

Who's the power behind CMS? - If you follow the money, you'll find the Broad Foundation. And skeptics are questioning its clout.

Charlotte Observer , Ann Doss Helms Thomas Goldsmith and T. Keung Hui of the Raleigh News & Observer contributed. Sunday, May 8, 2011

Superintendent Peter Gorman may be the face of public education in Charlotte, but is a Los Angeles billionaire the power behind the scenes?

Locally and nationally, skeptics are questioning the clout wielded by Eli Broad. His foundation, which has helped put Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in the national spotlight, has also paid to train Gorman and the school board, and to help CMS hire administrators with a business bent.

As public money dwindles, "venture philanthropists" such as Broad (rhymes with "road") and Bill Gates play a growing role in driving education reform. CMS is in the thick of their quest to find better ways to educate low-income and minority students, using principles that helped the benefactors earn their fortunes.

"With budget cuts, it's impossible to make student gains unless every penny at central-office level is flowing toward high-yield gains for kids," says Broad Foundation spokeswoman Erica Lepping.

The Broad Foundation has given CMS \$3.3 million in recent years, most to help the district crunch data and test kids. For the second year in a row, CMS is being considered for the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education.

Now, controversy over CMS performance pay and testing is drawing attention from national critics who say an obsession with data and a disregard of teachers is characteristic of Broad-trained leaders.

Erlene Lyde, science chair at Waddell High, said she became alarmed when she read a nationally circulated blog item on how to tell if districts are "infected by the Broad virus." Among the "symptoms" are school closings, teacher layoffs and reliance on novice teachers recruited by Teach For America - and even superintendents who read their Blackberries during public comments at board meetings, something Gorman has been accused of doing.

"When my colleagues read this article, their mouths drop and they exclaim, 'That's us!' " Lyde said. "What's the hidden agenda? This is not about what is best for children because no one is asking the children or the people who work most closely with them."

Broad's supporters say the foundation's ideas are being merged with national trends, local decisions and situations created by a sour economy, such as closings and layoffs.

Who's in charge?

Controversy over Broad, Gates and other high-powered education donors raises a chicken-and-egg question: Is the lure of big bucks driving public-policy decisions, such as CMS' pursuit of performance pay? Or are the philanthropists following the best thinking on reform, including ideas from local leaders?

Gorman insists there's no "Broad blueprint." He says he'd be working toward performance pay without grants, but he acknowledges that outside money has kept the project powering ahead through the recession.

The federal government and the Gates Foundation are the big spenders on CMS performance pay, according to a CMS tally. Broad's money is going toward "performance management," a data-focused project that includes performance pay and test development.

Broad's pervasive ties to educational leaders - from CMS to U.S. Education Secretary and former Chicago superintendent Arne Duncan - raise questions among skeptics.

Neal Thornburg, who calls himself a concerned Mecklenburg taxpayer, said he started delving into Broad's connections to CMS and other education groups, such as Teach For America, and found it "kind of frightening."

He wonders what kind of favors are being traded, and whether "a core of administrators with so much invested in Broad's educational philosophy" can objectively report results.

Training leaders

Broad, 77, made his billions in home construction and insurance before creating the foundation that has funneled more than \$400 million into urban education since 1999.

When he traveled the country trying to figure out the best way to help disadvantaged kids, he realized many urban districts lacked leadership, Lepping said.

School boards were often mired in micromanaging trivial issues. District administrators tended to focus on maintaining the system and complying with the maze of rules that govern them.

Lepping says the foundation's guidance to leaders is simple: Focus on student achievement. Articulate and communicate a mission. Create strategies. Measure results with accurate, meaningful data. Change what doesn't work.

CMS board members have been through extensive training paid for by Broad, including a weeklong retreat in Park City, Utah, in 2004. Current and former members speak highly of that experience.

"You use your own brain to analyze your own system," says member Kaye McGarry.

"The groups that we trained with all ended up picking different approaches," says former Chair Molly Griffin. "I'm a big fan."

Follow-up sessions in Charlotte were open to the public. Reporters attended, but the sessions generated few headlines because they focused on internal process, such as how board members work with each other and the superintendent.

Superintendent factory

The Broad Center, a nonprofit created by the foundation, recruits and trains superintendents to shake up urban districts - hopefully, in ways that break the links between race, poverty and failure. Some enter the 10-month training from education, others from the military or business.

Gorman was superintendent in Tustin, Calif, when he completed the Broad training in 2004. That got him on the radar of the search firm working with CMS in 2006, but it didn't make him a shoe-in for the job, McGarry said.

As the number of Broad-trained superintendents has grown - the center lists 31 leading urban districts - so has public scrutiny, especially when those leaders get tangled in controversy.

Wake County Schools recently hired Broad graduate Anthony Tata as superintendent, and the academy assigned Gorman to mentor him. That doesn't mean Gorman will tell Tata how to run Raleigh schools - or that Eli Broad will be calling the shots in either district, both say.

The Broad Center also recruits "cabinet-level" administrators to help make urban districts more businesslike and helps pay their salaries, at least \$90,000 a year. CMS currently has three. Duncan had 23 when he led Chicago Public Schools.

Too businesslike?

The idea that businessmen like Broad and Gates can invest their way to public power without public accountability - or experience as educators - worries some people.

"They know how to cut costs," said Fenwick English, a professor at UNC Chapel Hill's School of Education, who has labeled Broad as the top enemy of public education leadership in the U.S.

"But what they don't know is teaching and learning."

Diane Ravitch, an author and former assistant secretary of education, has labeled Broad, Gates and a handful of education philanthropists "the billionaire boys club." She argues that their control of the reform movement undermines democracy.

"Business leaders like the idea of turning the schools into a marketplace where the consumer is king. But the problem with the marketplace is it dissolves communities and replaces them with consumers," she writes in "The Death and Life of the Great American School System."

Ravitch helped create Parents Across America, a coalition of groups opposed to many of Broad's tactics. Pamela Grundy, a CMS parent, is also a co-founder. Grundy recently posted an article titled "Testing Madness: Charlotte Today, Your Schools Tomorrow."

But others say there's a grassroots desire to see schools spend money more effectively and take a more businesslike approach. It's up to local leaders to strike a balance and craft the best approach for any given city, say Broad officials and some experts.

Gene Maeroff, author of "School Boards in America: A Flawed Exercise in Democracy," has seen education from many angles. He's a former foundation executive, academic researcher, education writer - and currently president of the school board in Edison, N.J.

"Just because an outside foundation is putting money into something doesn't necessarily mean there's a heavy-duty agenda of trying to brainwash participants," Maeroff said. "People who get on school boards aren't supposed to be nincompoops. They're supposed to be able to work with their superintendent to decide what will benefit their district."

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CMS and Broad

The Broad Foundation has given CMS almost \$3.3 million in recent years.

CMS has been a finalist for the Broad Prize in 2004, 2010 and 2011, bringing the district \$500,000 in scholarships so far.

Superintendent Peter Gorman is a 2004 graduate of the Broad superintendents program and a Broad Center board member.

School board members and superintendents have received Broad-sponsored training in governance since 2002.

Chief Academic Officer Ann Clark and Chief Accountability Officer Robert Avossa, who has just been hired as superintendent in Fulton County, Ga., took part in the urban superintendents training.

The Broad Foundation is helping pay salaries for three administrators working in the accountability and curriculum offices, and building services.

Learn more

Broad Foundation: www.broadfoundation.org.

Parents Across America, a group critical of Broad: www.parentsacrossamerica.org.

The Broad Report, an anti-Broad blog: <http://thebroadreport.blogspot.com>.

Your Schools blog with more links: <http://obsyourschools.blogspot.com/>.

Big grants to CMS

At the Observer's request, CMS provided this tally of almost \$8.7 million in grants from Broad, Gates and other significant foundation donors since 2006, when Peter Gorman became superintendent:

Broad Foundation

\$3.3 million.

Most spent on staff and contracts for performance management, which involves tracking data to evaluate results and improve education.

Also includes \$315,000 for salaries for Broad administrative fellows.

Gates Foundation

\$3.2 million.

Most spent on efforts to improve low-performing schools through the now-defunct Achievement Zone and to measure teacher effectiveness.

Smaller amounts spent on performance pay, performance management, math and literacy.

Dell Foundation

\$1.8 million.

All spent on performance management.

Harvard University

\$328,850.

Spent on salaries and benefits for "Harvard fellows" who analyze CMS data.

Local giving

Charlotte-area philanthropists and charities are also starting to give large sums to public education. Among them:

Project LIFT: A five-year, \$55 million push by a group of local foundations, corporations and other donors to improve schools in the West Charlotte area. Includes paying for CMS staff to oversee and track data.

The C.D. Spangler Foundation gave \$4.5 million to CMS-related causes in 2010, including scholarships at West Charlotte High, \$1,000 grants to each principal and \$250,000 to Gorman.

The Arts & Science Council added a special \$1 million fund to its annual drive this year to restore arts programs in CMS endangered by budget cuts.

Local United Way leaders recently announced they may focus the agency's fund-raising efforts on education as a top priority.

Critics compromised?

Mecklenburg ACTS, a group of CMS parents and activists, has been vocal in criticizing the district's testing and performance-pay plans. Some have questioned that group's affiliation with the recently formed Parents Across America, which got a start-up donation from the National Education Association, a teachers union.

"Doesn't sound very grassroots to me," Tom Palmer emailed CMS officials.

Pamela Grundy, a Shamrock Gardens Elementary parent who helped create the local and national groups, says the NEA gave Parents Across America \$25,000. That money helped create a web site and pay for a kickoff event in New York, which Grundy attended.

Grundy said the local group predates the national alliance and is made up of people who have long been active in CMS issues. An online petition opposing CMS performance pay based on testing was written by local members, she said.