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Behind Grass-Roots School Advocacy, Bill Gates

By **SAM DILLON**

INDIANAPOLIS — A handful of outspoken teachers helped persuade state lawmakers this spring to eliminate seniority-based layoff policies. They testified before the legislature, wrote briefing papers and published an op-ed article in The Indianapolis Star.

They described themselves simply as local teachers who favored school reform — one sympathetic state representative, Mary Ann Sullivan, said, “They seemed like genuine, real people versus the teachers’ union lobbyists.” They were, but they were also recruits in a national organization, Teach Plus, financed significantly by the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#).

For years, [Bill Gates](#) focused his education philanthropy on overhauling large schools and opening small ones. His new strategy is more ambitious: overhauling the nation’s education policies. To that end, the foundation is financing educators to pose alternatives to union orthodoxies on issues like the seniority system and the use of student test scores to evaluate teachers.

In some cases, Mr. Gates is creating entirely new advocacy groups. The foundation is also paying Harvard-trained data specialists to work inside school districts, not only to crunch numbers but also to change practices. It is bankrolling many of the Washington analysts who interpret education issues for journalists and giving grants to some media organizations.

“We’ve learned that school-level investments aren’t enough to drive systemic changes,” said Allan C. Golston, the president of the foundation’s United States program. “The importance of advocacy has gotten clearer and clearer.”

The foundation spent \$373 million on education in 2009, the latest year for which its tax returns are available, and devoted \$78 million to advocacy — quadruple the amount spent on advocacy in 2005. Over the next five or six years, Mr. Golston said, the foundation expects to pour \$3.5 billion more into education, up to 15 percent of it on advocacy.

Given the scale and scope of the largess, some worry that the foundation’s assertive philanthropy is squelching independent thought, while others express concerns about transparency. Few policy makers, reporters or members of the public who encounter advocates like Teach Plus or pundits like Frederick M. Hess of the American Enterprise Institute realize they are underwritten by the foundation.

“It’s Orwellian in the sense that through this vast funding they start to control even how we tacitly think about the problems facing public education,” said Bruce Fuller, an education professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who said he received no financing from the foundation.

Mr. Hess, a frequent blogger on education whose institute received \$500,000 from the Gates foundation in 2009 “to influence the national education debates,” acknowledged that he and others sometimes felt constrained. “As researchers, we have a reasonable self-preservation instinct,” he said. “There can be an exquisite carefulness about how we’re going to say anything that could reflect badly on a foundation.”

“Everybody’s implicated,” he added.

Indeed, the foundation’s 2009 tax filing runs to 263 pages and includes about 360 education grants. There are the more traditional and publicly celebrated programmatic initiatives, like financing **charter school** operators and early-college high schools. Then there are the less well-known advocacy grants to civil rights groups like the Education Equality Project and Education Trust that try to influence policy, to research institutes that study the policies’ effectiveness, and to Education Week and public radio and television stations that cover education policies.

The foundation paid a New York philanthropic advisory firm \$3.5 million “to mount and support public education and advocacy campaigns.” It also paid a string of universities to support pieces of the Gates agenda. Harvard, for instance, got \$3.5 million to place “strategic data fellows” who could act as “entrepreneurial change agents” in school districts in Boston, Los Angeles and elsewhere. The foundation has given to the two national teachers’ unions — as well to groups whose mission seems to be to criticize them.

“It’s easier to name which groups Gates doesn’t support than to list all of those they do, because it’s just so overwhelming,” noted Ken Libby, a graduate student who has pored over the foundation’s tax filings as part of his academic work.

An early example of the increased emphasis on advocacy came in 2008, when Mr. Gates teamed with Eli Broad for a campaign aimed at focusing the presidential candidates on issues like teacher quality and education standards. The Gates Foundation spent \$16 million on the effort.

Mr. Gates later acknowledged that it achieved little, but in the years since, the foundation has helped leverage sweeping changes. Its latest annual report, for instance, highlights its role — often overlooked — in the development and promotion of the common core academic standards that some 45 states have adopted in recent months.

The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, which developed the standards, and Achieve Inc., a nonprofit organization coordinating the writing of tests aligned with the standards, have each received millions of dollars.

The Alliance for Excellent Education, another nonprofit organization, was paid \$551,000 in 2009 “to grow support for the common core standards initiative,” according to the tax filings. The Fordham Institute got \$959,000 to “review common core materials and develop supportive materials.” Scores of newspapers quoted Fordham’s president, Chester E. Finn Jr., praising the standards after their March 2010 release; most, including The New York Times, did not note the Gates connection.

“What Gates got for their money was an honest review,” said Mr. Finn, a longtime advocate of national standards. “All I could say to Gates before the common core came out was that we were hoping the new standards would be good.”

The Center on Education Policy, which calls itself “a national independent advocate,” was awarded \$1 million over two years to track which states adopted the standards. Its president, Jack Jennings, said he had nonetheless publicly criticized the Gates stand on other issues, including charter schools and teacher evaluations. “I feel free to speak out when I think something is wrongheaded,” he said.

In 2009, a Gates-financed group, the New Teacher Project, issued an influential report detailing how existing evaluation systems tended to give high ratings to nearly all teachers. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan cited it repeatedly and wrote rules into the federal Race to the Top grant competition encouraging states to overhaul those systems. Then a string of Gates-backed nonprofit groups worked to promote legislation across the country: at least 20 states, including New York, are now designing new evaluation systems.

While the foundation has given money to both the [American Federation of Teachers](#) and the National Education Association, totaling about \$6.3 million over the last three years, some of its newer initiatives appear aimed at challenging the dominance that unions have exercised during policy debates. Last year, Mr. Gates spent \$2 million on a “social action” campaign focused on the film “Waiting for ‘Superman,’ ” which demonized [Randi Weingarten](#), the president of the federation.

In 2010, the foundation gave \$500,000, to the Foundation for Educational Excellence, founded by Jeb Bush, a former governor of Florida.

In 2009, the foundation spent \$3.5 million creating an advocacy group to buttress its \$290 million investment in programs to increase teacher effectiveness in four areas of the country: Tampa-St. Petersburg, Fla., Pittsburgh, Memphis and Los Angeles.

A document describing plans for the group, posted on a Washington Post blog in March, said it would mobilize local advocates, “establish strong ties to local journalists” and should “go toe to toe” with union officials in explaining contracts and state laws to the public.

But to avoid being labeled a “tool of the foundation,” the document said the group should “maintain a low public profile.”

Ms. Weingarten complained to the foundation that the document appeared to be antiunion, and Mr. Golston said the foundation had shifted the group's mission to support union-management engagement.

"Unlike some foundations that would rather just scapegoat teachers and their unions, Gates understands that teaching is a profession, that you have to invest in and support teachers," Ms. Weingarten said. "That doesn't mean we agree with everything they do."

Two other Gates-financed groups, Educators for Excellence and Teach Plus, have helped amplify the voices of newer teachers as an alternative to the official views of the unions. Last summer, members of several such groups had a meeting at the foundation's offices in Washington.

Two Bronx teachers, Sydney Morris and Evan Stone, founded Educators for Excellence in March 2010, to argue against seniority-based layoffs. But it was a \$160,000 donation from Mr. Gates months later, Ms. Morris said, that allowed them to sign up 2,500 teachers.

Teach Plus was founded in 2007 in Boston by Celine Coggins, a former teacher with a Ph.D. from Stanford, to give young educators incentives to make the classroom a career.

With relatively small grants from other foundations, Ms. Coggins began working with teachers in Chicago and Indianapolis in 2008. The next year, she received Gates foundation awards totaling \$4 million, for expenditure over three years, which allowed her to expand to Los Angeles and Memphis, build a Web site and move into new offices at the Boston headquarters.

In Chicago, union activists have accused Teach Plus of being an "Astroturf" grass-roots organization. In Indiana, some lawmakers accused the group of being "part of a conspiracy by Gates and hedge fund managers" to undermine the unions' influence, according to Ms. Sullivan, a Democrat who voted to end seniority-based layoffs, as Teach Plus wanted. "I don't believe in conspiracy theories."