

## No Child Left Behind — Again?

Federal Pressure and Foundation Money Push for National School Standards

By Philip Brand

*Summary: Large charitable foundations like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation are spearheading a nationwide drive to develop national standards in English and mathematics in elementary and secondary schools. School districts and teachers will be more accountable. They will have to make sure that all their students, rich and poor, from Maine to Hawaii, meet the same standards. Isn't this a good idea?*

Last June education experts, corporation and foundation leaders and state policymakers from across the country gathered at Peachtree Ridge High School in Suwanee, Georgia, a town thirty miles north of Atlanta, to celebrate the release of the much-discussed Common Core State Standards Initiative. State governors, school superintendents and education commissioners were on hand as were American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten and National Education Association (NEA) vice-president Lily Eskelsen. The occasion was marked by praise for the teams of education experts that developed K-12 English and mathematics standards to prepare all of America's children "for success in college and work," according to a press release from the Georgia Department of Education.

It is hard to imagine a less controversial meeting than one dedicated to making sure "second graders should be able to read two-syllable words with long vowels." Yet the story behind the creation of national education standards reveals much about how education policy is made today, and by whom. The Common Core State Standards Initiative is supposed to have been led by the states. But the real-

ity is that the federal government spurred the states to adopt it, acting in concert with the nation's largest foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The process of adopting national education standards as public policy required a power shift away from state and local governments. Large private foundations and the federal government have taken the initiative in improving American schooling, and the results should become apparent over the next several years.



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CONTENTS

No Child Left Behind -- Again?  
Page 1

Philanthropy Notes  
Page 6

## Why National Standards?

Columnist George Will recently called K-12 education “the quintessential state and local responsibility,” and most Americans probably agree. However, the federal government’s role in education has grown dramatically since 1965, the year President Lyndon Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. In 1979 President Jimmy Carter elevated the Department of Education to a cabinet position. Then in 2001 Congress enacted the No Child Left Behind Act at the urging of President George W. Bush. Today 15 percent of every education dollar originates in Washington, DC. Federal education spending on kindergarten through 12th grade has doubled since 2000.

Yet despite this growth in federal spending, Americans remain content to let 50 states set their own education standards and benchmarks, which are then filtered through the jurisdiction of thousands of school districts. Outright attempts to specify national standards have failed, most recently in 1995, when the U.S. Senate by a vote of 99-1 rejected proposed national history standards.

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The push to make what students learn more uniform and measurable has been carried out at the state level. State efforts to adopt more rigorous standards were spurred by the influential 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, which stated in no uncertain terms that American students were falling behind students in other countries, just as economic competition was going global. The anxious drive to raise student achievement was motivated by a fear that American students were being outperformed by students in India and China and other emerging nations. This remains a primary goal for supporters of school reform.

“Contentions about global competitiveness,” writes William Mathis, managing director of the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder, “provide a key rationale given for common standards, along with increasing equity and streamlining the reform process.”

More recently, worries about educational equity have fueled the standards movement. Education activists are outraged by a yawning “achievement gap” between rich and poor and minority and non-minority students. As Tamar Lewin writes in the *New York Times*, “Increasingly, national standards are seen as a way to ensure that children in all states will have access to a similar education.” This view was made explicit by the No Child Left Behind Act, which requires that 100% of students will be proficient in math and English by 2014.

Ironically, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) let the states create their own standards, and this has exacerbated what were already wide variations among them. Many states actually weakened their own standards to make sure that their students fulfilled the federal law’s requirement that schools make “Adequate Yearly Progress” towards proficiency, as the law defined it. This tactic let the states avoid federal penalties. The American public had at first supported giving states the flexibility to set education standards. But as they observed education officials shift standards to win federal approval, many concluded that NCLB was prompting a “race to the bottom” in education.

As the suspicion that states were gaming NCLB increased, the idea of developing national standards revived and found a new ally in the White House. President Barack Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, are strong supporters of national standards. But the new administration cannot simply enact its own standards into law. As education historian Diane Ravitch writes, “In fact, it is currently a matter of federal law that the U.S. Department of Education is not permitted to impose any curriculum on the schools. Thus, any national curriculum must be both nonfederal and voluntary, winning the support of districts and states because of its excellence.” Prohibited from enacting or compelling national standards, the Obama administration has had to adopt a more subtle approach.

Enter the Common Core State Standards Initiative. In April 2009 representatives from 41 states met with representatives of the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and agreed to draft a set of common standards for education. All the states, except Alaska and Texas, signaled their initial support. The standards, which outline what American students should know in grades K-12 in both math and English, were drawn up by a coalition that included schoolteachers, college professors and curriculum specialists, and Achieve, Inc., an education nonprofit (2008 revenues: \$7.4 million) created in 1995 by state governors and corporate leaders concerned about education. The standards were then reviewed by the teachers unions and by state departments of education. It was the release of this 500-page document that was celebrated at Peachtree Ridge High.

### **Race to the Top**

The choice of location—a small Georgia town far from Washington, D.C.—was not accidental. It was a public relations tactic meant to suggest that the new standards were a local collaboration, not a federal mandate.

Indeed, the creation of the new standards was “state-led,” but the federal government was certainly enticing and threatening the states with financial carrots and sticks.

Consider Title I funding, which the Department of Education distributes to states to help low-income students. The University of Colorado’s William Mathis writes that the Obama administration threatens to withhold Title I aid from states that do not adopt these or comparable standards. Specifically, the administration has warned that it will “require all states to adopt and certify that they have college- and career-ready standards in reading and mathematics, which may include common standards developed by a state-led consortium, as a condition for qualifying for Title I funding.”

Once the standards are adopted the administration then intends to allocate \$2.5 billion to align state curricula with the new standards. As the Common Core website acknowledges, “The federal government will have the opportunity to support states as they begin adopting the standards.”

The clearest example of federal arm-twisting is the Obama administration’s Race to the Top initiative. Race to the Top is a \$4 billion fund created as part of the president’s economic stimulus plan. States have applied for money from the fund in two separate rounds. Their applications were judged according to criteria determined by the Department of Education. On its website, the department asked states to concentrate on four areas: standards and assessments, building data systems, recruiting

teachers and principals, and turning around low-achieving schools. It is telling that states which adopted the Common Core standards were awarded extra points on their Race to the Top applications.

In the first round of competition just two states were announced as winners—Tennessee and Delaware. Nine states and the District of Columbia were winners in the second round: Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Ohio and Rhode Island. Secretary Duncan said the Department of Education wanted to choose more winners but “simply ran out of money.” He said during a third round of competition in 2011 he hopes to reward more applicants with \$1.3 billion.

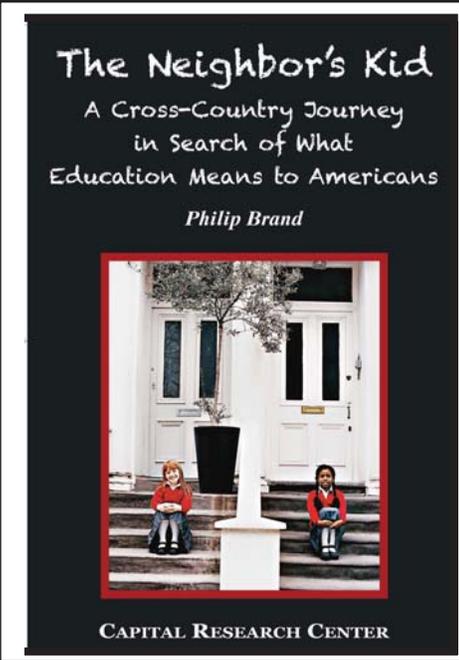
Even before the money was disbursed, there were accusations of “horse trading.” “I don’t want to trash Ohio,” said Terry Ryan, vice president for Ohio programs and policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, “but it’s hard to see Ohio as a winner and Louisiana and Colorado as losers.” “For those of us who live and breathe education reform and are on the ground in these states, it’s clear that Louisiana is night and day ahead of us on some of these issues.”

According to Newsweek, Ryan blogged that politics was creeping into the evaluation process, particularly in Ohio, where incumbent

Democratic Gov. Ted Strickland was in a tight fight with Republican challenger John Kasich. Strickland, one of several governors who traveled to Washington, helped make Ohio’s case to those judging the standards. (Kasich won the election.)

At least one charter school leader made headlines by criticizing the strings attached to federal Race to the Top (RttT) money. Tom Carroll is founder of the Brighter Choice Foundation, a network whose 11 high-achieving Albany charter schools enroll 25% of all public school students in New York’s state capital. In a statement about Race to the Top, Carroll warned, “it is ironic that Race to the Top is being used to standardize what we all do. The charter school movement has flourished in New York precisely because we have had the freedom and autonomy to innovate – not because of the quality of regulatory guidance from State Ed.” He added, “I don’t believe for a minute that this is the last instance of regulatory creep that we will witness in the coming years.” Carroll has discouraged other charter school leaders from signing up for RttT funds because of “how seriously the program jeopardizes the administrative and operational independence of charter schools.”

Is Carroll right to pass up a short-term monetary boost to preserve his schools’ independence? Professor Mathis, writing



**An excerpt from Philip Brand’s *The Neighbor’s Kid* (p. 91):**

[Education Secretary Arne] Duncan recently said: “If we accomplish one thing in the coming years, it should be to eliminate the extreme variation in standards across America.”

*I couldn’t disagree more. Children, families, voters and communities derive real benefits from local control. When people disagree, forced uniformity creates lots of losers. The differentiation created by local control creates choices for families and citizens. Families decide what sort of school they want for their kids, and citizens decide on the policies they want for their schools and the amount they are willing to pay for them...*

*Those who claim to have the answer—to know “what works” for all children and families and schools across the country—find the current system “unwieldy.” But unwieldy is just a word for saying that power is too dispersed for one person to tell everyone else what to do. Count me a supporter of unwieldy.*

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about Race to the Top and the other federal pressures on schools, writes, “Taken together, the proposed changes would give the federal government unprecedented influence over the curriculum, pedagogy and governance structure of the nation’s schools.”

## The Gates Foundation Push for National Standards

The federal government isn’t the only important player pushing the new standards. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is making large contributions to groups that promote the Common Core Standards.

“Never in the history of the United States was there a foundation as rich and powerful as the Gates Foundation,” Diane Ravitch writes. “Never was there one that sought to steer state and national policy in education. And never before was there a foundation that gave grants to almost every major think tank and advocacy group in the field of education, leaving almost no one willing to criticize its vast power and unchecked influence.”

Of course philanthropic involvement in education isn’t new; philanthropists always give to schools. Typically, it is loyal alumni who give to their alma mater. However, in 1993 Ambassador Walter Annenberg raised the stakes when he pledged \$500 million over five years to help improve the nation’s worst public school systems. His gift was the largest ever made to American public schooling. (See *Foundation Watch*, March 1998).

The Annenberg experiment, which was announced with much fanfare, yielded few results. Writing in *Philanthropy* magazine (“Retooling K-12 Giving,” September 2004) American Enterprise Institute scholar Rick Hess observed, “In 1998, the fifth-year anniversary of the launch of the Annenberg Challenge, the four foundations awarding the most grant money for elementary and secondary education were the Annenberg Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. These philanthropists supported conventional school and district improvement.”

With the Annenberg disappointment fresh

in the minds of foundation donors, Hess has uncovered a “new generation of funders eager to try another tack.” By 2002, the top two givers were the Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, whose \$196 million in donations to K-12 efforts counted for about one quarter of all grant money given by the top 50 education funders.

As Diane Ravitch notes in her new book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (Basic Books, 2010), “The turn of the millennium marked a changing of the guard in the foundation world.” Rick Hess, who is editor of the book, *With the Best of Intentions: How Philanthropy is Reshaping K-12 Education* (Harvard Education Press, 2005), notes that this shift has been abrupt, and that the emerging foundations “have adopted a ‘muscular philanthropy’ that promotes a focused vision of school reform and uses the foundation’s resources to promote it.”

The Gates Foundation’s first big push in education was to increase high school graduation rates in urban districts. “The foundation’s leaders,” writes Ravitch, “decided that the primary obstacle to reaching these goals was the traditional comprehensive high school,” and they pushed to break up large urban high schools into smaller ones. Like Annenberg a decade earlier, Gates’s efforts reaped few results. Academic results in the new high schools were no different than those in regular high schools.

In 2005, the foundation switched focus. Bill Gates delivered a keynote speech to the National Governors Association (the group behind the Common Core Standards), which initiated his switch to, as Ravitch says, “performance-based teacher pay programs; creating data systems; supporting advocacy work; promoting national standards and tests; and finding ways for school districts to measure teacher effectiveness and to fire ineffective teachers.”

The new Gates Foundation mission fit in well with Race to the Top. In fact, the foundation picked 15 states and gave them \$250,000 each to help prepare their applications for Race to the Top grants. It also announced it

would offer assistance to the remaining 35 states if they met certain education reform criteria—and the criteria included whether the state had signed onto the Common Standards Initiative. Of the 16 first-round finalists for Race to the Top money, the New York Times’ education reporter Sam Dillon points out that only two did not receive help from the Gates Foundation.

Besides coaxing states to sign up for Common Standards, the Gates Foundation is funding organizations that are among the standards’ biggest boosters. Erik Robelen reported for *Education Week* in 2006 that the foundation “had increased its giving to advocacy groups from \$276,000 in 2002 to nearly \$57 million in 2005.” In doing his research Robelen found that nearly every group he interviewed was getting Gates money. Among the recipients was Achieve (\$8.84 million), which was commissioned to draft the new common core standards. Two of the largest recipients were the very organizations spearheading the common standards effort: the Council of Chief State School Officers (\$25.48 million) and the National Governors Association (\$21.23 million). The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education reform group that has been an influential supporter of the standards, received \$848,000.

Rick Hess thinks Diane Ravitch’s rhetoric regarding foundation influence on education may be over the top, but he concludes that “it would be a mistake to assume that education philanthropy is not influential.” He adds that although philanthropy constitutes less than 1 percent of total education spending, it “can have a vastly disproportionate impact on the direction of America’s schools.”

## “The Death of Federalism”

Race to the Top and Common Core Standards seem to have ushered in a new era of education policy making, one in which the federal government and large foundations use their financial weight to push and pull states toward specific policies. What should conservatives make of these changes?

Some conservatives have dreamt about doing away with Department of Education ever since President Ronald Reagan promised to

de-fund it in 1982 and the GOP's 1996 platform backed its abolition. In 2001, however, President George W. Bush decided on a different course when he promoted enactment of No Child Left Behind. Rather than shrink the federal government's role in education, Bush would use the federal government to achieve conservative ends. He promised that NCLB would promote choice and accountability in education.

A similar debate is playing out over the new national standards. When the regulations for Race to the Top were released in 2009, Michael Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute wrote, "But while the substance is worth celebrating, I can't help but feel remorse for the death of federalism." "This is," he continued, "Washington Knows Best at its worst."

Petrilli and Fordham president Chester Finn have concluded that the part worth celebrating outweighs the part that stirs up remorse. Together they have argued the conservative case for new national standards. The shift is both "profound" and "positive," they say. Writing in National Review Online in July 2010, they say it has largely been successful because the Common Core Standards' "authors eschewed the vague and politically correct nonsense that infected so many state standards (and earlier attempts at national standards)." Finn and Petrilli acknowledge that "[a]nxiety will surely rise when school kids across the land begin (three or four years hence) to take tests linked to these standards." But they believe the standards are necessary. (The development of the new tests begins shortly, spurred by \$350 million in federal funds.) Comparing the Common Core Standards to existing state standards, the Fordham Institute finds that the standards for English and math are "clearer and more rigorous" than the English standards in 37 states and the math standards in 39 states.

In his new book, *The Same Thing Over and Over*, (Harvard University Press, 2010) Rick Hess notes that advocates of specific school reform panaceas have not been able to deliver on their brash promises. Hess recommends a different perspective, writing:

Pluralism provides an institutional mechanism for permitting competing notions of the good to flourish. This is less a Darwinian concern with allowing the "fittest" school or educational approach to win and more a conviction that there is value in nurturing diverse intellectual traditions, models of thought, bodies of knowledge, and modes of learning. This allows us to foster intellectual diversity that enriches civil society and can free up energy that is otherwise siphoned into bitter wars for control of the curriculum. It allows individual schools, educators, and providers to excel at something, rather than asking every school to excel at everything.

Many new members of Congress are likely to agree with Hess. Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), responded this way to a NEA questionnaire, "I am against any federal funding or control of education. Historically, education was funded and controlled locally. Even now, most funding is local. You can't have it both ways. Most teachers despise No Child Left Behind. If you want to be rid of it, you must also oppose federal funds!"

Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah), Reps. Robert Hurt (R-Va.), Mike Keown (R-Ga.), Allen West (R-Fla.), and Frank Guinta (R-N.H.) all said during last year's primaries that they favored abolishing the Department of Education.

George Will has recently weighed in, arguing: "If we must continue the mistake of increasing federal supervision of primary and secondary education, Washington should at least reverse what NCLB does. Washington should set national standards and measurements and leave states free to choose how to meet them."

In fact, the federal government has been assessing what American students know in various subject areas for decades by administering the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly known as "the nation's report card." The assessment is given periodically and measures 4th, 8th

and 12th grade students in mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, and U.S. history. It is a useful metric for comparing states and analyzing trends over time. However, unlike the Common Core Standards, it does not propose curriculum changes, specify what children are required to know at each grade level, or coax states to adopt some policies and hinder them from adopting others.

George Will accepts that Americans will "continue the mistake" of accepting federal supervision over K-12 education. But good parents and teachers know that mistakes should not be tolerated and should be quickly corrected.

*Philip Brand was director of Capital Research Center's Education Watch project. His book, The Neighbor's Kid: A Cross-Country Journey in Search of What Education Means to Americans, was recently published by CRC.*

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Terrence Scanlon  
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# PhilanthropyNotes

**Democracy Alliance**, the **George Soros**-led billionaires' club that wants to transform America into a European-style socialist leviathan may be distancing itself from President **Obama**, according to the Huffington Post. At a post-election meeting, Soros "voiced blunt criticism of the Obama administration, going so far as to suggest that Democratic donors direct their support somewhere other than the president." An unnamed attendee at the meeting said participants were frustrated that "we just came out of an election where the right wing and the Republicans distorted what was going on." Democracy Alliance was last profiled in the December 2008 *Foundation Watch*.

The fake media watchdog, **Media Matters for America**, is using **Glenn Beck** as a fundraising tool. In an email to supporters Media Matters CEO **David Brock** calls Beck's relentless criticism of the far-left money laundering outfit known as the **Tides Foundation** "violent rhetoric and fear-mongering." When you're Brock, everything you disagree with is "hate speech."

Former Washington, D.C. schools chancellor and education reformers **Michelle Rhee** launched a new nonprofit that she said will represent the interests of students. **StudentsFirst** aims to raise and spend \$1 billion "to lobby for merit pay for teachers and expanded school choice, among other issues, and will support political candidates who share her ideas about education," according to the Washington Post.

Boston philanthropist **Carl Shapiro** and his family, longtime investors with imprisoned swindler **Bernard Madoff**, have agreed to cough up more than \$625 million to repay victims of Madoff's fraud, the Boston Globe reports. The feds were gearing up to seize the money, which the government argues are fictitious profits the family took in over four decades from Madoff's company. Shapiro, now 97, parlayed the 1971 sale of a dress business into more than \$1 billion, a good sized chunk of which he has donated to charity through his family foundation.

Some people are never satisfied. Left-winger **Pablo Eisenberg**, senior fellow at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, criticized **Warren Buffett**, who has pledged to give away at least \$37 billion, for not giving away more of his fortune immediately. Buffett recently "confirmed that he was paying off a \$50-million pledge he made in 2006 to develop an international nuclear-fuel bank to prevent the spread of atomic bombs," Eisenberg wrote in a Chronicle of Philanthropy op-ed. "Why hasn't he donated an equal or greater amount for programs to aid the hungry and homeless in America?"

## Goldman Sachs WATCH

Goldman told the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission that it did not cause the collapse of two Bear Stearns hedge funds by reducing the valuation of subprime assets they held, the New York Times reports. The two hedge funds collapsed in 2007, an event that led to the purchase of Bear Stearns by JPMorgan Chase at fire sale prices. Goldman lawyer Janet A. Broeckel told the commission by letter, "Simply put, it was against the financial interest of Goldman Sachs to cause the failure of the fund and it did not do so." Critics continue to fault Goldman and the commission has accused the firm of not cooperating with its investigation.

Theo Lubke, who spearheaded the Federal Reserve Bank of New York's push to reform the private derivatives market, took a job with Goldman to help the firm manipulate the approaching government overhaul of financial regulations for its advantage. As the company's new chief regulatory reform officer in its securities division, Lubke will "work closely with divisional and firm-wide leadership to implement regulatory reform legislation," an internal memo said.

Goldman is pledging \$20 million to groups affiliated with Mission Continues, which serves wounded veterans. "The pledge brings to \$212-million the amount the New York bank has donated this year through Goldman Sachs Gives, which requires partners to give a portion of their pay to charity," the Chronicle of Philanthropy reports.