

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

---

---

## Plentiful School Gifts, But Unfocused

By **ROSS DANIS**

When Facebook [FB -0.72%](#) founder [Mark Zuckerberg](#) hosted a fundraising event at his home in Palo Alto, Calif., last month for New Jersey Gov. [Chris Christie](#), the event set tongues wagging. The billionaire's interest in the New Jersey politician was thoroughly dissected by the chattering class. Too bad there hasn't been as much interest in analyzing Mr. Zuckerberg's \$100 million commitment to support the struggling public schools in Newark, N.J., or in studying the effectiveness of the many other education grants made by foundations to help in Newark.

To be fair, it is difficult to judge how well the philanthropy in Newark is working because precious few data have been collected. Truly useful metrics, therefore, haven't been developed. The gap between good intentions and measurable results will be familiar anywhere in the country where philanthropies join efforts to improve education.

To address the shortfall in Newark, our organization, the Newark Trust for Education, has undertaken an effort to collect information about the foundations' work that will help clarify for school administrators, principals, teachers, parents and students how best to improve K-12 public education.

Our primary objective: follow the money. Which philanthropies are spending how much, to do what, in which schools? No one really knew. In collaboration with the funding community, we created a tool called the NET Navigator. It allows anyone with an interest in tracking the tens of millions of philanthropy dollars now flowing into Newark schools to conduct online searches by funder, by school or by specific program. Soon the database will include individual school achievement data.

So far, we have learned that there are more than \$90 million dollars from 50 different private funders supporting hundreds of programs in Newark's 94 schools, including the matching funds pledged by Mr. Zuckerberg's Start Up Foundation. Unfortunately, with a survey of school principals conducted last year, we have also found that nearly half of these programs are clustered in fewer than 10 schools. Our data also indicate that more than half of the various programs are initiated by well-intentioned funders or program

providers, not by school-district leaders.

Troublingly, such school-based "interventions," as they're known, are often brokered between and among the funders, the program providers and individual schools, leaving the central office without a clue as to what programs and services are being offered at which schools. Thus an array of seemingly unconnected programs based on questionable premises have taken root. Such programs include an attempt to improve literacy through yoga and an effort to improve students' social skills with the adoption of classroom pets.

To their credit, many local foundation leaders who have worked for years to solve Newark's most intractable public education problems have begun to question the contribution that so many unaligned programs can make to what ideally should be a coherent, unified and equitable strategy for improving student outcomes. Some go as far as to say that, in the small number of particularly at-risk schools where so many of the foundations' programs are concentrated, the combined impact of multiple interventions based on opposing philosophies of teaching and learning may well be a net negative.

A minority of education philanthropies in Newark have begun to focus funding on efforts to improve entire school systems. For example, rather than simply imposing a preferred, if ad hoc, program on a particular school or a subset of students within a school, the Foundation for Newark's Future, the local affiliate of Mr. Zuckerberg's national foundation, and whose grant dollars are included in the NET Navigator, wisely steers funding to system-wide teacher evaluations and contracts, new school options (including charter schools), and broader investments in human capital.

There are other encouraging signs. Ten local and national funders came together in Newark two summers ago, committing themselves to improving outcomes for all of Newark's school children with better coordination and strategic alignments. Our organization hopes to enhance what is now known as the Funders Collaborative by gathering useful data that can inform strategic investments and thus help maximize the impact of finite foundation dollars.

The challenges to improving public education in Newark can be found in urban school districts across the country. Myriad political, policy and management hurdles are faced

by private funders and public-school-system leaders, who are now increasingly thrust together by genuine crisis and a mutual determination to make things better. More information, and better sharing of it, will lend coherence to well-intentioned initiatives that too often are also haphazard.

*Mr. Danis is president and CEO of the Newark Trust for Education.*