

Evidence-based advocacy for education: the case of the Open Society Foundations

My talk at the ACEA conference focused specifically on the case of OSF, this note extracts and summarizes the general points I made without specifically referencing OSF's work.

Philanthropies are generally slow to realize that high-level advocacy is often inadequate for achieving the changes they wish to see. High-level advocacy involves putting a case for a strategic single policy 'ask' to the people who have influence to make change. High-level advocacy will always play a role but it always involves a compromise with privilege and power as the 'ask' must be crafted in such a way that it wins support from people with influence. Social accountability and democratic participation are essential for change to take hold. However, few foundations and philanthropies have the confidence or structures to support activities at the grassroots/ community level.

We are living in an age increasingly dominated by the ideas of nativist populism. In this context, advocacy cannot be simply about defending the rights of minorities. It has to take account of how to win support for these rights in the wider population. Advocacy thus needs to become the art of building shared understandings and lasting alliances. If we do not succeed with this, the interests of the majority and various minorities will always be in conflict.

Evidence-based policy for education should be understood in the context outlined above. Policy-making is not a rational process. This means that policy-based evidence is more likely to be source for policy-making. The role of progressive philanthropies must support thinking that goes beyond quantifiable indicators in relation to national policy. The understanding of impact must be shaped by the stories behind the numbers: as a more critical engagement with evidence is needed if we are to understand what changes mean. This will inform how changes may be deepened and sustained.