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After Parkland, How Foundations Can Act

By Robert Ross



ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

Just a week after the horrific high-school shooting in Parkland, Fla., our foundation's board gathered for our regularly scheduled quarterly meeting.

We decided it was important to add this topic to the agenda and engaged in a wide-ranging, candid, and earnest closed-door discussion about the tragedy and the policy implications it has for our foundation and for all of us who work at grant makers and other nonprofits.

Three issues arose that I hope will become the subject of deliberation within foundation boardrooms and executive offices in the weeks and months ahead. I say that with a great deal of humility because our foundation focused on health, primarily on the health of young people in communities of color, and we have had done precious little strategy or policy work on gun violence.

We have learned so much from other philanthropies that have been working on gun violence for many years, especially the Joyce Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, and the California Wellness Foundation, and their expertise is important to our entire field.

Banning Investments in Firearms Companies

As a [first step](#), based on our studies of the issue and our mission, we have decided to:

- Add a prohibition on investments in firearm manufacturers to our investments policy. This represents the third such "negative screen" in that policy, with tobacco products and private, for-profit prisons being the other two. It's a modest and constrained action for sure, but most of our board members felt that America is a nation with far too much weaponry in our communities and on our streets, and we just didn't want to aid and abet that problem. The matter of a firearms-manufacturing prohibition has come up in years past, but the Parkland shootings and the activism they have spurred pushed us to act on this occasion.
- Reject any policy or practice approach that militarizes schools and campuses and view the presence of armed teachers or other personnel as an unacceptable answer to the problem of school shootings.

The activism after Parkland was our second key area of deliberation. The activism of high-school students and youth allies — in Florida and across the nation — that spontaneously erupted in the days following the shootings was an inspiration.

At our foundation, investments in helping young people become activists and engaged citizens on health and wellness issues have paid off in ways we didn't even imagine at first.

Young people have hit home runs time after time when we have provided support to help them advocate and organize for improvements in immigrant health care and changes to the juvenile-justice and criminal-justice systems. They also played a huge role in pushing the idea that everyone in America deserves health insurance.

Investing in youth activism, organizing, and civic engagement has provided us with a very good return on investment, and we hope more foundation boardrooms consider this approach in their grant making. This is philanthropy's version of "And a child shall lead them."

A Challenge on Race

A comment by one of our board members prompted us to turn to the third and perhaps the most provocative and important conversation.

She asked why we would vote to ban investment in firearms after Parkland but not earlier, even though black and brown young people across urban America have been disproportionately burdened by gun and community violence for decades.

Were we succumbing to the attention that media and political elites had given the Parkland shooting and ascribing greater value to the shooting deaths of mostly white children?

That is an excellent and timely question — especially for a foundation that prides itself on being attentive to matters of racial equity, diversity, and inclusion. We decided the only way to deal with our failure to act earlier was to move ahead and act now.

That part of our deliberations was a discomfoting moment for us, but this is how foundation boards grow on the matter of confronting structural inequality and racism in America: We need to lean into the discomfort that matters of race bring into our boardrooms and our institutions.

Many of us in philanthropy spend much of our time seeking to close disparities and inequities across a broad range of issues. We carefully analyze, plot, and strategically plan — typically over the course of years. We are thoughtful and deliberative about how we make our investments in nonprofits that carry out the work, in how we deploy our prestige and reputation, and how we use our voice. And then, seemingly out of left field, a "moment" jumps up and taps us on the shoulder and invites us to act.

The Parkland shootings and resulting youth activism represent such a moment. If you haven't had the boardroom and executive conversation yet, the moment invites you to talk — and then act.

Robert Ross is chief executive of the California Endowment.