

Open Letter to The Gates Foundation

There Is One Lasting Impact *Only You Can Make*

By Marc Prensky

[1538 words]

Having hundreds of millions of dollars to spend on educational reform is an awesome responsibility, a responsibility that I know you do not take lightly.

However it is not at all clear – especially in light of your initial efforts – where your vast sums of money will do the most good. I assume you are currently in the midst of great internal debates and discussions about this.

As someone who has been observing education – and students – carefully for a while, I'd like, with due respect, to add my voice to the discourse.

First, I'd like to offer a guiding principle. While there are a great many things you and your money *can* do for public education, most of these can also (and hopefully will, to the extent they are truly necessary) be done by other institutions over time, although perhaps at a smaller scale or slower pace.

I suggest, though, that there is at least one thing that *only* an effort of your magnitude, independence and prestige can accomplish in the foreseeable future. And I suggest it is in this area (and there may be others, i.e. places where your money will accomplish something that could not get done otherwise) that you should be placing your main focus and biggest bet.

That said, what area is this?

In my view, the single hardest thing to do in American public education, the one thing that for a number of reasons can't and won't get done in the foreseeable future without your specific intervention, is *updating our public school curriculum for the 21st century*.

Why is this unlikely to get done in other ways? Curriculum control in the U.S. is incredibly fragmented. Districts and regions and states have strong often widely differing opinions and degrees of freedom. But, in addition, there are many other

groups with strong opinions and various degrees of control and/or veto power, including the Federal government (including and not including the DoE), the teachers, the unions, the subject-based associations, the curriculum commissions, the administrators, the parents, the pundits such as William Bennett, politicians at several levels, and the non-education professionals, especially, recently, our scientists. Surely there are others as well.

Because of this fragmentation, without a major intervention no single curriculum is likely to prevail, and little, other than small, incremental curricular change, is likely to happen in our lifetime.

Yet the need for curriculum reform is severe and pressing. In a time of unprecedented, dynamic, exponential, “hyper-change” – a time when our students’ minds and hopes are uniquely focused on the future – our curriculum is almost entirely about the past. While there is no question that the past informs the future to some degree, we are currently in a situation where the past in our curriculum is crowding out the future almost entirely. If we are to prepare our children to be successful in the 21st century, this situation cannot continue. Learning about the future, including subjects like media literacy, programming, on-line collaboration and problem-solving, genetics, protonomics, nanotechnology, bioethics, prediction, adaptation and environmental science ought to comprise *at least* half of the curriculum.

While our current curriculum varies enormously from place to place, it is probably safe to say that the Pareto Rule almost universally applies: 80 percent of the curriculum’s lasting value to the students comes from 20 percent of the content. So we need to assess *why* we teach the things we do, and to see if we can’t teach those same fundamental things in newer, more twenty-first-century-useful ways. As an ex-high school math teacher, I know, for example, that the same logical lessons that 2000 year-old geometry is meant to teach can be taught in a much more future-thinking way through programming. Assuming this happens, no kid *needs* a second semester of geometry, and possibly not even an entire single semester, to be prepared for the twenty-first century. In Language Arts, along with the classics of fiction that kids are (and should be) taught, we ought to also be teaching the classics of *science* fiction– the literature about the future.

I’m sure some will agree with these (personal) views, and others will disagree. And that is precisely my point.

We cannot and will not reach consensus on a twenty-first century curriculum in the current fragmented environment without some major outside intervention.

I believe the only way for the fundamental, massive curriculum change we need to happen is for a group with the independence, prestige and financial and

marketing power of the Gates Foundation to provide political and social “cover” for such change. The Foundation can do this by creating and blessing a new “standard” twenty-first century “Gates” curriculum that blends the past or legacy content with future content, in a contemporary, different, and dynamic way.

Obviously it will be a massive undertaking to create such a curriculum, and there will be no way to force any school, district or state to adopt and use it. But if it comes out well, and gets endorsed by the leading, most highly-respected thinkers of our day – from science, from education, and from other areas – adopting “The Gates Curriculum” can become a politically safe, and even forward-thinking thing for school boards and states to do.

In this way, the Gates Foundation could have a similar, or even greater effect than the Carnegie Commission in the 1970s, which had a huge impact on our higher education institutions. While those institutions may now again be ripe for change, the Carnegie Commission was revolutionary in its time, producing an “astonishing volume of high-quality material,” (according to an evaluation at <http://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/docs/ROP.Douglass.Carnegie.14.05.pdf>.)

Although they were not successful at everything they undertook, “in a number of instances, the influence of the commission and council, and the bevy of affiliated scholars, was substantial” (*same reference*.) Many of the commission’s recommendations became close to universal in their adoption and application.

Currently, I can’t see any other organization besides the Gates Foundation – not even the Federal Government – with the ability to have the same influence and impact on the public school curriculum.

Of course there are many other pressing issues in public education besides curriculum. They include, among others, teacher quality and training, teaching methodology, class sizes, student relationships, using technology, and assessment. But of all the pressing issues facing public education, I think curricular reform is *only* one where the Gates Foundation could leave an indelible mark for the future *of which no one else is capable*.

Let me close by relating this to the current educational climate of worry over America’s standing in international test rankings, particularly in science and math.

Those who think that the U.S. can compete on test scores with countries that can put a variety of pressures on kids that we cannot, are, I submit, badly mistaken. But that doesn’t mean we are, or should be, losers in the global competition for talented people. In business it is well-established that the way to win is not for everyone to compete with the same strategy, but rather for each player to select

a strategy that maximizes its own competitive advantages. This view of business competition has been extended by scholars to countries as well.

So let us ask: What is America's competitive advantage in education? The answer, I believe, is, and always has been, *creativity*, not knowledge. Our long-time competitive advantage in the world is our people's continued ability to see things in new ways, to approach problems from different perspectives, and to produce new and successful solutions. It is on *this* world ranking, and not on test score rankings, that we should be striving to be (or remain) number one.

Encouraging and maintaining this creativity in our public school students should, I submit, be a key part of the new Gates Curriculum. Americans, it must be remembered, comprise only four percent of the world's population. Intelligence, however you measure it, is distributed equally among all peoples. So we in the U.S. had better be focusing on something the others aren't focused on to the same degree, i.e. best preparing and equipping our kids with the creativity to be successful in a dynamic, hyper-changing future (rather than on mastering the curriculum of the twentieth century and before.)

I submit that this is the task on which your hundreds of millions can be most wisely spent. I will be pleased to offer my further thoughts and assistance should they be requested.

Respectfully,

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Marc Prensky is an internationally acclaimed thought leader, speaker, writer, consultant, and game designer in the critical areas of education and learning. He is the author of Digital Game-Based Learning (McGraw Hill, 2001) and Don't Bother Me Mom – I'm Learning (Paragon House, 2006). Marc is the founder and CEO of Games2train, a game-based learning company, whose clients include IBM, Bank of America, Pfizer, the U.S. Department of Defense and the LA and Florida Virtual Schools. He is also the creator of the sites www.SocialImpactGames.com, and www.GamesParentsTeachers.com. Marc holds an MBA from Harvard and a Masters in Teaching from Yale. More of his writings can be found at www.marcprensky.com/writing/default.asp. Marc can be contacted at marc@games2train.com.