for effective programs to be sustainable and brought to scale. Higher Achievement, a rigorous, year-round academic enrichment program for middle-school students, for example, relies largely on corporate and private foundation grants for general operating support and on public-school systems for students, data, and facilities. It offers a good balance of private investment, helping public institutions to achieve an ultimately collective goal: high student achievement. For the most part, this public-private partnership is a key ingredient for nonprofit organizations to be well-resourced, effective, efficient, and accountable. In short, it enables nonprofits to focus on what they do best and have the greatest possible impact.

For these partnerships to work, however, the public and the private side need to be willing and ready to cooperate: two key ingredients that are not always present. Ideally, however, both parties recognize that they can have maximum leverage when the partnership is open, transparent, and inclusive.

But what if this partnership takes place at the highest level of the political hierarchy? Does it maximize the national impact of the civic sector or restrain it? And do the partnership's benefits trickle down to grassroots work? When the Bill &

Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, partners with the Obama administration to set the agenda for education reform, does it create an effective, efficient, and accountable machinery? Or does the partnership cross the line of influencing federal policy and thereby affect community-based work in a way that was never intended?

Much has been written about the convening of 15 states by the Gates Foundation to support these states in their Race to the Top applications to the U.S. Department of Education. States' education officials who were uninvited to this meeting cried

Do public-private partnerships like the Gates Foundation maximize the national impact of the civic sector or restrain it?

foul and claimed that the foundation had used its resources to provide some states with an unfair advantage. The Gates Foundation later revised its invitation to include all states whose strategies match with the foundation's priorities—a smart move, indeed. But will such intense philanthropic support effectively determine policy direction by primarily funding—and favoring—the “Gates states?” Will more states change their strategies to take advantage of this philanthropic support and boost their chances to win Race to the Top funding

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rather than focus on what works best for their communities? Is the Gates agenda the best way to address these communities' education issues?

The Gates Foundation has done a tremendous job of addressing some of the most pressing global social problems. It has approached these problems not only with major financial backing but also with a bold, grand vision of eradicating disease, finding cures, and elevating the quality of human life. We need bold, grand visions in the private philanthropic sector. Together with the government's ability to take solutions to scale, these creative solutions make a perfect pair.

This approach, however, is a double-edged sword. Nonprofit organizations are accustomed to implementing their core mission as the main agenda. And large private foundations partnering with federal government can impose a heavy agenda. But, one may ask, "If the agenda is good, so what?" The response is, "Good for whom, and according to whom?"

The accountability and transparency that are so present in community-based nonprofit work can easily be absent in partnerships formed at this highest political level. The Gates Foundation was not formed by public vote; nor was its agenda created by an electorate. It was created by the generous hearts and minds of private citizens. In this

available, where the goal would have been to generate *proven* strategies—not merely innovations—that have been implemented through collective efforts. These strategies work because, from the get-go, they are fueled by those who want to bring about change in their communities. No one is forced into the game, and the game's rules have been collectively established, embraced, and followed.

In 2007, for example, Higher Achievement faced serious problems in the Ward 7 section of Washington, D.C. Several student volunteers were mugged on their way from Higher Achievement to a subway stop. Distraught, the volunteers contacted the organization, reported the incident to the police, and chose to stop volunteering at the site. Because the organization relied heavily on volunteers, Higher Achievement needed to address the situation with urgency. Staff contacted every public and community official in Ward 7: city council representatives, advisory neighborhood commissions, the police, church and civic leaders, student councils, and active residents. The community was unanimous in its stance: for the neighborhood to benefit from volunteer support, the safety issue needed to be *collectively* addressed. The police conducted safety patrols, church leaders offered free van shuttles to and from the subway stop, council representatives ordered broken street light posts fixed, shrubs that blocked street views were trimmed, and residents watched for foot traffic when volunteers and students were scheduled to arrive at and depart from the program. The result was not only an increased volunteer pool for the Higher Achievement site but a community that came together. Public entities and private citizens joined to solve a local problem.

Community-based work offers several lessons learned. The solutions are not only about resources—although resources help. When a partnership is truly inclusive and explores the problem from different perspectives, a comprehensive solution surfaces, muscles get flexed in every part, and, ultimately, those muscles lift up everyone involved.

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Public-private partnerships formed at the highest political level often lack the accountability and transparency of community-based nonprofits.

regard, the White House can promote and espouse transparency and inclusiveness in the process. It is an important symbolic act for the Obama administration to show that it sets itself apart from past administrations in promoting a national agenda—especially when private money is involved. The administration can also outline the role that big philanthropy and grassroots nonprofits together play in solving a national problem.

By promoting a more transparent and inclusive partnership, the Obama administration and the Gates Foundation could engage diverse expertise at the federal, state, and local levels. State and local entities could partner with corporate and local private philanthropy to generate the public will needed to align resources with the best strategies