



How donors helped create a movement for national standards

By Liam Julian

It was a muggy, 86-degree June day in Suwanee, Georgia. Patchy clouds threatened rain in the afternoon, and the guests filing into Peachtree Ridge High School were grateful for the air conditioning.

But even if rain clouds threatened outside, the visitors to the school exuded sunny optimism. They had gathered to unveil something unprecedented in American education—the first set of shared, nationwide grade-by-grade benchmarks for what students are expected to learn: the Common Core State Standards.

Perhaps even more notable was the fact that the event was not organized by the U.S. Department of Education in Washington. The host for

the day was then-Gov. Sonny Perdue. Joining the Georgia Republican by satellite was Delaware's Democratic Governor, Jack Markell. Their participation underscored two key features of the Common Core standards: They were driven by state leaders, not by federal officials; and they were endorsed across party lines. Indeed, the standards have been adopted by 46 states.

“We need to maintain a national focus to ensure our kids are ready to compete and ready to win,” said Markell. “That’s why our nation’s governors committed to this effort to create a common set of high expectations for students across the country. The Common Core State Standards reflect what can come from cooperation to improve student achievement.”

That sweaty day in 2010 was the result not just of collaboration among governors and school

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officials. It wouldn't have happened without the support of philanthropists. It was the drive and resources of private donors who brought about this sea change in K–12 education.

Raising the Standard

Education in America has long been a subject of local concern and control, but the drive toward national academic standards is by no means new. In 1989 President George H. W. Bush and the nation's governors met for an education summit in Charlottesville, Virginia. They emerged to decree that by the turn of the millennium “American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography.” Bush's Secretary of Education, Lamar Alexander (now a Senator from Tennessee), actually called for a “national examination system” tied to “new world standards.”

President Bill Clinton—who, as Governor of Arkansas, was a top negotiator at the 1989 Charlottesville summit—continued the standards push with Goals 2000, his education agenda, which became law in 1994. Goals 2000 gave federal money to states and school dis-

tricts so long as they drew up plans for designing high-quality standards and tests. The Department of Education, National Endowment for the Humanities, and National Science Foundation had already begun handing out grants to scholars to draft content standards in different subjects. The project was interrupted, however, when Lynne Cheney—who, as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, had approved the grant for Goals 2000 history standards—perused the final 271-page product and was angered by what she read. She published an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* denouncing the document, “in which the foundings of the Sierra Club and the National Organization for Women are considered noteworthy events, but the first gathering of the U.S. Congress is not.” The Senate later condemned the history standards by a vote of 99 to 1. It was a lesson in how easily the

good idea of high standards can devolve into political correctness, uniformity, and conventionalism if their interpretation and translation into practice is nationalized.

The idea of high-quality nationwide standards was mostly dormant for the next decade or so. President George W. Bush's signature education initiative, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), was certainly testing- and standards-based, but the law was clear that individual states—and not anyone in Washington, D.C.—would make the standards and tests by which their own kids would be judged. A few states crafted challenging standards and tests, but most avoided changes that would challenge the status quo and put new demands on their educational establishments.

Organizations across the political spectrum once again began to see the value in a shared set of demanding benchmarks. The big question was whether a path existed between the dual risks of slackness on the one hand, and stultifying homogeneity on the other.

Philanthropic Evolution

As the national educational conversation began returning to the idea of standards, several important philanthropies were shifting portions of their

education giving into public-policy advocacy. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation embodies this trend. Education Week reported that in 2002 Gates committed about \$276,000 to advocacy. In 2008, Gates partnered with the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation to spend \$30 million on the Strong American Schools campaign—better known by its tagline, “Ed in '08”—which attempted to make ed reform a key issue in the election.

Ed in '08 was widely considered a flop, but the interest in public policy continued at many philanthropies. Recognizing that their spending would always be modest in comparison to the \$600+ billion that the state, local, and federal governments spend on K–12 education each year, foundations began developing and promoting public policies to improve American schooling.

Stefanie Sanford, who spent more than a decade as director of policy and advocacy for the

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Gates Foundation before moving in March to a similar position at the College Board, summarizes some of the Gates advocacy investments: “The foundation’s early advocacy investments included the Data Quality Campaign to improve the use of data in decision making; the Graduation Rate Compact, which worked to create a common graduation rate measure across all states to show the real extent of the dropout rate and allow for cross-state comparisons; and the NGA Honor States grant program, which supported states to advance college and career-ready policies.” The Gates Foundation’s potent support for development of the Common Core standards grew out of these early partnerships.

In addition to Gates and Broad, other prominent funders of the Common Core include the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. Scores of other philanthropists were also involved. According to a 2012 Grantmakers for Education survey of 200 education donors, 24 percent supported or planned to support the Common Core.

Creating the Core

Although state education standards vary, the Gates-funded American Diploma Project (which

convened nearly 40 states by 2008) revealed “that there was great consistency among the participating states’ standards,” Sanford explains. This was a foundation to build on. “Meanwhile, a number of organizations were calling for versions of national standards on equity and competitiveness grounds. The different groups began meeting to see if they could come to a consensus on a common agenda across groups and states. The governors and chiefs had been working on college and career-ready standards in their individual states and across states, while the Alliance for Excellent Education, the Hunt Institute, the Fordham Institute, and others had been advocating for national standards.”

Philanthropic funding brought these conversations together in one place, and “from those meetings emerged the idea of leveraging the cross-state work that the governors and chiefs had been working on with the voluntary mechanism that the American Diploma Project had been using to help states benchmark standards to college and career readiness,” Sanford says. “That approach would maintain state decision-making and independence in standard-setting (purely voluntary state decisions), while also generating the benefits of multiple states having the same high standards.”

It was through the bipartisan membership associations of governors and state school com-

What Is the Common Core?

The Common Core State Standards consist of grade-level education benchmarks for K–12 learning, devised by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). Currently, there are standards for math and English language arts.

The standards are not themselves a curriculum. “While the Standards make references to some particular forms of content, including mythology, foundational U.S. documents, and Shakespeare, they do not—indeed, cannot—enumerate all or even most of the content that students should learn,” NGA and CCSSO explain. “The Standards must therefore be complemented by a well-developed, content-rich curriculum consistent with the expectations laid out in this document.”

Nonetheless, the standards do spell out specific skills and abilities that students will be expected to master. Below are a few examples:

- Kindergarten: Compose simple shapes to form larger shapes. For example, “*Can you join these two triangles with full sides touching to make a rectangle?*”
- Grade 3: Read grade-level prose and poetry orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression on successive readings.
- Grade 5: Add and subtract fractions with unlike denominators (including mixed numbers) by replacing given fractions with equivalent fractions in such a way as to produce an equivalent sum or difference of fractions with like denominators.
- Grades 11–12: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in *Federalist* No. 10).

missioners (the official authors of the Common Core standards) that states were able to convince the funders that they could make the Common Core happen. “In the early stages of conversation with the foundations, there was a lot of skepticism about whether the states could do this and would do this,” explains Gene Wilhoit, who was until recently executive director of CCSSO. “We didn’t have the entire support we needed when we started the process. So when we sat down with the philanthropic community we had to make some pretty specific promises to them—like having so many states agree to participate in the process, and that those states would sign on to the adoption.” Cash-strapped states did not have the funds necessary to undertake the Common Core project on their own, and funding from the federal government wasn’t desirable from the states’ perspective—governors and education commissioners knew that if voters were to embrace national benchmarks, they would need to be convinced that states were in the driver’s seat.

As of this writing, 46 states have committed to adopt the Common Core standards. “This is a massive and largely unprecedented coalition,” says Gregory McGinity, the Broad Foundation’s managing director of policy.

Common Core’s Future

The next challenge for philanthropists is Common Core implementation. States have promised to adopt the Common Core standards. Will they actually do the hard work of designing curricula and instructional materials that give those standards purpose? Prominent education reformer Jay P. Greene of the University of Arkansas doesn’t think so. “States were coerced into doing this,” he says of Common Core, “and the effort is already failing.” Robert Scott, a former Commissioner of Education in Texas (which has neither participated in the Common Core’s development nor adopted the standards), echoes the sentiment. “This initiative which had been con-

stantly portrayed as state-led and voluntary was really about control,” he said recently. “It got co-opted by the Department of Education later. And it was about control totality from some education-reform groups.”

Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, is more circumspect but still glum about Common Core’s ultimate chances of success. “The adoption went way too fast, and it isn’t sincere,” he says. The standards won’t matter unless they are implemented conscientiously, and states may not have sufficient incentives to do that carefully.

Other observers, though, are more sanguine. “For most states . . . the Common Core is an enormous step forward,” writes Sol Stern in *City Journal*. “Since the standards call for a content-based curriculum, those states are now having a serious discussion about the specific subject matter that must be taught in the classroom.”

For donors interested in the Common Core, there remains much to do. And so far they seem committed to doing it. Last year the GE Foundation announced it was donating \$18 million to help teachers understand the Common Core standards, and to create free instructional materials for them to use. In December, the Helm-

sley Trust donated \$11 million for the same purpose, as have the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, Hewlett, and—of course—Gates. The funders who helped create the Common Core are optimistic. “The development process engaged hundreds of people from a range of different disciplines,” explains Sanford, “including significant numbers of teachers and over 10,000 comments from the general public.” Chris Minnich, executive director of CCSSO, echoes the sentiment. “The states were pretty determined to do this,” he says.

Minnich notes, however, that this project would have gone nowhere without the philanthropic leadership. “It would have been hard to get states to contribute financial resources up front.” And in addition to underwriting the costs of creating the standards, philanthropists gave the effort a “national voice,” and “the political capital of major, national funders thinking this was the right way to go.” **P**

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