

How go Gates' big bucks in schools?

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation may not view our country's stressed public schools as full of Neanderthal teachers trying to bash knowledge into bored, thick-skulled students. Yet the foundation's leaders do consider most U.S. schools terribly outdated, technologically deficient and bureaucratic morale-suckers in need of overhaul.

That's why the foundation decided to try to help.

Just a quarter of U.S. public high school graduates possess the skills needed to succeed academically in college. That statistic should terrify this country, given the aggressive rise of economic competition and rapidly improving education elsewhere in the world. Left unchecked, we are slipping in the global race to sustain a quality workforce.

That's a big reason why the Gates Foundation's \$100 million grant to the Hillsborough County public school system is so compelling. The grant is wrapping up Year Four of a seven-year partnership between the Seattle-based foundation and Hillsborough schools. It's clearly a team effort. To get the Gates grant, Hillsborough has committed to match the foundation's \$100 million. The goal: to improve student achievement by rethinking how best to support and motivate teachers to elevate their game during the adoption of the Common Core curriculum and beyond.

To gauge the partnership's progress, the *Tampa Bay Times* recently sat down at Blake High School in Tampa with Vicki Phillips and MaryEllen Elia. Phillips is the visiting Gates Foundation education leader, a former secretary of education and chief state school officer for the state of Pennsylvania. And here's the real street cred. She's a former school superintendent and middle and high school teacher.

Elia is not only completing her ninth year as Hillsborough's school superintendent. She also has emerged as a prominent figure in the broader Tampa Bay educational and economic development communities.

Nine years running the same school system is commendable. Especially in Florida where public schools rarely receive adequate attention or funding. Florida spends roughly half per pupil compared to New York or Connecticut. And Florida teachers remain among the poorest paid in the nation.

Contrast Elia's longevity in Hillsborough with Pinellas County, which has had four superintendents in the same nine years - Clayton Wilcox, Julie Janssen, John Stewart and now Mike Grego.

. See TRIGAUX, [5P](#)



ROBERT TRIGAUX

On Business

Article Continued Below

[See TRIGAUX on Page P005](#)

.TRIGAUX continued from 1P

Is the Gates' grant making the grade?

Let's be clear. The Gates Foundation picked Hillsborough County from among a national pool of applicants to

receive such generous funding and a partnership role because the school system already was doing innovative things. Hillsborough also demonstrated a willingness to look at itself in a Gates-supplied mirror and change how it operated - if better ways to teach could be found.

According to Elia and Phillips, Hillsborough's education mission is to support innovation that can improve K-12 public schools and ensure students graduate high school ready to succeed in college. Accomplish that, says Elia, and the regional workforce becomes a strong economic selling point to businesses looking for quality employees.

'Great quality education is what draws businesses and people to a community,' Phillips agrees. 'The things MaryEllen is talking about is not just pushing more science and math but about asking students: 'Can you critically think and problem-solve?' ' When Hillsborough County and Tampa economic development officials are pitching this area to businesses looking to expand, education is no longer an afterthought.

Increasingly, business leaders want to know how dynamic the area school system is, not only for hiring sharp workers with 21st century skills but to gauge whether their own children should attend.

'We are at the table and part of those discussions,' Elia said. 'Hillsborough is one of the districts identified five years ago to get a very large grant from the Gates Foundation. Does that open eyes? Yes, I would say so.' So now that we're past the halfway point in this Gates-Hillsborough project, what's working so far to help students? What's left to be done? And how do we know this partnership has delivered the goods?

Clear progress has occurred. But the final verdict remains several years away.

Elia and Phillips point out how the old way Hillsborough used to evaluate and compensate teachers is gone. 'It's been blown up,' Elia said.

A cadre of mentors, one for every 15 teachers, has slowed the turnover of young teachers leaving the profession. And Hillsborough is ahead of many districts in making teacher evaluations more meaningful. Principals observe teachers and give more concrete feedback. And teachers get peer reviews, which can be sticky at times but is considered quality input. All of that means Hillsborough has not had to follow the state's own strict evaluation guidelines. The foundation also wants to sharply improve the role technology plays in the classroom by providing more easily accessible curriculum support to teachers and better ways to keep students engaged in their work.

The three legs of the school stool - the school board, the administration and the teachers union - willing to work together at the start are still coming to the table to find common ground, say Elia and Phillips.

'Teachers have been skeptical,' Phillips acknowledged. 'They have seen changes before that have not been thought through.' The key so far to the buy-in, the two women point out, is that Hillsborough teachers have been part of the conversation from the start in creating better ways to evaluate and train. That involvement reduces frictions even as the two women admit change does not come easily.

Public schools suffer from an excess of measurement, something the Gates folks would like to streamline. Like other public school systems in Florida, Hillsborough has three different graduation rates depending on whose yardstick is used. Elia says what's important is that the graduation rates are rising by most measures. And Hillsborough students are scoring high in National Merit and AP testing when compared with quality school systems in other states.

'One teacher told us today that a few years ago students were not able to do things they can do now,' Elia said. That will translate to a more capable workforce and supply a long-term boost to Florida's economy, she suggests.

Bottom line? Both Elia and Phillips admit it has been a struggle at times but seem satisfied with progress that has outpaced other large Florida school districts.

The trick is most of what has occurred so far is procedural, putting systems in place to improve teaching and, in turn, future student achievement. Measuring that achievement in a meaningful way has yet to happen. Hillsborough hopes it can deliver improved results soon. Another tough challenge is education's biggest oxymoron: teacher respect. 'One thing we are dismayed about is how we have made teachers feel over the last 15 years,' Phillips said. 'We shamed and blamed them. It was unconscionable. We do not want them to feel that way.' Phillips says celebrating good teachers is part of the recovery plan. So is listening to them. 'Teachers want time to collaborate with other teachers. Yet we put them alone in classrooms. It is a lonely existence.' Elia and Phillips insist big strides

are still to come in the remaining three years of the partnership. And even when the seven years are up, Phillips says the foundation and Hillsborough will stay in close touch. There will still be much to learn.

For the Gates Foundation, it has invested heavily in Hillsborough schools. It certainly is hopeful of a return on those funds, one measured by a successful outcome of better student achievement that it can show off to other U.S. school systems.

Similar Gates Foundation grant commitments to school districts in Memphis and Pittsburgh have suffered slower progress, which may make Hillsborough a beacon of best practices.

In the end, this is about sharing what worked best in Hillsborough with other schools.

Asks Phillips: 'What lessons can we pass on so school systems are not always reinventing the wheel but rather standing on the shoulders of Hillsborough? - or even asking 'How do we do this one better?'

Contact Robert Trigaux at rtrigaux@tampabay.com.

So far, most of what has occurred is procedural, putting systems in place to improve teaching and future student achievement.

Measuring that achievement in a meaningful way has yet to happen.