

School Reform TV: The “New” Philanthropists of Public Education

Have You Heard listens in on the recent [XQ Super School Live](#) spectacular, the big budget, star-studded TV extravaganza aimed at “rethinking high school,” brought to you by Silicon Valley billionaireess Laurene Powell Jobs. Co-host Jack Schneider examines the claims that high school hasn’t changed in 100 years. We’re joined by Megan Tompkins Stange, author of [Policy Patrons: Philanthropy, Education Reform, and the Politics of Influence](#). She helps us see the world of public education as a billionaire edu-reformer does.

Young female speaker This is America in 1900. This is a car in 1900. And a phone, and a high school.

 This is America in 1950, and a car, and a phone, and a high school.

 This is today: A car, a phone, a high school. Whoa; back up.

 So cars are now *this*, and phones are now *this*, but high schools are still *that*? American high schools are based on the same model, and it’s been over 100 years.

Young male speaker Wow, that’s a long time.

Young female speaker But why? In 1900 it made sense to prepare high school students for *that*. But in 2017, shouldn’t they be preparing students for *this*? And *this*? And even *this*? So why are we still granting diplomas based on the time a student spends in a seat?

 And why is the formula for learning four years sitting at a desk, multiplied by one subject taught at a time, equals students ready for the future?

 Yeah, doesn’t make sense anymore. So, let’s start to rethink, reimagine, and rebuild the high school system. The time is now.

Jennifer Welcome to Have You Heard. I’m Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack And I’m Jack Schneider.

Jennifer What you just heard was a clip from an all-star, television extravaganza.

Jack It was quite a spectacle.

Jennifer That was the XQ Super School Live show that ran on all four major networks in September. Just in case you happened to miss it, XQ is a production brought to us by Laurene Powell Jobs. She’s the widow of Steve Jobs, and the inheritress of an enormous fortune, via Apple. I think she’s worth something like \$14 billion USD. She is devoting a sizable chunk of that money to rethinking high school.

Jack I really like that clip that we opened with, Jennifer, because it really distills their vision: *Phones and cars have changed, therefore, the American high school is a complete travesty that we need to tear down to its studs and rebuild.*

 I think it’s worth joining me on a “talk-through” right now, in terms of what I can see when I look out the window of my time machine.

Jack The year is 1900. The Model T has not quite rolled off the factory floor, yet, but soon will. The telephone is in its early days. And here, we have the bad, old high school that looks exactly like the high schools we have today. Except, there are few differences.

We have almost total segregation in these high schools that I am looking at right now.

There's no special education. Any child who has learning differences, any sort of physical or cognitive difference cannot be served by this school.

Some of these schools have up to a 100 students in each class. I am looking at a picture right now of desks bolted down. There are roughly 100 desks in this classroom.

I'm looking at an all-white teaching force in the white schools.

I'm seeing on the board some notes indicating that this is a class in Greek. I'm seeing that the schedule has us headed to Latin, followed by mechanical drawing, and afterwards, a course in zoology.

At the end of the day, our students, who constitute roughly 20% of American high-school aged students, will head home and join the majority of students who are not enrolled in high school, and then carry on with their tasks, presumably hoping for better cars and better phones that will match the schools that have just been created for them, which is another part of this story.

That, too, is a misleading claim, because the American high school was invented before America was. America's oldest high school is Boston Latin, which is not too far from where we're recording right now, and predates the United States by over a century.

So, all of this [historical record] really challenges this narrative: High schools were built a particular moment in time, they were designed in a sort of fixed way, and we put them away, and we never really revisited them, until we realized that times change—that we've got smartphones now, and there are Teslas out on the road—and that we really need to rethink what we're doing in high schools.

Jennifer Well, despite the star-studded cast, there's something so soothing and reassuring about the claims being made. Anyone can grasp the concept our high schools haven't changed.

In addition to playing on a misunderstanding about the past, there are definitely anxieties about the future that are being played upon, too: Things seem to have been sped up, parents are understandably worried about the fates and fortunes of their own kids.

So, the other part of the argument being made is the jobs of the future haven't yet been invented, and yet the kids who are going to be in those jobs are in schools now.

I was thinking as I heard that—obviously, I was really distracted by Samuel L. Jackson and when they played The Breakfast Club song; that's really speaking to my generation—but you could make that argument about any generation of kids, couldn't you?

Jack You know, I like to picture Henry Ford standing at the doorstep of the high school and pointing a menacing finger at it, and accusing it of not preparing the workforce that *he* needs for the jobs of the future. So, you're absolutely right.

I think a further point that needs to be made here in terms of thinking about this narrative, is the fact that schools do far more than prepare students for future labor.

Yes, it is true that right now there are jobs out there that require skills like coding, for instance, and that schools could be teaching those skills. Employers could also be teaching those skills, and we could leave schools to educate children and prepare them to participate as citizens, to learn to appreciate arts and music, to discover their talents and abilities, to develop basic math and even advanced math skills, to develop basic and even advanced reading skills, without any concern for how those will help them be efficient employees at Apple or Tesla.

The constrained narrative around what the purpose of school is, and the idea that because students are not leaving high school directly ready for the workforce [it's failing], is a false narrative that suggests the purpose of high school has always been to prepare students for work. Once upon a time, it did a good job, it's no longer doing that.

That has never been the purpose of high school, at any point! That's actually the new piece that's being thrust on to the American high school.

Jennifer We did an [episode](#) a few weeks ago that explored a last big vision for change that was driven by an enormously wealthy individual who derived his fortune from the tech industry, and that...

Jack That was really good episode. People should go back into the archives for that one.

Jennifer They should. That was Bill Gates, and his dream was to make every school a small school. When we ended that episode, we noted that despite some promising research in some places, that vision has been cast by the wayside. What you saw the on the XQ Super School Live special is the new billionaire dream.

Jack I also saw a lot of singing and dancing, and I also think it's worth noting if we added up all of the clips from that special where we were actually looking at schools and "innovative practices," they might have constituted about ten minutes of that hour-long special.

Jennifer As a special treat, before we go to our guest, can we play [The Breakfast Club](#) song?

Jack Let's do it.

Excerpt from movie The Breakfast Club On any given morning in the United States, more than 15 million students can be found in high schools like this one. An ordinary school in an ordinary town. When students cross this threshold, they bring their hopes and dreams, only to encounter a system that no longer helps them achieve these goals. [Narrator walking through school. School-day events and sounds are his backdrop]

- Excerpt from movie The Breakfast Club
- This system has been around for a very long time, and it worked quite well for a very long time, but it hasn't kept up with the changes necessary to get kids ready for life after high school in the 21st century.
- While people talk about what needs to be done all the time, very little seems to, uh, actually change. [Ringing bell and students' talking and movement causes narrator to speak louder]
- Dispirited and demoralized, far too many of today's high school students wage daily struggle against apathy and inertia, and...Rick, why are you going off...[Speech trails off as "Don't You Forget About Me", by Simple Minds, begins playing]
- Jennifer
- We're joined now by [Megan Tompkins Stange](#). Megan is an Assistant Professor of Public Policy at the University of Michigan. She's the author of one of the best books on big education philanthropy that I've come across. It's called [Policy Patrons: Philanthropy, Education Reform, and the Politics of Influence](#). Megan, thanks for joining us.
- Megan
- Thanks so much. I'm so happy to be here
- Jennifer
- The thing that's so interesting about your book is for years, you got to be a fly on the wall, talking to people at some big education philanthropies, including Broad, Gates, and Ford, and you really got key insights into the way that they think.
- What Jack and I were wondering as we forced ourselves to sit through XQ Super School Live again, is there anything in what you picked up along the way that gives you insight into the kind of thinking that would produce a project like this? An all-star, big money, glitzy effort to rethink our high schools.
- Megan
- That's a really great question. I would say...Well, first, I would say—I'm sure Jack has mentioned this before—this has been going on for 100 years, people always wanting to rethink school. To create them from whole cloth, [to tinker, in the words of Larry Cuban, towards a better model for high school](#).
- I think that general ethos of wanting to build something new and sexy and innovative, as opposed to dealing with the messy bureaucracy that exists, I think that is something very common to most foundations.
- I'd say in tech, the new education foundations, like Gates and Broad that I covered in the book, and also new philanthropic pursuits, like Sharon Zuckerberg Initiative, they tend to embrace that due to their core values and expertise as organizations, which is technology, and wanting to disrupt what are perceived as inefficient bureaucracies and wanting to do things new and more efficiently, and to their minds, more effectively.
- But those things, that I've seen in both in the book and XQ marketing campaign, those almost never the best fit for actually making inroads into public education.
- Jennifer
- I want to play another brief clip from the XQ show. This is Chance the Rapper, one of many celebrity guests who was featured. Chance has been very involved in raising money for the Chicago Public Schools, but here he makes an argument that you often hear big philanthropists make about what it takes to fix schools.
- Chance the
- Communities throughout America can come together and create the type of

Rapper at XQ Super School Live education that honors and respects the potential of every child. It's not a question of whether we can, it's a question of whether we will. Whether we decided to choose a better future for our kids, because they need us, and we need them. Don't ever forget that.

Jennifer Megan, what do you think when you hear that argument about mustering the will to reform public education?

Megan That assumption is baked into much of the new education's recipe, DNA, and core values...almost a fundamentally pejorative view toward efforts that have been made up to this point.

One of the quotes in my book is "the real problem is stupidity," [meaning] that the wrong people are doing this. People who have managerial or entrepreneurial knowledge are more equipped to handle these challenging problems. The assumption is if we bring in new people and new frameworks and new ways of rethinking high school, somehow, those people will be much better equipped to address these challenges.

There are so many problems with the whole ed-reform movement, but more specifically in ed-philanthropy. There's a very paternalistic view towards teachers, towards institutions of education and how people are trained to be teachers. There's this very naive assumption that you don't need to be a rocket scientist to do this; this is not hard, this is just something if we worked harder, if we had the right people doing it, we could overcome.

Time after time, throughout history, we've seen that's just not the case. Bill Gates ways [using] almost identical language back in 2000, when he was talking about let's rethink high schools, let's make everything small, and that's going to be the thing that creates the tipping point, and of course, that didn't work.

Jack I want to add one more observation to this, there's a total failure to distinguish between *problems* and *dilemmas*, because there are in fact problems that we are still dealing with, in terms of our schools.

The fact that we still have high levels of school segregation, for instance, that's a problem.

But, then there are dilemmas, which, unlike problems, can't be solved, can only be managed. One dilemma is how do you do all the things that you want to do during a limited school day, and a limited school year? [Another is] how can we help students develop their whole human potential when there are so many elements that are outside of our control...

Megan Right.

Jack As educators, when developing one's whole human potential actually takes a whole life, and we're trying to cram it in between grades K and 12?

But, I wanted to transition, Megan, to ask you a question about the sorts of things that philanthropists do in order to get the kind of impact that one might imagine they'd get for, let's say, \$1B USD.

Jack You know, I just did quick math problem. I multiplied \$10,000 USD, which is a

ballpark [figure] for the national per pupil expenditure average, and then I just multiplied that by 50M, the number of students in public schools in the United States. I got so many zeros that I started drawing with a dry erase marker on my computer screen, to try to figure out how many billions that was.

It reminds me of a comment that a senior scholar made to me a number of years ago, that [Walter Annenberg's](#) gift to the [CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT WAS SAID] public schools. He said Walter Annenberg pissed away half a billion dollars, and got nothing in return for it. That seems to me to be a key fact to keep in mind when we're thinking about the way that policy patrons, to use your term, are thinking about their influence in American public education.

Megan

Sure. I would say to that point, I think billionaires who want to make a big impact in education do think all those zeros [total of per pupil expenditure], but all those zeros are much more money than what any philanthropist can do.

In [California, the public school budget](#) is like \$50B USD, the philanthropic contribution to public school is \$1.5B USD, and Gates is most of that. Whatever philanthropic foundations do, it's nothing compared to the scope and scale of the state.

What I see from billionaires doing, attempting to have impact in education, is they're turning to policy influence. In earlier years, the [Annenberg Challenge](#), they are giving money to a wide variety of different places, district schools, spreading it out so much that it really didn't have impact in any one place. You would think that \$500M USD would make that impact, but it didn't. So, the new philanthropists are kind of taking a page from that in some sense, by targeting advocacy and policy-related initiatives. Ten years ago, this wasn't a trend, but probably since 2008, with the Obama Administration coming in and the philanthropists seeing [CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT WAS SAID]...

Start to see a huge proportion of budget shifts toward direct funding of advocacy organizations, funding of efforts to sway public opinion. Of course, [foundations are under some political restrictions as to what they can and cannot do in terms of lobbying](#), but you can do a lot of [things that are lobbying by another name](#).

The Broad Foundation has moved to something like 50% or more of their budget is advocacy related expenses. Gates is also going that way. That's something you would never have seen, even like a decade ago, and again, it's founded in and is conscious of sort of a managerial or entrepreneurial value, that you want to get the most bang for your buck.

Jennifer

At several points during the XQ show, audience members were encouraged to take some kind of action. They could text message their support, or send away for a kit about how to run for their local school board.

Megan, there's a term that pops up again and again in your book, *theory of change*. Explain to us what that means and how it relates to the sales pitch we've been listening to.

Megan *Theory of change* is essentially a management tool for managing complex social change initiatives, and it was started by foundations in the 1990s to try to guide evaluations, and see if nonprofits were meeting their goals. Theory of change is especially how you explain how a certain strategy or course of action is going to result in the outcomes that you want.

So, you always start from the top, and if the outcome you want is rethinking high school, you might build backwards from that. In order to rethink high school, what needs to happen before that? You go down a path of intermediate outcomes, outputs, and inputs, and it's all based on assumptions.

In the case of XQ, the assumptions would be high schools are failing; that existing human capital is incompetent; that a school can fix social ills, including adverse childhood effects that occur before they even set foot in the classroom. And their theory of change seems to be that if we dramatically change the structure, the delivery system, and the people, we'll get to better outcomes eventually. We'll be able to transform education such that we're a leader in the world, in terms of our test scores.

Jack I've done a little bit of research into the world of big philanthropy as well—not as much as you—and one of the things that I found is so many assumptions and belief are shared in these circles...

Megan Uh-huh.

Jack And the social network tends to be both tight and fairly closed. I'm wondering if you can talk thorough for us a bit, why it is—and I'm going to oversimplify here, but—why it is all of these folks tend to believe the same stuff?

For instance, I could run a cottage industry just replying to all of the philanthropic edu-reformers who tell a story about the history of the American high school or the history of American public schools that is totally wrong!

Megan Yeah.

Jack And yet, I could only run that cottage industry because whatever I am doing and whatever others are doing is not penetrating that bubble at all. I'm wondering if you could talk through that a little bit.

Megan It's because the ed-reform movement is really a self-reinforcing network of folks who are generally connected to the same sort of support organizations, including foundations. Take the Broad Foundation, for example. They invest in getting people into the right places, and funding pipelines for ed-reformers to take leadership positions in schools and in districts.

Going back to your original question, Jennifer, about running for the school board, Broad trains superintendents to go takeover big city [school] districts, it trains fellows to go into these districts or in state government and spread these ideas. The last statistic I saw was something like, oh, I don't even want to say, but 80% of the largest urban school districts have Broad-trained superintendents.

Megan Meaning, they were Broad Fellows and went through a residency training program that focuses on these very values, about disruption, about failure, about the leverage it will take to change the existing system, which are often charter schools, accountability, measurements, competition. Broad is one, but there's a lot of sharing in the ed-reform movement.

I remember I was talking to the founder of a big charter school chain, who's now a major person at a big foundation. He was saying, we envision this movement as happening thorough our organization or organizations like us. They would literally share business plans for charter school innovation, they would network very closely among one another. Most of the folks, 10 years ago, who were in those networks, those [inaudible] networks, are in high level or government, or at foundations themselves.

It's a rhetoric that's cultivated and communicated in a reinforcing way. Until recently, those networks were relatively closed to people who think differently, for example parents advocacy groups who are not about competition and choice, who might believe more in unions and the power unions can have for good—and I know someone's probably going to hate tweet me for saying anything good about unions, but— in terms of talk about an echo chamber, that's very much the case.

A few of the foundations are trying to depart from that, trying to bring in more voices of folks from the communities they're investing in, actually working with school boards. As opposed to wanting mayoral control or a smaller group of people that are more easy to work with to have that efficient and quick route towards the changes they want to make. And, realizing that some of these reforms that have failed is because they were (a) too fast and (b) too concentrated on people in the lead position, and not people who were actually doing the work on the ground.

Jennifer That was Megan Tompkins Stange. She is an Assistant Professor of Public Policy at the University of Michigan and the author of [Policy Patrons: Philanthropy, Education Reform, and the Politics of Influence](#).

Jack, we talked a little bit about the various channels through which the XQ Super School project might be sort of percolating. You can send away for a school board kit, they were encouraging people to send text messages, but we didn't mention that Laurene Powell Jobs is a prominent education reformer in her own right. She runs a group called the [Emerson Collective](#) that has tentacles in all the things that Megan just described.

As of this summer, Laurene Powell Jobs is also sort of your boss. [She purchased a majority stake in *The Atlantic* magazine](#), for which you write.

Jack So, you'll notice that whenever I publish anything critical of her, I publish it with different billionaires: John Henry, owner of the Red Sox and The Boston Globe, or Jeff Bezos, owner of Amazon and The Washington Post. I keep my billionaires straight and try to let them criticize each other.

Jennifer One thing about the [XQ] show that we didn't talk about, there was kind of a red carpet event that was meant to honor teachers, and it didn't quite come off.

Jennifer One of the reasons it didn't quite come off was lurking just off stage, you can really feel the iron fist.

I just finished writing an essay about the influence of education reform in the Democratic Party. I have great quote from a campaign manger for Bill Clinton in Arkansas in the 1980s, where the Clintons were really the first to run against the teachers union. He said, "You know, if you're going to turn as institution upside down, you need a villain." Even though XQ Super School didn't make teachers explicitly the villain, you could still kind of sense they're the ones blocking the schoolhouse door.

Jack They're the ones who are keeping the school as a metaphorical switchboard or Model T, if you will.

Jennifer They really are.

Now Jack, I know that I promised you that we could go out playing your favorite clip from XQ Super School. Are we lined up and ready to go?

Jack I think we're ready.

Well, it's my second favorite clip, because my other favorite clip is Samuel L. Jackson, but let me see if I can find this before I play it: A little reminder to our listeners that if you're enjoying what you hear, please go on iTunes, or whatever your podcast source is, and give us a rating. It helps people find us.

And with that, I'm sending us out. I'm Jack Schneider.

Jennifer And I'm Jennifer Berkshire. Thank you for listening to Have You Heard.

[Podcast ends with Jennifer Hudson singing the beginning of "Come Together" by The Beatles, ending just after the lyrics "One and one and one is three"]