

Education and Philanthropy

A quality education can help individuals learn critical thinking skills, prepare for the workforce, participate in civic life, practice empathy, and lead flourishing lives. Schools, universities, and other education institutions play a critical role in helping individuals, communities, and societies reach their potential—from early childhood to postsecondary attainment. However, many communities receive inadequate funding for their schools, which can affect the quality of teaching, access to resources, and learning outcomes. This lack of resources has global implications: by 2030, [825 million young people](#) will lack the basic reading, math, and digital literacy required to compete for jobs. In particular, girls around the world face barriers to education, and [more than 100 million girls](#) today are out of school.

Resource gaps can lead to achievement gaps, which can further perpetuate existing racial and wealth inequalities. In the United States, for example, school districts with more than 50 percent Black or Latino students are two times more likely to have a funding gap than higher-income districts. Often, these under-resourced schools face additional challenges in preparing students for post-secondary education and for future employment opportunities, which in turn serve as a barrier to upward mobility.

Given the enormous challenges faced by the education sector, philanthropy can play a significant role in advancing initiatives and strengthening institutions to help ensure a quality education for all.

Education Ecosystem Overview

Given the breadth of the education space, there are many players involved, including across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors:



Government agencies provide funding for public schools and colleges, establish curricula, and set performance standards for students and teachers.



Schools and universities provide students with learning environments and opportunities to achieve their potential.



Teacher preparation programs equip prospective educators with the skills and training needed to succeed in the classroom.



Nonprofits and NGOs conduct research, advocate for education reform, work with schools to develop and implement programs, and offer supplemental out-of-school-time programs.



Corporations, foundations, and individual donors provide significant funding for initiatives that support education institutions and educators as well as financial aid for students.

Philanthropy Trends






Philanthropists have long contributed to education, which is consistently one of the largest giving categories in the United States. In 2020 alone, for example, U.S.-based donors gave **more than \$71 billion to education**, which represented 15 percent of all giving and was surpassed only by charitable giving to religion, according to Giving USA. Philanthropy is uniquely positioned to facilitate collaboration between policymakers, business groups, and schools to achieve scale and impact. The sector also provides substantial support for policy reform and advocacy efforts to address the systemic barriers that contribute to unequal access to education.

Funders support a wide range of projects, initiatives, and areas across education. According to a [benchmarking study by Grantmakers for Education](#), 57 percent of grant dollars in 2018 went to elementary or secondary

education, compared with 49 percent for postsecondary education and workforce/career readiness and 4 percent for early learning.

There are challenges for philanthropists specific to the education sector, such as the lack of consensus around measuring impact. There are varying opinions, for example, on the most effective indicators for assessing educational performance, and those frameworks have evolved, with commonly cited metrics ranging from secondary-school graduation rates to third-grade reading levels to eighth-grade algebra proficiency.

Ultimately, philanthropists play a significant role in the evolving education landscape, across various geographies and education stages. Examples of how donors are working in the educational sector are below.

	Project Focus	Example
	Promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in education.	The Lumina Fund for Racial Justice and Equity supports organizations and efforts working to eradicate systemic racism and to advance equity and justice, with a focus on higher education in the United States.
	Holistic approaches to education focused on social and emotional learning (SEL), mental health, and well-being.	The Social and Emotional Learning (SEL For Teachers) project, a partnership between the NoVo Foundation and Education First, works to build momentum for high-quality SEL practices through education, technical assistance, and networks and has awarded more than \$1 million since 2016 in grants to teachers and districts through the SEL Innovation Fund.
	Providing educators with career development, training, and mental health resources.	Through the LIGHT Awards program, the Intrepid Philanthropy Foundation supports teachers by offering multi-year grants to teams of teachers to engage in professional learning opportunities of their choosing.
	Advancement of global education , including under the UN's Sustainable Development Goals framework.	The International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity engages with world leaders, policymakers, and researchers to promote and increase investment in quality education and lifelong learning for all, and its goals are aligned with the 2030 timeline for the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.
	Addressing student debt and the lack of post-secondary education funding.	The Achieving Success in Postsecondary Education project, which emerged from a partnership between Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and the TIAA Institute, surveyed the state of student debt in the United States and highlighted trends in postsecondary education funding.

How to Get Started in Education Philanthropy

Funders looking to get started in philanthropy focused on education should engage with member organizations and peer-learning networks that have published extensive research and analysis on the fields. National networks like [Grantmakers for Education](#), for example, regularly provide resources such as publications, convenings, and webinars for funders focused on improving education outcomes. [NewSchools Venture Fund](#) holds an annual summit to exchange innovative ideas to advance public education in the United States. Regional and local organizations can also provide resources for understanding the education landscape—such as the [East Bay Community Foundation](#) in Oakland, California, which contributes to local efforts such as [LitLab](#) that work to ensure success in early education.

Ultimately, many funders reflect on their own educational experiences as a start point for discovering the education issues, causes, and organizations that are most aligned with their interests—and to identify the specific geographies or levels of the education system that resonate the most with them. From there, they can read about issues in education, talk with other funders to learn about their approaches to education philanthropy and connect with individuals already working in the education space to learn about the needs and gaps within their specific areas.

Experts at Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors focused on education include [Amy Holmes](#), [Joanne Schneider](#), [Meenakshi Abbi](#), and [Tina Joh](#). For additional information or help getting started, email info@rockpa.org.

Additional Resources

- [Achieving Success in Postsecondary Education: Trends in Philanthropy](#) (TIAA/Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors)
- [#JusticelsTheFoundation: New Data on Racial Equity and Racial Justice Funding in Education Philanthropy](#) (Schott Foundation for Public Education)
- [Mainstreaming Equity in Education](#) (Education Equity Research Initiative)
- [Making Funding Count for Educational Equity](#) (Horizons National)
- [Trends in Education Philanthropy: Benchmarking 2018–19](#) (Grantmakers for Education)