Education Overview

Inequity in the United States – one of the world’s richest countries – has created a yawning gap between haves and have-nots; a gap so wide and seemingly intractable that it is often mistaken for a natural and impassable divide.

Dedicated to the belief that all lives have equal value, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has from its earliest days seen investments in education and learning in the United States as a powerful expression of that belief.

Why? Because of all the paths that lead to economic prosperity, social mobility, and personal growth and fulfillment, a quality education is as close as one can get to a sure thing. But for too many Americans, that path is too narrow, its barriers to entry too high, and the ability to navigate the path too uncertain.

A high quality, broadly accessible public education is not only central to the American Dream; it is key to increasing promise and prosperity in this country. These beliefs fuel the education work of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; we seek to invest in programs and solutions that could be powerful for anyone, but truly transformational for the underprivileged and for traditionally underserved communities of color. Our aim is to broaden access to the opportunity-creating, lifelong benefits that come from a quality education and the tools that make learning easier.

Over the past fifteen years, we’ve invested more than $4 billion in partners who share our commitment to transforming the U.S. education across the full spectrum: from early learning, to K-12 education, to postsecondary education and college completion. Together with our partners, we seek to dramatically expand access to opportunity through education for students in the United States, and to protect and preserve education’s role as the great equalizer, through investments that help build a bridge broad enough, accessible enough, and reliable enough to carry many more people in the United States above and beyond their current circumstances.

- **Our K-12 Initiative** works to ensure that teachers have the skills, supports, and standards they need to prepare every student to graduate from high school ready to succeed in college, and that students have access to high quality, personalized learning experiences and excellent teaching to help them realize their potential.

- **Our Postsecondary Initiative** aims to help many more Americans enter and complete college or a career-training program by reducing cost and complexity in the admissions and financial aid process, promoting innovations in course design and delivery, and supporting novel, personalized, student-centered pathways toward a college degree or credential.

We concentrate resources in areas where strategic investment, in combination with technology-aided innovations and the involvement of partners, can make the biggest difference. From the outset, the foundation’s initiatives have been envisioned as connectors: of people to vital
resources, of potential to possibility, and of optimism to opportunity, that could improve individuals’ lives and put their dreams within reach.

Fundamentally, we believe that inequality isn’t inevitable or intractable, and the Foundation’s education exist to support any student who finds the route to a high quality education and degree too hard to navigate, too narrow to pass, or too expensive to travel. When it works well, the bridge to educational success and economic prosperity connects students – from early learners through adults seeking degrees or career credentials – to skills, knowledge, and experience that will support their journey to a quality education, success in the workplace, and contributions to the life of their communities.

Postsecondary Focus

Higher education has truly been an American success story. In just a generation, millions of people have made it to and through our colleges and universities, earning everything from short-term certificates to doctoral degrees. Education after high school has become the rule rather than the exception and the surest route to the middle class, and the vast majority of parents see college in their child’s future.

But despite its deserved reputation as the great equalizer, the bridge to a better life that is higher education remains too narrow, too hard to navigate, and carries a toll too high for many Americans. This is especially true for the new majority of college students: working adults, low-income and first generation students, and students of color. Today, only about half of all students who start out to get a certificate or degree will reach that goal. And only one in 10 of the lowest income young adults will complete a certificate or degree by age 24.

Unless we dramatically improve student success in higher education, our nation will suffer from a shortage of skilled workers needed to ensure global competitiveness and national security. Leading labor economists estimate that we are currently on track to produce at least 11 million fewer career-relevant certificates and degrees than our economy will require by 2025.

The world in 2025 will either be one in which higher education becomes a bridge to opportunity for millions more Americans, or one in which it becomes a barrier to opportunity, driving a wedge between the haves and the have nots. The choices we make today – as policymakers, educators, innovators, and advocates – will set a course for one of those paths.

We believe that higher education’s bridge to opportunity can be widened and strengthened. And we believe that race, income, and gender should no longer be predictors of educational opportunity and achievement. But that will take transformative change that puts students and their changing needs at the center. And after nearly a decade of investing and learning, we believe that there are four things we can do now to make opportunity a reality for more students:

1. Make learning easier and teaching smarter using technology. Leading colleges and universities are using courseware tools that help faculty help students figure out exactly where they need assistance and target extra support to those areas. The result? More
students are making it through “killer” introductory courses and shortening their time to a degree or certificate. A growing number of institutions are also using technology to provide integrated advising to students about the courses they need to take or connect them to resources they might need to help them stay in school. Many students drop out over issues that can easily be fixed, but only if different offices on campus are able to share information in real time. Colleges using these technologies are already seeing better student outcomes.

2. **Get more students to and through college with better financial aid.** This starts with simplifying the aid application process, which serves as a barrier to two million low-income students a year. But it also includes providing incentives in aid programs for students to persist and finish their programs. College affordability is about more than just financial aid, but we believe that streamlining our aid process and better targeting our aid dollars can lead to better outcomes for millions of students.

3. **Provide students clear pathways to a certificate or degree,** regardless of how or where they start their journey. Many of today’s new majority of students come to college not completely ready and/or attend more than one institution on the way to their goal. Too many of these students end up stuck in remedial courses that don’t help them or are forced to re-take courses that didn’t transfer. In addition to costing students time, this also costs them money. We are working with colleges and universities to redesign remedial education so that it is a way up rather than a way out, improve transfer so that students are not repeating courses unnecessarily, and create flexible but focused maps to guide students to certificates and degrees.

4. **Empower students, educators, and policymakers with better data for decision-making.** Much of the data we need to make informed decisions at all levels is either not available or does not cover critical outcomes, students, or institutions. Students need better information to make decisions about where and how they attend college. Educators need information to identify students who need help and determine how best to support them. Policymakers need better information to determine how to target limited public resources toward student success.

All of these things are important. But they will only make a difference for the new majority of students if they are brought together to make higher education more affordable, flexible, personalized, and clear. That work will require bold and creative leadership by colleges and universities to implement and integrate these and other solutions. It also will require new types of providers that are able to meet students’ needs with innovation and stimulate healthy competition. State and federal policy will also be crucial, providing strong incentives for student access and success.

The world in 2025 holds great promise for higher education. But we must act now if it is to be a bridge to opportunity and not a barrier.
Jason Palmer – Biography

Jason Palmer is Deputy Director for Postsecondary Success at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, leading the foundation’s efforts in online and blended learning solutions, digital courseware, student coaching and advising, competency-based learning, seamless credit transfer, financial aid and employer pathways.

Prior to joining the foundation, Jason founded and grew three investor-backed technology and services companies before holding a series of executive positions at Microsoft, SchoolNet and Kaplan. At Microsoft Education, Jason was responsible for developing and launching the world’s first learning management system for tablet-based education (way back in 2002). At SchoolNet, Jason was responsible for establishing key partnerships with The Princeton Review, Kaplan and ETS before the company was acquired by Pearson for $230 million. At Kaplan, Jason led three education turnaround businesses as general manager or president, in addition to leading the company’s venture capital effort and serving as a board member to education technology startups like Moodlerooms, StraighterLine and iProf India.

Jason holds a B.A. in interdisciplinary studies from the University of Virginia and an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School. The first business he founded in 1993, while he was a 4th year at UVA, was The Corner Meal Plan, a debit card startup that enabled 1,500 undergraduates to eat at restaurants on the Corner instead of the cafeteria. Jason sold The Corner Meal Plan in 1996. Jason has served on the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education Foundation Board since 2005.