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Previous ← N.H. Family Charities Win in \$3.55-Million Billing Battle	Next
--	----------------------

Opinion: Grant Makers Must Do More to Stave Off State Cuts to Education

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By *Guest Post*



Janet Harman

Editor's Note: The following post was written by Janet Harman, president and founder of the KDK-Harman Foundation, a family foundation in Austin, Tex.

Education grant makers in Texas, as in most states, have largely avoided public-policy debates. But as state governments chisel away at spending on public education, we no longer have that luxury.

The KDK-Harman Foundation surveyed 54 representatives of education grant makers in Texas to gauge their concerns about the state's schools. One of their biggest fears: the impact of massive budget cuts. That beat out even the perennial challenges of a sky-high dropout rate and concerns about accountability and testing.

For decades, foundations in Texas and nationally have worked with the state to support public education. Some of the state's most creative and successful educational efforts were started by or in cooperation with leading philanthropists and foundations, including cutting-edge charter schools, critical physical-education research, and high-quality early-childhood education.

Foundations have provided millions of dollars to reward and encourage innovation in public schools, understanding that neither the state nor local school districts have the resources or political freedom to take risks or try new and promising strategies. They have stepped in to make sure promising research does not languish in academic journals but instead is put into practice in public schools.

But this long and successful history of public-private partnerships is in jeopardy. In 2011, the Texas Legislature cut more than \$5-billion from public education. Education grant makers have been forced to reassess previous commitments and consider shifting support to programs that have lost some or all of their state money.

However, foundation resources—even when you include the country's largest donors—pale in comparison to these massive cuts.

The survey also asked education grant makers about their advocacy grants. Even though state budget cuts were among their biggest concerns, more than half said they had not made any grants in advocacy or public policy in the past three years.

Foundations have the tools to help stop the budget cuts by making strategic grants and using our own coordinated voices. The question becomes: Do we have the vision and courage to do all we can to protect public education?

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