

2020
K-12 EDUCATION
STRATEGIC PLAN



The Walton Family Foundation is working to improve K-12 outcomes for all students, especially those of limited means, by ensuring access to high-quality educational choices that prepare them for a lifetime of opportunity.

WALTON FAMILY
FOUNDATION



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Sam and Helen Walton established the Walton Family Foundation more than two decades ago with a clear and ambitious mission. They aimed to improve lives by expanding access to educational and economic opportunity.

Since then, the Walton family has carried forward this vision — working to foster equal opportunity and build a more just society. The Walton family believed their foundation was uniquely equipped to help low-income and minority children live the American dream and to support innovators, spark new ideas and achieve life-changing results.

Today, the Walton Family Foundation remains deeply committed to this original vision. We are also determined to learn from our experience of more than two decades, during which the foundation has given more than \$1 billion to support better schools for America’s children.

With its 2020 K-12 Education Strategic Plan, the Walton Family Foundation is making an unprecedented investment in expanding educational opportunity. The new plan calls for investing a total of \$1 billion over five years to create more and better opportunities for American children.

This overview of the 2020 strategic plan includes the following sections:

The Walton Family Foundation’s Historical K-12 Results and Next Steps	3
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The Walton Family Foundation’s Theory of Change: Lessons Learned	4
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The Four Initiatives of the 2020 Strategic Plan	
• Investing in Cities	5
• Supporting the High-Quality School Movement	6
• Innovation	6
• Research and Evaluation	7

Conclusion	7
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Historical K-12 Education Results and Next Steps

The Walton Family Foundation began supporting K-12 education in the mid-1990s. Since the beginning, the foundation has invested more than \$1 billion to improve educational opportunities for America's children — and to prove wrong the prevailing wisdom that poverty and ZIP code determine destiny.

Since the Walton Family Foundation committed to improving education, more than a third of the foundation's total education giving has supported the creation of high-quality school options. To date, 1 in every 4 charter schools created nationally have received support from the Walton Family Foundation.

Over the last decade, the foundation has invested deeply in researching the impact of charter schools on the students and communities they serve. We know that not every charter school fulfills its promise just as we know that not every state has a regulatory framework that nurtures excellence, encouraging high-quality charters to grow and ensuring that under-performing ones close. On balance, however, it is clear that most charter schools have a positive impact on student learning, and that most urban charter schools, serving students who otherwise would not have access to great schools, are helping students beat the odds and showing the way for other schools to do the same.

A March 2015 analysis of charter school performance in 41 urban regions by Stanford University's CREDO research team found that compared to their peers in traditional neighborhood schools, urban charter students are, on average, gaining 40 days of additional learning per year in math and 28 additional days of learning per year in reading.¹ Those gains are roughly equivalent to extending the school year by more than 20 percent in math and 15 percent in reading.²



1 in 4 charters nationally have received WFF startup funds

The same study found that black students in poverty attending urban charter schools received the equivalent of 59 days of additional learning in math and 44 days of additional learning in reading compared to their peers in traditional public schools. Hispanic students in poverty experienced the equivalent of 48 days of additional learning in math and 25 days of additional learning in reading in charter schools relative to their peers in traditional public schools.³

The public charter schools studied by CREDO serve students who face rough circumstances and tough odds. Charter schools are proving that these students can learn at levels comparable to, or even higher than, their peers with greater advantages. Today, there are hundreds of examples of schools beating the odds, and doing so at scale.

In addition to supporting charter schools, the Walton Family Foundation also partners with public school districts to create autonomous schools of choice that are managed directly by districts, and it supports private schools that have access to public dollars and are prepared to be transparent and held accountable for helping low-income students succeed. The foundation supports high-quality schools — regardless of their governance.

The foundation has also worked to build a pipeline of talented principals and teachers who are ready to work in U.S. public schools and provide students with the opportunities they need to prepare for college and careers. This includes support to programs like Relay Graduate School of Education, Teach For America and The New Teacher Project (TNTP).

Despite many important signs of progress, America's educational challenges today remain both urgent and formidable. Nationally, too many students are completing school without the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college and in their careers. Only 43 percent of high school students are college-ready, according to the College Board,⁴ and about 20 percent of all first-year undergraduates must take a remedial course when they get to college.⁵ International comparisons are equally unflattering. Among 15-year-olds from 34 countries participating in the 2012 Program for International Student Assessment, U.S. 15-year-olds ranked 27th in math, 20th in science and 17th in reading.⁶

Racial and socio-economic opportunity gaps also persist. Less than 1 in 10 students with low-income parents earn a bachelor's degree.⁷ Even when low-income students enroll in college, their bachelor degree attainment rates are 78 percentage points lower than students from higher income families.⁸

Theory of Change: Lessons Learned

When the Walton Family Foundation began supporting K-12 education, it helped to create a new supply of high-performing schools, creating more choices and opportunities. The thought was that more choices would generate more competition. Competition would catalyze systemic improvement.

Today, WFF's theory of change has evolved: choice is necessary, but schools of choice cannot stimulate systemic transformation and large-scale improvements on their own.

In order for choice and opportunity — the ultimate forms of parent empowerment — to spur change,

These opportunity gaps are compounded by persistent shortages of high-quality educational options at the local level. In 2013-14, more than 1 million students were on public charter school waiting lists nationally; even after removing potential double-counting of students, more than 500,000 individual names were on charter school waiting lists in 2013.⁹ According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 163,000 students are waiting for spaces in charter schools in New York City. In Boston, 25,700 students are waiting, and in Washington, D.C., 18,500 students are waiting.¹⁰ In Boston and Washington, D.C., the number of students waiting easily exceeds the number currently enrolled in charter schools, meaning that the demand is more than twice the supply.

Many cities lack resources that help families to access educational options. For example, it is often difficult for parents to navigate school systems to find out about individual schools or to identify the best schools for their children, and there is a shortage of excellent teachers and principals to work in autonomous schools of choice. EdFuel's 2014 "Map the Gap" study projected that the country's 50 largest cities would need to hire 200,000 new teachers, principals and other educators in the next decade to work in these schools.¹¹

cities need to create environments that support expanded choice and high-quality schools. This means creating enrollment platforms, equitable transportation access, fair funding and readily accessible, current information on schools and student performance for families and other stakeholders.

Under its 2020 strategic plan, the foundation is aiming to create more high-quality educational options, spur innovation and build more of the environmental factors that support opportunities for students and families in cities. It will invest \$1 billion over the five-year period to expand educational opportunity across the United States.

THE FOUR INITIATIVES OF THE 2020 STRATEGIC PLAN

INVESTING IN CITIES

The foundation is supporting work in cities where there are conditions supporting systemwide educational improvement and where the foundation can have the greatest impact.



These include:

- Atlanta
- Indianapolis
- Oakland
- Boston
- Los Angeles
- San Antonio
- Camden
- Memphis
- Washington, D.C.
- Denver
- New Orleans
- Houston
- New York

The foundation is also supporting state-level policy work in Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Wisconsin.

Key grantees include:

- Grants to national organizations, including **Memphis Lift**, the **National Alliance for Public Charter Schools**, the **Alliance for School Choice**, **GreatSchools** and **Black Alliance for Educational Options**
- Grants to local organizations, including the **Urban League of Greater New Orleans**, the **California Charter School Association**, **Colorado Succeeds** and **Friends of Choice in Urban Schools** in Washington, D.C.
- New school startups in cities — each year, the foundation gives startup grants to dozens of schools that promise to create high-quality options for disadvantaged students.

The foundation’s city-level investments include grants focused on:



SUPPLY: Building and sustaining high-quality schools that serve students’ diverse needs and address communities’ priorities in each city. The foundation has a “three-sector approach.” The foundation supports charter schools that promise to provide high-quality options. It also partners with school districts to create autonomous schools of choice in the conventional district-managed construct, and it supports private schools targeting low-income students, that have access to public dollars and are prepared to be transparent and held accountable for student performance.



TALENT: Recruiting and training more effective teachers and school leaders.



ENABLING CHOICE: Developing systems that allow easy access to high-quality options, whether in charter, traditional public or in private schools (e.g., supporting the implementation of open enrollment platforms, student transportation systems, money following the child to the school of choice, good information for parents on school performance, etc.).



POLICY: Advocating for favorable policies that create an environment that supports student success (e.g., family organizing and mobilizing).



COMMUNITY SUPPORT: Organizing, communicating and engaging directly with people who live and work in cities to understand their needs and build authentic community partnerships. Forming partnerships with community-based organizations, local religious leaders, parents and local leaders directly is vitally important in ensuring that WFF is supporting efforts that meet local needs.



SUPPORTING THE HIGH-QUALITY CHOICE MOVEMENT

The foundation will support statewide and national efforts to develop environments receptive to choice, autonomy and innovation. This includes working with local educators and community leaders — as well as with some national organizations active in communities — to create local environments that embrace quality and empower families with choice. This means, among other things, helping to ensure that innovative charter leaders can secure the facilities and facilities financing they need to serve students. It also means working with community-based organizations to understand local conditions and to meet the needs of local families who are demanding better options.

The foundation will invest in the following high-quality strategies:

- Advocating for favorable policies for expanding opportunities



INNOVATION

Innovations in school models and how parents can be empowered have helped to improve schools and results for students over the past decade. The foundation will continue to support efforts that promise to produce new innovations that will spur further improvements.

The foundation is particularly interested in supporting:

- Novel school models, including those that have new approaches to career and technical education
- Citywide enrollment models that include both traditional and public charter schools
- New ways — beyond test scores — to advance long-term success, including understanding noncognitive attributes

The foundation will invest in innovative projects that meet the following criteria:

- Supporting leading national reform organizations
- Investing in communications to build awareness and support for high-quality opportunities
- Supporting organizations that are helping schools of choice to find the facilities they need to serve students

Over the next five years, the foundation seeks to expand its transparency and visibility, amplify the real-world impact of its grants and collaborate with nontraditional partners.

Key grantees include:

- Charter School Growth Fund
- Building Excellent Schools
- Education Reform Now
- American Federation for Children
- Denver Public Schools
- The KIPP Foundation
- Building Hope and other charter facility-finance and technical-assistance organizations

It solves a problem: The project addresses a significant barrier to student success and/or access to high-quality schools.

It applies the foundation's theory of change: The project enhances student access to a high-quality education and educational opportunity.

There's potential for a breakthrough: The proposed intervention, if implemented effectively, has the potential to produce significant results for students.

The idea is transferable: Projects should be replicable in different circumstances and locales.

Its success can be tested objectively: The project's results will be discrete and measurable.

Key grantees include:

- The Character Lab
- 4.0 Schools
- NewSchools Venture Fund
- MDRC
- EdNavigator



RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

It is essential to understand the impact of reform efforts on students, schools and educators: What efforts are working and why? What could be better? How?

To answer these questions, the foundation will make research and evaluation grants that aim to support:

1. Research that provides rigorous, actionable information to inform the foundation's city, high-quality school movement and innovation investments.
2. Research investigating big questions related to the foundation's theory of change.

The foundation has the responsibility to use evidence, both to refine its theory of change and to identify and support the most effective grantees. The foundation expects to learn from its successes and its failures.

Key grantees include:

- University researchers, such as Martin West at Harvard University, Parag Pathak and Joshua Angrist at MIT, Susanna Loeb at Stanford University, Angela Duckworth at University of Pennsylvania, Ron Zimmer at Vanderbilt, Brian Jacob at University of Michigan and Mark Berends at University of Notre Dame
- Contract research firms, such as Mathematica Policy Research, American Institute for Research and RAND
- Research consortiums, such as D.C. EdCORE and the Research Alliance for New York City Schools

CONCLUSION

We have set ambitious goals and targets for our work in the next five years. We will work to help create an environment that fosters opportunity, and we will empower more low-income, high-needs students to perform at the same level of excellence as students at today's best public schools. We will support innovation in American education. We will test and refine theories through rigorous evaluations.

In the years ahead, we will retain an unwavering commitment to dramatically expanding educational opportunity for all children, and we will continue to focus on producing results that matter.

We are committed to learning from our successes and failures. This is the very essence of continuous improvement. We also understand that change takes time. Far-reaching reforms that expand choice, autonomy and opportunity may take years and even decades to take hold.

But while we understand the need for patience, we also recognize the need for urgency. We are determined to help children use their extraordinary talents to reach their full potential and to ensure every child has an opportunity to achieve the American dream.

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