A conversation with Rob Reich on January 9, 2014

Participants:

- Rob Reich – Associate Professor of Political Science, Stanford University; Board member, GiveWell
- Elie Hassenfeld – Co-Founder, GiveWell

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Rob Reich.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Rob Reich about philanthropy and US education.

Current focus of large-scale philanthropy

Large philanthropists want the programs that they support to go to scale, and achieving this requires coordinated action to leverage public spending and/or policy change on education.

The core goal of large philanthropists is to address underperformance in the public system . Different strategies aiming to achieve scale and leverage public dollars include setting up charter schools, diminishing the influence of teachers unions, and creating an alternative and improved talent pipeline via programs such as Teach For America.

A list of the areas philanthropy is working in includes:

- **Aiming to have publicly-funded universal pre-kindergarten.** James Heckman is a major proponent of this policy. In California, Rob Reiner has funded ballot propositions for universal pre-k that have failed. There may be other funders working on this at a policy advocacy level.
- **Focusing school on education, specifically, vs. offering comprehensive social services.** The best-known example of an education program that attempts to offer comprehensive social services is the Harlem Children's Zone. Comprehensive programs such as this try to understand the full range of benefits that the US poor could access and then aim to provide them via the schoolhouse.
- **Online learning / using technology to increase student engagement and reduce cost**. Both the commercial marketplace and philanthropists have invested heavily in this area.
- **Long-time-horizon speculative research**. There are centers in universities aiming to apply improvements in our understanding of brain science (e.g., how people learn) to education.

Current funding in specific areas

Research to determine which approaches to education are "most effective"

Even though many different styles of education have been tried (e.g., project-based learning, Montessori Schools, etc.), little evidence exists about which are "most effective." Two challenges are that (a) defining "most effective" is challenging and (b) good research would require long-term follow-ups, and these are logistically difficult and costly.

It is also possible that trying to determine which approaches are "most effective" is the wrong framing. Some approaches may be best for some students but not others. Dr. Reich said that he could think of no research that tries to determine which approaches are best for different types of students and that this fact, alone, is interesting.

The question of how to improve the study of educational outcomes and what should go into robust studies of education may be worth addressing. It's possible that bringing better scholars with better methods into the field could help to answer this question.

Programs to improve career counseling/career-focused curricula/career fit for students

Over time, there have been different levels of public investment in varying models of career preparation. The American educational system is different than other systems in that it neglects vocational educational systems and has, today, a uniform goal of college preparation. Entry to postsecondary is the ultimate goal of the US K-12 education system. There have been scattered attempts to create versions of the educational system with more diverse goals, and other countries have had systems of vocational education that yield good outcomes.

Dr. Reich could not think of any significant, current philanthropic efforts in this area.

There are always some small-scale experiments where someone funds a visionary teacher or principal working to try something innovative with the hope that it gains attention. Dr. Reich is not aware of a comprehensive list of all such experiments and does not know if one exists.

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