

Inside Philanthropy

Why Funders Are Writing Checks for New Approaches to Teacher Training

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Many factors play into student achievement, from class size and school facilities to income level and nutrition. But a number of studies, including [this one from RAND](#), have suggested that among in-school factors, teachers have the single greatest impact on academic performance, at a rate two to three times higher than anything else. Teachers may matter even more when it comes to the intimidating subjects of science and math, and the critical importance of qualified, competent teachers in this area is a big reason why we've seen a trend toward increased funding for educator training in STEM fields.

We've been talking about this for over two years, and the new grants and initiatives keep rolling in. One group attracting the big bucks is EnCorps, a nonprofit that transitions STEM professionals into encore careers as teachers. The California-based organization has garnered [support from Qualcomm](#), the [Keck Foundation](#), and others as it prepares to celebrate its 10th anniversary in 2017.

Another high-profile educator training organization is [100Kin10](#), which seeks to recruit and retain 100,000 STEM teachers by 2021. A response to a call to action made by President Obama in his 2011 State of the Union address, 100Kin10 is a partnership of more than 200 groups spanning all sectors from private to public to nonprofit.

Even if funders are ready to write checks in support of preparing educators, however, questions remain about how best to do that. Last year, [we wrote about the Woodrow Wilson National Foundation](#) stepping up to the plate with a proposed solution in the form of an alternative path for teacher training and a laboratory to examine best practices. Recently, we checked in on the progress of that project with Patrick Riccards,

Chief Communications and Strategy Officer at the Wilson Foundation. So far, the news is promising.

The [Wilson Foundation](#) is committed to developing our country's intellectual capital, and is known for supporting scholars who go on to become Nobel laureates and Pulitzer Prize winners. The foundation also offers teaching fellowships to get people who understand STEM into schools in five states.

Moving beyond that is an ambitious project to create the [Woodrow Wilson Academy of Teaching and Learning](#) to offer a new model of teacher prep with a master's degree program that includes a year of clinical training and three years of mentorship. And at the risk of sounding like a late-night infomercial: But wait! There's more! The foundation is simultaneously developing the Walter Buckley Teaching and Learning Lab at MIT to study what actually works when it comes to getting teachers ready for the classroom.

A year after announcing the WW Academy and the Buckley Lab, the foundation has raised half of the \$35 million total budget and remains on track to open in June 2017 with the first cohort of about 25 students. In subsequent years, enrollment is estimated to reach 200-250 students. Funders in the first two rounds include the Bezos Family Foundation, at \$1.5 million, Nellie Mae and [Carnegie](#) at \$1 million each, plus other foundations and individuals who chose to remain anonymous.

The WW Academy is working with school districts in Massachusetts to develop the program and has received informal approval from the state to offer an initial, post-baccalaureate license in biology, chemistry, and math for middle and secondary school teachers.

“Look at any state in the country and its teacher shortage lists, and the STEM disciplines are always at the top. We are first focusing on biology, chemistry, and math because that is where the greatest needs currently lie,” Riccards tells *Inside Philanthropy*, adding that the program will eventually expand to include other content areas.

Riccards believes that the ability to adapt to the new digital age is crucial to our nation's success. “We've seen other industries, from healthcare to media, make the transition from the industrial economy of old to the current information economy,” he says. “We know our learners must be prepared for the latter. But education has been slow to make the necessary adjustments. The Woodrow Wilson Academy is looking to fill that need.”

The big picture plan for the WW Academy is to influence the next generation of teacher training by creating a roadmap for other institutions to follow. “We will serve as a resource to teacher education programs across the country, providing the tools,

research, and direction,” says Riccards. And determining what to draw on that map will require input from the Buckley Lab.

The Wilson Foundation intends for the Buckley Lab to serve three purposes. First, to evaluate methods employed by the WW Academy to see what’s effective and where changes need to be made. “With so many incredible advances in cognitive science—both coming out of our partner MIT and other institutions—one must constantly take those lessons and apply them in the classroom,” says Riccards.

Second, the lab will act as a clearinghouse for teacher training research from the United States and worldwide, in order to guide policymakers. Finally, the foundation wants the lab to find ways to support existing teachers. “There are currently more than 3.5 million K-12 educators in the United States. By providing content-focused professional development, we will seek to help existing teachers improve their craft,” Riccards tells us.

So can this dual academy/lab track break new ground in training methods to have a lasting impact on American education? Considering the backing from funders, a partnership with MIT, and buy-in from school districts, a shake of the Magic Eightball says, “Signs point to yes.” The main premise, here, is to prepare the STEM teachers that our schools so desperately need by reimagining training models that were developed in a different paradigm. Times have changed, and we’re hoping a fresh take will get results.