

Bill Gates funds CMS PR blitz - Billionaire's foundation gives \$200,000 to help district pitch its Strategic Plan 2014.

Charlotte Observer, Eric Frazier
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The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is bankrolling a \$200,000 public relations campaign to boost interest in local school reform efforts, but critics quickly panned it as meddling billionaires trying to steer debate over the future of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

The Gates Foundation is paying for a media campaign to run through this fall that would deploy TV, radio and Internet ads, as well as a website, to tell citizens about school reform efforts stemming from CMS' Strategic Plan 2014.

That's the school board's blueprint for improving local schools. It propelled former Superintendent Peter Gorman's controversial push this spring to expand student testing and craft performance-pay systems for teachers.

The rollout this year of 50-plus new tests stoked months of controversy. Teachers protested at school board meetings after learning of a CMS-backed bill that would have canceled earlier legislation requiring a teacher vote on performance-pay plans.

Natalie English, a senior vice president with the Charlotte Chamber, said the campaign isn't aimed at shoring up support for those efforts. She said it aims to make the public more generally aware of the 2014 plan and its importance for improving graduation rates and closing achievement gaps.

"This is not an advocacy campaign," she said. "We're not out to change anybody's mind about what is going on in CMS ... We are asking citizens to get themselves educated on Strategic Plan 2014."

Opponents of expanded testing and performance-pay questioned whether the PR campaign would affect the search for a new superintendent or this year's school board elections, which several candidates have framed as a referendum on those controversial issues.

They said Bill Gates and other wealthy philanthropists are meddling in local schools. Similar complaints have been aired about the Broad Foundation, which underwrites reform efforts in CMS and runs training programs that Gorman and other CMS leaders have participated in.

"It's the billionaire's club wanting to shape public education," said Carol Sawyer, a leader with **Mecklenburg ACTS**, a parents group opposed to the testing expansion.

"I find their approach profoundly undemocratic. They could usurp the entire community's will with money."

The Gates Foundation has given money to school systems around the country under grants aimed at improving teacher effectiveness. Some grants have been much larger than what CMS received.

Asked about critics' concerns, English replied: "If you think the status quo is working and we're doing all we need to do to ... then don't look for any new ideas. But I'm pretty sure we can all agree that that's not the case."

School board chair Eric Davis said the school system's public relations staff has been decimated by cuts, and CMS needs the kind of help Gates is offering. "This is nothing more than trying to get factual information out to the community about our efforts to try to improve student learning."

Gates Foundation officials couldn't be reached Monday for comment on the Charlotte grant. English said she wasn't aware of any other case in which the foundation gave a grant specifically for a school-related

public relations campaign.

English said she wrote the grant for the project after officials from the foundation called her in spring 2010. They wanted to know about the success she'd had helping the chamber educate the public in connection with bond campaigns.

She said she told them about it, and they later invited her to apply for a grant. She did, after consulting with Gorman and other education leaders. Gates awarded the grant in October, she said, but the chamber decided to wait until after CMS settled its \$100 million budget shortfall this spring before proceeding.

The campaign will not endorse school board candidates, she said. However, she added that as people get more educated about local school reforms, "they will probably want board members to weigh in on these issues."

She said people have a misconception that CMS' 2014 plan is all about performance pay. She said the new campaign will inform people about the full range of reforms in the plan, including targeting low-achieving schools for extra help, upgrading technology, and adding flexibility to the academic calendar.

Most of the money will go toward buying ads; contractors will be hired to help, but none full-time. Carolina PR, a public relations firm, will assist with the effort, which includes opinion polling to see how effectively the message is getting out.

Organizers are recruiting a panel of local parents, business leaders, clergy and civic leaders to oversee the five- to six-week publicity effort, with the chamber providing management and logistical support.