

## Bill Gates Tacitly Admits His Common Core Experiment Was A Complete Failure

*It looks like this is as close to an apology or admission of failure as we're going to get, folks. Sorry about that \$4 trillion and mangled years of education for American K-12 kids and teachers.*

---

By Joy Pullmann

By Joy Pullmann  
OCTOBER 25, 2017

Bill and Melinda Gates run the world's richest nonprofit, with **assets at \$40 billion** and annual giving around \$4 billion. They have helped pioneer a mega-giving strategy called "**advocacy philanthropy**," which aims to use private donations to shift how governments structure their activities and use taxpayer dollars.

Since 2009, the Gates Foundation's primary U.S. activity has focused on establishing and implementing Common Core, a set of centrally mandated curriculum rules and tests for what children are to learn in each K-12 grade, with the results linked to school and teacher ratings and punitive measures for low performers. The Gates Foundation has **spent more than \$400 million itself** and influenced **\$4 trillion in U.S. taxpayer funds** towards this goal. Eight years later, however, Bill Gates is admitting failure on that project, and a "pivot" to another that is not likely to go any better.

"Based on everything we have learned in the past 17 years, we are evolving our education strategy," Gates **wrote on his blog** as a preface to a speech he gave last week in Cleveland. He followed this by detailing how U.S. education has essentially made little improvement in the years since he and his foundation — working so closely with the Obama administration that federal officials

regularly consulted foundation employees and waived ethics laws to hire several — began redirecting trillions of public dollars towards programs he now admits haven't accomplished much.

“If there is one thing I have learned,” Gates says in concluding his speech, “it is that no matter how enthusiastic we might be about one approach or another, the decision to go from pilot to wide-scale usage is ultimately and always something that has to be decided by you and others the field.” If this statement encompasses his Common Core debacle, Gates could have at least the humility to recall that Common Core had *no pilot* before he took it national. There wasn’t even a draft available to the public before the Obama administration hooked states into contracts, many of which were ghostwritten with Gates funds, pledging they’d buy that pig in a poke.

But it looks like this is as close to an apology or admission of failure as we’re going to get, folks. Sorry about that \$4 trillion and mangled years of education for American K-12 kids and teachers. Failing with your kids and money for eight years is slowly getting billionaire visionaries to “evolve” and pledge to respect the *hoi polloi* a little more, though, so be grateful.

## Strategic Retreat, or Stealthy Persistence?

While Gates will continue to dump money into curricula and teacher training based on Common Core, “we will no longer invest directly in new initiatives based on teacher evaluations and ratings,” he said. This is the portion of the Common Core initiative around which bipartisan grassroots opposition coalesced, since unions oppose accountability for teachers and parents oppose terrible ideas thrust upon their kids without their input. Gates’ speech reinforces that Common Core supporters are scapegoating their initiative’s poor quality and transgression against the American right to self-government upon its links to using poorly constructed, experimental tests to rate teachers and schools.

Agreed, that’s a bad idea that failed miserably, **both in PR and in teacher effectiveness terms**, but it’s one bad bite out of a rotten apple. Looks like Gates is just going to bite again from another angle. It’s the old rationalization for communism: “**Great idea, terrible implementation.**” Yes, that sometimes happens, but what about considering whether the implementation trainwreck

was caused by a bad idea?

In lieu of ramming his preferred, untested education theories through a mindhive of unelected bureaucrats elated to be showered with Gates money and attention, over the next five years the Gates Foundation will spend \$1.7 billion on myriad smaller initiatives. “We anticipate that about 60 percent of this will eventually support the development of new curricula and networks of schools that work together to identify local problems and solutions,” Gates says.

This curricula, however, will be explicitly tied to Common Core and its cousin, the Next Generation Science Standards (which academic reviewers rate of **even more obviously low quality**). Similar **experiments in New York and Louisiana**, the latter of which Gates cites, have **yielded uniformity but not uniformly good curricula or proven improvements** for student achievement.

“[H]igh-quality curricula can improve student learning more than many costlier solutions, and it has the greatest impact with students of novice and lower performing teachers. We also know it has the greatest impact when accompanied by professional learning and coaching,” Gates says. This is

entirely true. But who decides what is “high-quality curricula”? Press releases and buzz or proven results?

The latter not only takes time to establish, but is directly threatened by the **anti-learning environment** inside which **most curricula is created** and teachers are trained, which typically dooms its effectiveness. Further, most measurements of curricular success use test score bumps, but there are **major questions from the research** about **whether those benefit kids**

**or society long-term.** The metrics for success that make the most sense to Bill Gates **do not actually ensure success** for children. The prospects for his “evolution” are, then, foreboding. The most likely outcome is the **historically most frequent outcome from big-bucks philanthropy** in public education: sound and fury, signifying nothing.

## Gates' Philanthropy Proves Money Can't Buy Success

Look, I want Gates to succeed. He and Melinda obviously mean well and have means to do good. They are handicapping their own success at education philanthropy, however, by attempting to approach schools precisely opposite to the manner in which Gates innovated to earn his own professional mega-success. Gates made it big by creating things that solved people's problems and which they could choose whether to use. Millions of people individually initially chose (as opposed to later company actions after going big, in which Microsoft used its size to coerce people to use their products) to use Microsoft products because they personally saw value in exchanging their time and money for those products.

One of the key problems of public education that makes it of such poor quality and resistant to change is that it is built on the later Microsoft model of coercion rather than the early Bill Gates-the-whiz-programmer model of free exchange. Public schools get money and students whether families really want to dedicate those resources or not. **Twice as many parents** send their kids to public schools as really would like to, if they had the choice. Thus, teachers and schools are not rewarded in direct correlation with the needs and desires of their customers. This is a core reason public education persistently perpetuates bad curricula, bad teaching methods, and poor attention to kids' specific needs.

The Gates Foundation is so close, yet apparently so far away from realizing why the mountain of money they can shovel around has so far not been as effective for American kids as they earnestly desire. Last year's **annual letter** from foundation CEO Sue Desmond-Hellman, its first major admission of failure, prefaced Gates' own groping this week at why: "Unfortunately, our foundation underestimated the level of resources and support required for our public education systems to be well-equipped to implement [Common Core]. We missed an early opportunity to sufficiently engage educators – particularly teachers – but also parents and communities so that the benefits of the standards could take flight from the beginning."

Here's Gates this week, echoing that theme in announcing changes to his giving strategy: "We believe this kind of approach – where groups of schools have the flexibility to propose the set of approaches they want – will lead to more impactful and durable systemic change

that is attractive enough to be widely adopted by other schools...we will leave it up to each network [of schools we fund] to decide what approaches they believe will work best to address their biggest challenges.” This is good, but not good enough.

I have been hard on Gates over the years for Common Core because he has used his fabulous financial power irresponsibly. He’s forced American citizens into an experimental and at best academically mediocre policy fantasy that has further eroded American government’s

legitimacy, which depends upon the consent of the governed. He and Melinda may mean well, but they haven’t done well on this major initiative. It’s going to take a lot more than passive-aggressive side references to their failure to make up for the years of classroom chaos their bad ideas inflicted on many U.S. teachers and kids without their consent. A direct apology and dedication to the “first, do no harm” principle would be a start.

*Joy Pullmann is executive editor of The Federalist and author of "The Education Invasion: How Common Core Fights Parents for Control of American Kids," out from Encounter Books in 2017. [Get it on Amazon.](#)*

Photo [Jeff Sandquist / Flickr](#)

advocacy philanthropy anti-testing Bill Gates Common Core curricula curriculum  
GatesFoundation k-12 teacher evaluations testing testing backlash