

The Center for High Impact Philanthropy

School of Social Policy & Practice | University of Pennsylvania

Pathways to Student Success

A Guide to Translating Good Intentions into Meaningful Impact

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If I had a million dollars to improve the educational outcomes of at-risk students, how could I spend it to have the greatest impact?

Over a million students—mostly poor and not white—drop out of U.S. schools each year.¹ This fact is not likely to be news to anyone committed to improving educational opportunities for our nation’s at-risk students. But, despite good intentions, individuals often lack the time, relevant experience, and expertise to understand where their capital can have the greatest impact.

The Center for High Impact Philanthropy’s first philanthropic investment guide, **Pathways to Student Success: A Guide to Translating Good Intentions into Meaningful Impact**, was written for just such

individuals who seek to go beyond charity by actively searching for opportunities to produce as much good as possible with the dollars available. In the guide, the Center’s multidisciplinary team addresses three critical questions that must be answered to achieve the biggest bang for every philanthropic buck:

- What is a meaningful change to target?
- What activities lead to that change for at-risk students—and who is producing it?
- How much does it cost to achieve that change?

About The Center for High Impact Philanthropy

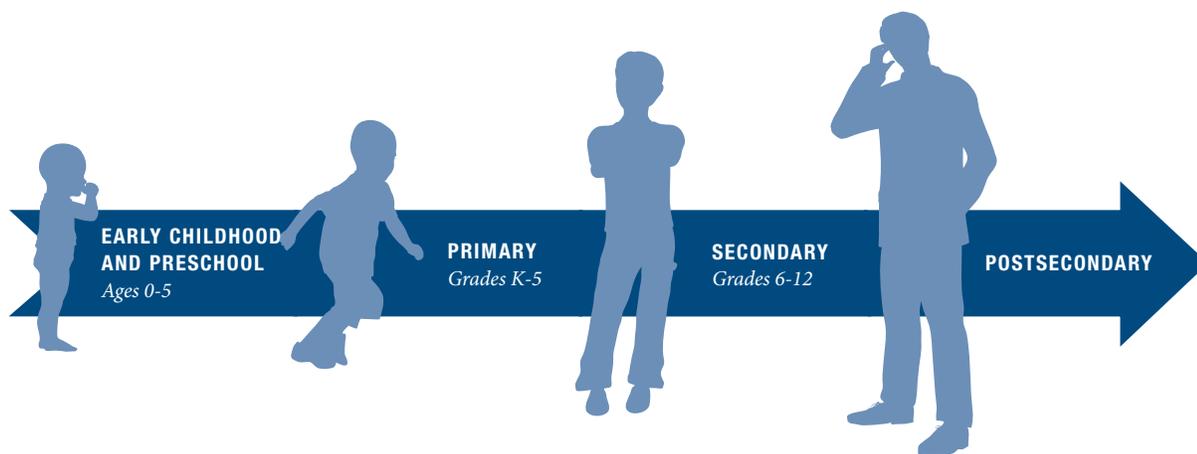
The nonprofit Center for High Impact Philanthropy was founded in 2006 by Wharton alumni and is housed at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Social Policy & Practice. Our aim is to provide information and tools to help philanthropists determine where their funds can have the greatest impact in improving the lives of others. With expertise in business, medicine, the law, and public and social policy, our team brings a multidisciplinary approach, in-depth knowledge of research methods, and seasoned judgment to the analysis of high impact philanthropic opportunities.

To answer these questions and enable philanthropists to get to smarter decisions faster, we reviewed academic research, think-tank policy briefs, program evaluations, U.S. Department of Education statistics, and financial and performance data from nonprofit institutions. We interviewed education scholars and practitioners and conducted site visits to schools and nonprofit educational organizations. We then drew on our collective training and professional judgment to reach the independent, practical conclusions presented in this guide.

If you are a philanthropist seeking opportunities to invest in improved outcomes for at-risk students, this guide can help by:

- Providing our framework for thinking systematically about where high impact opportunities exist
- Identifying the key educational targets necessary for student success as well as leading indicators to help you understand whether your philanthropy is achieving the impact you are targeting
- Outlining specific philanthropic “on-ramps”, promising practices that our analysis indicates are making a difference in the lives of disadvantaged students
- Presenting five in-depth case examples of organizations that are translating these practices into action and producing good “bang for buck”

What follows is a snapshot of the analysis and advice contained in the full guide.



Key issues

During the first three years, children’s brains are rapidly developing the neural pathways that support language, problem solving, behavioral and social skills, as well as emotional health. If not used, these pathways begin to disappear by late childhood, threatening future school performance.²

By the start of this phase, many at-risk children are already academically behind their more affluent peers. This hinders them from acquiring the foundational skills and behavioral predispositions (e.g., self-control, school engagement) that move them from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” and enable them to perform basic calculations required in future problem solving.³

Adolescence is a difficult period as it entails biological, social, and emotional challenges that all students inevitably confront. At the same time, many at-risk students also have to catch up to overcome earlier gaps in learning. Such learning is required to master the content of the critical ninth grade on time, excel in college-preparatory courses, and succeed in the experiences that develop the skills (e.g., critical thinking and communication) that employers seek.

Since the 1980s, salaries for individuals who have completed high school or less have dropped while wages for postsecondary graduates have remained relatively even,⁴ leading many to set postsecondary completion as the ultimate educational goal.

What is a meaningful change to target?

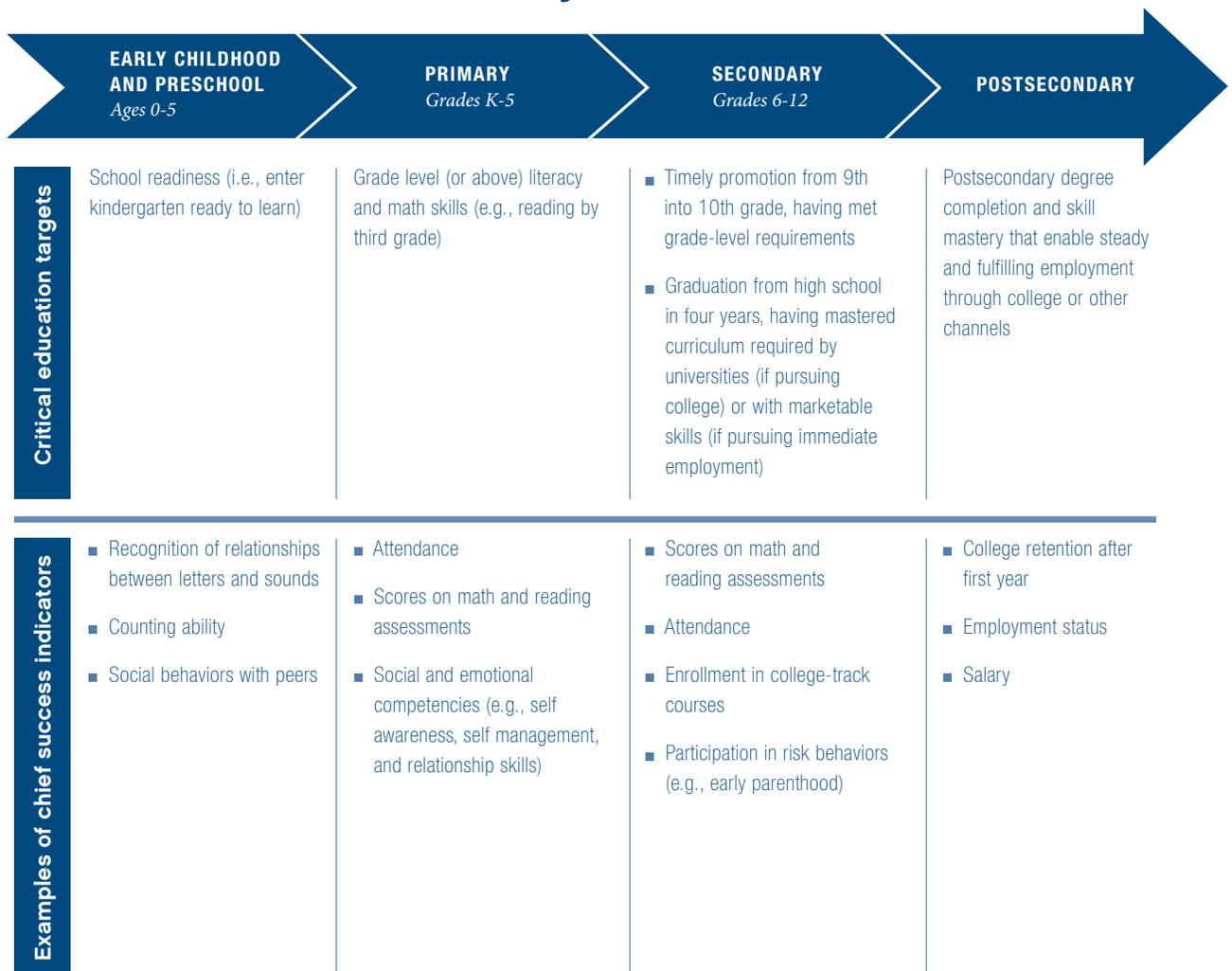
Imagine education as a pathway on which students travel. The hope is that all children will develop along this pathway and accumulate the social, emotional, and cognitive skills required to emerge as productive and self-reliant adults. For too many at-risk students, obstacles both inside and outside of school affect their ability to navigate this path successfully. We divide this journey into four phases: early childhood and preschool, primary school, secondary school, and postsecondary education.

In each phase, certain educational targets are commonly identified as closely associated with students' ability to succeed in the next phase. These

targets represent the meaningful change your capital can address. For example, in early childhood and preschool, the ultimate educational goal is to ensure that students enter kindergarten ready to learn.

To understand whether your philanthropic efforts are making progress towards achieving established goals, you will need leading indicators that allow you to monitor students' progress. Such indicators enable the kind of ongoing assessment and course corrections that increase the probability of success and are a hallmark of smart investing. Examples of commonly used success indicators are identified in the chart below.

Education Pathway



What activities lead to change for at-risk students—and who is producing it?

Opportunities abound for philanthropists to help in each phase of the education pathway. Throughout the guide, we identify “philanthropic on-ramps”, the practices that have a record of improving disadvantaged students’ chances for educational success. Examples of such practices include:

- *Early childhood and preschool* – Building school readiness through one-on-one relationships and setting up periodic visits by nurses to homes
- *Primary school* – Improving the quality of literacy instruction and coordinating community resources to meet student needs
- *Secondary school* – Extending learning time through afterschool apprenticeships and engaging students in college preparatory coursework
- *Postsecondary education* – Providing long-term, comprehensive academic and social support services with a college tuition guarantee and building peer groups to provide support through college

How much does it cost to achieve that change?

When making allocation decisions, you are likely to consider a variety of issues, such as equity and personal connection to an area of need or to a specific community. Costs, however, are always an issue.

A common way to understand nonprofit costs has been to look at overhead ratios or aggregate costs per beneficiary. However, such an approach focuses on inputs. It does not link the cost of the inputs with the impact achieved.

In the examples described in the chart, we link considerations of results with cost by estimating a cost-per-impact figure. The math is simple: we aggregated the program’s costs and divided them by the number of students who, because of the program’s intervention, met the specified target. For example, we estimated that **Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)** is able to prepare an additional, college-ready high school graduate (i.e., a student who has mastered the curriculum required by colleges) for about \$1,700.

Such back of the envelope estimates can be useful starting points from which to understand what you can realistically achieve with the money you give. Keep in mind, however, that the actual impact achieved by any philanthropic investment will vary based on many factors, including local costs, management expertise, student demographics, and fidelity to the program model.

In considering the link between cost and impact, it is also important to take into account that many activities will produce substantial additional benefits beyond those included in our single cost-impact analysis. These additional impacts explain, in part, the wide range of cost-per-impact figures we estimated for the practices we examined. Another issue to keep in mind is the model’s ability to leverage pre-existing infrastructure to do its work.

In our case examples, we examine how six nonprofits translate these practices into action and the costs of achieving their targeted results. The examples are summarized in the chart on p.5.

Examples of Philanthropic “On-Ramps”

3-5 YEARS



CASE EXAMPLE – Build school readiness through increased one-on-one time with a trained, caring adult (e.g., **Jumpstart**)

TARGETED BENEFICIARIES – Low-income, 3- and 4-year-olds who are identified as needing additional support to ensure school readiness

COST PER BENEFICIARY – Average annual cost per student (as reported by the nonprofit) ranges between \$981 and \$1,873

ESTIMATED COST PER IMPACT – Roughly between \$1,600 and \$3,100 per additional student with increased school readiness

PRE-K - GRADE 3



CASE EXAMPLE – Improve quality of literacy instruction through group training and extensive coaching of elementary school teachers (e.g., **Children’s Literacy Initiative**)

TARGETED BENEFICIARIES – Students in high-poverty classrooms

COST PER BENEFICIARY – Average annual cost per student (as reported by the nonprofit) is approximately \$182

ESTIMATED COST PER IMPACT – Roughly \$586 per additional student meeting literacy benchmarks

GRADES 6-8



CASE EXAMPLE – Extend learning time through afterschool apprenticeships, academic support, leadership training, and homework help (e.g., **Citizen Schools**)

TARGETED BENEFICIARIES – Low-income, middle school youth capable of regularly attending an afterschool program

COST PER BENEFICIARY – Average annual cost per student (as reported by the nonprofit) is \$3,194

ESTIMATED COST PER IMPACT – Roughly between \$12,000 and \$40,000 per additional on-time high school graduate

GRADES 4-12



CASE EXAMPLE – Engage students in college-track coursework while providing academic support (e.g., **Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)**)

TARGETED BENEFICIARIES – Underachieving minority students who are likely to be the first in their families to attend college

COST PER BENEFICIARY – Average annual cost per student (as reported by the nonprofit) is \$291

ESTIMATED COST PER IMPACT – Roughly \$1,700 per additional college-ready high school graduate

PRE-K - COLLEGE GRADUATION



CASE EXAMPLE – Implement long-term, wraparound support services with college tuition guarantee, from elementary school to college graduation (e.g., **“I Have A Dream” Foundation & Say Yes to Education**)

TARGETED BENEFICIARIES – All students, regardless of need, in a group such as a high-poverty classroom or across a public-housing facility

COST PER BENEFICIARY – Average annual cost per student (as reported by the nonprofits) ranges between \$983 and \$3,500

ESTIMATED COST PER IMPACT – Roughly between \$29,000 and \$250,000 per additional on-time high school graduate/college graduate

Using the analyses for change

While the guide focuses on the direct-service activities that philanthropists tend to support, it also provides examples of successful infrastructure, new schools, advocacy, and large-scale school reform investments that afford additional opportunities for supporting positive change.

At the end of the guide, we provide advice on how to begin your work in education. We discuss activities such as setting a philanthropic focus, selecting organizations to fund, options for measuring results, and common pitfalls to avoid.

You can use this guide to:

- Fund one of the many activities or programs discussed, or promote the entrepreneurial use of these activities by other organizations

- Create entirely new models to address issues outlined in the report and avoid wasting precious dollars by reinventing the wheel, or worse, causing unintended harm
- Test the value proposition of models other than the ones we discuss as this guide is not an exhaustive review of all the possible high impact opportunities available

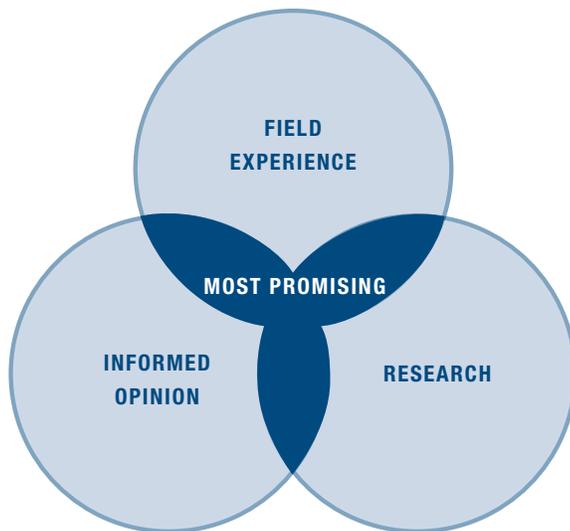
Our hope is that the information and analysis we provide will help you focus your philanthropic dollars where they have the best chance of producing the greatest impact. The educational—and life—outcomes of our nation's at-risk students depend on it.

To request a free electronic copy of the full report, please visit our website, www.impact.upenn.edu, or call us at (215) 573 -7266.

Our multi-perspective, evidence-informed approach

To meet our goal of providing smart, practical guidance to individual philanthropists, we synthesize the best available information from three domains: research, informed opinion, and field experience. By considering evidence from these three sources, we seek to leverage the strengths while minimizing the limitations of each. We believe the most promising opportunities exist where the recommendations of these three domains overlap.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION



FIELD EXPERIENCE

- Practitioner insights
- Performance assessments
- In-depth case studies

INFORMED OPINION

- Expert opinion
- Stakeholder input
- Policy analyses

RESEARCH

- Randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental studies
- Modeled analyses (e.g., cost-effectiveness)

ENDNOTES

¹ Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. (2008). *National Summary 2008: School to College, Can State P-16 Councils Ease the Transition?* Retrieved June 20, 2008, from <http://www.edweek.org/media/ew/dc/2008/40sgb.us.h27.pdf>

² Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2005). *Investing in Children: An Early Learning Strategy for Washington State*. Retrieved December 4, 2008, from <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/united-states/Documents/early-learning-strategy.pdf>

³ Brown, B.V., & Bogard, K. (2007, August). Pre-Kindergarten to 3rd Grade (PK-3) School-Based Resources and Third Grade Outcomes. *Child Trends DataBank: CrossCurrents*, 5(#2007-27). Retrieved September 12, 2007, from <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/PDF/PKtoThree.pdf>

⁴ Planty, M., Hussar, W., Snyder, T., Provasnik, S., Kena, G., Dinkes, R., KewalRamani, A., & Kemp, J. (2008). *The Condition of Education 2008* (NCES 2008-031). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC. Retrieved May 29, 2008, from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2008/pdf/20_2008.pdf

About the Guide's Authors

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