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How Bill Gates pulled off the swift Common Core revolution

By [Lyndsey Layton](#), Saturday, June 7, 7:25 PM

Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates is taking heat from education groups, which say the Gates Foundation's philanthropic support comes with strings attached. Here, he responds to his critics in an interview with The Washington Post's Lyndsey Layton.

The pair of education advocates had a big idea, a new approach to transform every public-school classroom in America. By early 2008, many of the nation's top politicians and education leaders had lined up in support.

But that wasn't enough. The duo needed money — tens of millions of dollars, at least — and they needed a champion who could overcome the politics that had thwarted every previous attempt to institute national standards.


So they turned to the richest man in the world.




On a summer day in 2008, Gene Wilhoit, director of a national group of state school chiefs, and David Coleman, an emerging evangelist for the standards movement, spent hours in Bill Gates's sleek headquarters near Seattle, trying to convince him and his wife, Melinda, to turn their idea into reality.

Coleman and Wilhoit told the Gateses that academic standards varied so wildly between states that high school diplomas had lost all meaning, that as many as 40 percent of college freshmen needed remedial classes and that U.S. students were falling behind their foreign competitors.

The pair also argued that a fragmented education system stifled innovation because textbook publishers and software developers were catering to a large number of small markets instead of exploring breakthrough products. That seemed to resonate with the man who led the creation of the world's dominant computer operating system.

“Can you do this?” Wilhoit recalled being asked. “Is there any proof that states are serious about this, because they haven't been in the past?”



		
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Wilhoit responded that he and Coleman could make no guarantees but that “we were going to give it the best shot we could.”

After the meeting, weeks passed with no word. Then Wilhoit got a call: Gates was in.

What followed was one of the swiftest and most remarkable shifts in education policy in U.S. history.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation didn't just bankroll the development of what became known as the Common Core State Standards. With more than \$200 million, the foundation also built political support across the country, convincing state governments to make systemic and costly changes.

Bill Gates was de facto organizer, providing the money and structure for states to work together on common standards in a way that avoided the usual collision between states' rights and national interests that had undercut every previous effort, dating to the Eisenhower administration.

The Gates Foundation spread money across the political spectrum, to entities including the big teachers unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, and business organizations such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce — groups that have clashed in the past but became vocal backers of the standards.

Money flowed to policy groups on the right and left, funding research by scholars of varying political persuasions who promoted the idea of common standards. Liberals at the Center for American Progress and conservatives affiliated with the American Legislative Exchange Council who routinely disagree on nearly every issue accepted Gates money and found common ground on the Common Core.

One [2009 study](#), conducted by the conservative Thomas B. Fordham Institute with a \$959,116 Gates grant, described the proposed standards as being “very, very strong” and “clearly superior” to many existing state standards.

Gates money went to state and local groups, as well, to help influence policymakers and civic leaders. And the idea found a major booster in President Obama, whose new administration was populated by former Gates Foundation staffers and associates. The administration designed a special contest using economic stimulus funds to reward states that accepted the standards.

The result was astounding: within just two years of the 2008 Seattle meeting, 45 states and the District of Columbia had fully adopted the Common Core State Standards.

The math standards require students to learn multiple ways to solve problems and explain how they got their answers, while the English standards emphasize non-fiction and expect students to use evidence to back up oral and written arguments. The standards are not a curriculum but skills that students should acquire at each grade. How they are taught and materials used are decisions left to states and school districts.

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The standards have become so pervasive that they also quickly spread through private Catholic schools. About 100 of 176 Catholic dioceses have adopted the standards because it is increasingly difficult to buy classroom materials and send teachers to professional development programs that are not influenced by the Common Core, Catholic educators said.

And yet, because of the way education policy is generally decided, the Common Core was instituted in many states without a single vote taken by an elected lawmaker. Kentucky even adopted the standards before the final draft had been made public.

States were responding to a “common belief system supported by widespread investments,” according to one former Gates employee who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid antagonizing the foundation.

The movement grew so quickly and with so little public notice that opposition was initially almost nonexistent. That started to change last summer, when local tea party groups began protesting what they viewed as the latest intrusion by an overreaching federal government — even though the impetus had come from the states. In some circles, Common Core became known derisively as “Obamacore.”

Since then, anti-Common Core sentiment has intensified, to the extent that it has become a litmus test in the Republican Party ahead of the GOP’s 2016 presidential nomination process. Former Florida governor Jeb Bush, whose nonprofit Foundation for Excellence in Education has received about \$5.2 million from the Gates Foundation since 2010, is one of the Common Core’s most vocal supporters. Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, who, like Bush, is a potential Republican White House candidate, led a repeal of the standards in his state. In the past week, Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin (R), a former advocate of the standards, [signed a law pulling her state out](#), days after South Carolina’s Republican governor, Nikki Haley, did the same.

Some liberals are angry, too, with a few teacher groups questioning Gates’s influence and motives. Critics say Microsoft stands to benefit from the Common Core’s embrace of technology and data — a charge Gates vehemently rejects.

A group calling itself the “Badass Teachers Association,” citing opposition to what it considers market-based education reform, plans a June 26 protest outside the Gates Foundation’s headquarters in Seattle.

In an interview, Gates said his role is to fund the research and development of new tools, such as the Common Core, and offer them to decision-makers who are trying to improve education for millions of Americans. It’s up to the government to decide which tools to use, but someone has to invest in their creation, he said.

“The country as a whole has a huge problem that low-income kids get less good education than suburban kids get,” Gates said. “And that is a huge challenge. . . . Education can get better. Some people may not believe that. Education can change. We can do better.”

“There’s a lot of work that’s gone into making these [standards] good,” Gates continued. “I wish there was a lot of competition, in terms of [other] people who put tens of millions of dollars into how reading and writing could be improved, how math could be improved.”

Referring to opinion polls, he noted that most teachers like the Common Core standards and that those who are most familiar with them are the most positive.

Gates grew visibly irritated in the interview when the political backlash against the standards was mentioned.

“These are not political things,” he said. “These are where people are trying to apply expertise to say, ‘Is this a way of making education better?’ ”

“At the end of the day, I don’t think wanting education to be better is a right-wing or left-wing thing,” Gates said. “We fund people to look into things. We don’t fund people to say, ‘Okay, we’ll pay you this if you say you like the Common Core.’ ”

Whether the Common Core will deliver on its promise is an open question.

Tom Loveless, a former sixth-grade teacher who is an education policy expert at the Brookings Institution, said the Common Core was “built on a shaky theory.” He said he has found no correlation between quality standards and higher student achievement.

“Everyone who developed standards in the past has had a theory that standards will raise achievement, and that’s not happened,” Loveless said.

Jay P. Greene, head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, says the Gates Foundation’s overall dominance in education policy has subtly muffled dissent.

“Really rich guys can come up with ideas that they think are great, but there is a danger that everyone will tell them they’re great, even if they’re not,” Greene said.

Common Core’s first win

The first victory for Common Core advocates came on a snowy evening in Kentucky in February 2010, when the state’s top education officials voted unanimously to accept the standards.

“There was no dissent,” said Terry Holliday, Kentucky’s education commissioner. “We had punch and cookies to celebrate.”

It was not by chance that Kentucky went first.

The state enjoyed a direct connection to the Common Core backers — Wilhoit, who had made the personal appeal to Bill and Melinda Gates during that pivotal 2008 meeting, is a former Kentucky education commissioner.

Kentucky was also in the market for new standards. Alarmed that as many as 80 percent of community college students were taking remedial classes, lawmakers had recently passed a bill that required Kentucky to write new, better K-12 standards and tests.

“All of our consultants and our college professors had reviewed the Common Core standards, and they really liked them,” Holliday said. “And there was no cost. We didn’t have any money to do this work, and here we were, able to tap into this national work and get the benefits of the best minds in the country.”

“Without the Gates money,” Holliday added, “we wouldn’t have been able to do this.”

Over time, at least \$15 million in Gates money was directed both to the state — to train teachers in Common Core practices and purchase classroom materials — and to on-the-ground advocacy and business groups to help build public support.

Armed with \$476,553 from Gates, the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce’s foundation produced a seven-minute [video](#) about the value and impact of the Common Core, a tool kit to guide employers in how to talk

about its benefits with their employees, a list of key facts that could be stuffed into paycheck envelopes, and other promotional materials written by consultants.

The [tool kit](#) provided a sample e-mail that could be sent to workers describing “some exciting new developments underway in our schools” that “hold great promise for creating a more highly skilled workforce and for giving our students, community and state a better foundation on which to build a strong economic future.”

The chamber also recruited a prominent Louisville stockbroker to head a coalition of 75 company executives across the state who lent their names to ads placed in business publications that supported the Common Core.

“The notion that the business community was behind this, those seeds were planted across the state, and that reaped a nice harvest in terms of public opinion,” said David Adkisson, president and chief executive of the Kentucky chamber.

The foundation run by the National Education Association received \$501,580 in 2013 to help put the Common Core in place in Kentucky.

Gates-backed groups built such strong support for the Common Core that critics, few and far between, were overwhelmed.

“They have so much money to throw around, they can impact the Kentucky Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Education, they can impact both the AFT and the NEA,” said Brent McKim, president of the teachers union in Jefferson County, Ky., whose early complaint that the standards were too numerous to be taught well earned him a rebuke by Holliday.

The foundation’s backing was crucial in other states, as well. Starting in 2009, it had begun ramping up its grant-giving to local nonprofit organizations and other Common Core advocates.

The foundation, for instance, gave more than \$5 million to the University of North Carolina-affiliated Hunt Institute, led by the state’s former four-term Democratic governor, Jim Hunt, to advocate for the Common Core in statehouses around the country.

The grant was the institute’s largest source of income in 2009, more than 10 times the size of its next largest donation.

Bill Gates sat down with The Post’s Lyndsey Layton in March to defend the Gates Foundation’s pervasive presence in education and its support of the Common Core. Here is the full, sometimes tense, interview.

With the Gates money, the Hunt Institute coordinated more than a dozen organizations — many of them also Gates grantees — including the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, National Council of La Raza, the Council of Chief State School Officers, National Governors Association, Achieve and the two national teachers unions.

The Hunt Institute held weekly conference calls between the players that were directed by Stefanie Sanford, who was in charge of policy and advocacy at the Gates Foundation. They talked about which states needed shoring up, the best person to respond to questions or criticisms and who needed to travel to which state capital to testify, according to those familiar with the conversations.

The Hunt Institute spent \$437,000 to hire GMMB, a strategic communications firm owned by Jim Margolis, a

top Democratic strategist and veteran of both of Obama's presidential campaigns. GMMB conducted polling around standards, developed fact sheets, identified language that would be effective in winning support and prepared talking points, among other efforts.

The groups organized by Hunt developed a "[messaging tool kit](#)" that included sample letters to the editor, op-ed pieces that could be tailored to individuals depending on whether they were teachers, parents, business executives or civil-rights leaders.

Later in the process, Gates and other foundations would pay for mock legislative hearings for classroom teachers, training educators on how to respond to questions from lawmakers.

The speed of adoption by the states was staggering by normal standards. A process that typically can take five years was collapsed into a matter of months.

"You had dozens of states adopting before the standards even existed, with little or no discussion, coverage or controversy," said Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute, which has received \$4 million from the Gates Foundation since 2007 to study education policy, including the Common Core. "People weren't paying attention. We were in the middle of an economic meltdown and the health-care fight, and states saw a chance to have a crack at a couple of million bucks if they made some promises."

The decision by the Gates Foundation to simultaneously pay for the standards and their promotion is a departure from the way philanthropies typically operate, said Sarah Reckhow, an expert in philanthropy and education policy at Michigan State University.

"Usually, there's a pilot test — something is tried on a small scale, outside researchers see if it works, and then it's promoted on a broader scale," Reckhow said. "That didn't happen with the Common Core. Instead, they aligned the research with the advocacy. . . . At the end of the day, it's going to be the states and local districts that pay for this."

Working hand in hand

While the Gates Foundation created the burst of momentum behind the Common Core, the Obama administration picked up the cause and helped push states to act quickly.

There was so much cross-pollination between the foundation and the administration, it is difficult to determine the degree to which one may have influenced the other.

Several top players in Obama's Education Department who shaped the [administration's policies](#) came either straight from the Gates Foundation in 2009 or from organizations that received heavy funding from the foundation.

Before becoming education secretary in 2009, Arne Duncan was chief executive of the Chicago Public Schools, which received \$20 million from Gates to break up several large high schools and create smaller versions, a move aimed at stemming the dropout rate.

As secretary, Duncan named as his chief of staff Margot Rogers, a top Gates official he got to know through that grant. He also hired James Shelton, a program officer at the foundation, to serve first as his head of innovation and most recently as the deputy secretary, responsible for a wide array of federal policy decisions.

Duncan and his team leveraged stimulus money to reward states that adopted common standards.

They created Race to the Top, a \$4.3 billion contest for education grants. Under the contest rules, states that adopted high standards stood the best chance of winning. It was a clever way around federal laws that prohibit Washington from interfering in what takes place in classrooms. It was also a tantalizing incentive for cash-strapped states.

Heading the effort for Duncan was Joanne Weiss, previously the chief operating officer of the Gates-backed NewSchools Venture Fund.

As Race to the Top was being drafted, the administration and the Gates-led effort were in close coordination.

An early version highlighted the Common Core standards by name, saying that states that embraced those specific standards would be better positioned to win federal money. That worried Wilhoit, who feared that some states would consider that unwanted — and possibly illegal — interference from Washington. He took up the matter with Weiss.

“I told her to take it out, that we didn’t want the federal government involvement,” said Wilhoit, who was executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers. “Those kinds of things cause people to be real suspicious.”

The words “Common Core” were deleted.

The administration said states could develop their own “college and career ready” standards, as long as their public universities verified that those standards would prepare high school graduates for college-level work.

Still, most states eyeing Race to the Top money opted for the easiest route and signed onto the Common Core.

The Gates Foundation gave \$2.7 million to help 24 states write their Race to the Top application, which ran an average of 300 pages, with as much as 500 pages for an appendix that included Gates-funded research.

Applications for the first round of Race to the Top were due in January 2010, even though the final draft of the Common Core wasn’t released until six months later. To get around this, the U.S. Department of Education told states they could apply as long as they promised they would officially adopt standards by August.

On the defensive

Now six years into his quest, Gates finds himself in an uncomfortable place — countering critics on the left and right who question whether the Common Core will have any impact or negative effects, whether it represents government intrusion, and whether the new policy will benefit technology firms such as Microsoft.

Gates is disdainful of the rhetoric from opponents. He sees himself as a technocrat trying to foster solutions to a profound social problem — gaping inequalities in U.S. public education — by investing in promising new ideas.

Education lacks research and development, compared with other areas such as medicine and computer science. As a result, there is a paucity of information about methods of instruction that work.

“The guys who search for oil, they spend a lot of money researching new tools,” Gates said. “Medicine — they spend a lot of money finding new tools. Software is a very R and D-oriented industry. The funding, in general, of what works in education . . . is tiny. It’s the lowest in this field than any field of human endeavor. Yet you could argue it should be the highest.”

Gates is devoting some of his fortune to correct that. Since 1999, the Gates Foundation has spent approximately \$3.4 billion on an array of measures to try to improve K-12 public education, with mixed results.

It spent about \$650 million on a program to replace large urban high schools with smaller schools, on the theory that students at risk of dropping out would be more likely to stay in schools where they forged closer bonds with teachers and other students. That led to a modest increase in graduation rates, an outcome that underwhelmed Gates and prompted the foundation to pull the plug.

Gates has said that one of the benefits of common standards would be to open the classroom to digital learning, making it easier for software developers — including Microsoft — to develop new products for the country’s 15,000 school districts.

In February, Microsoft announced that it was joining Pearson, the world’s largest educational publisher, to load Pearson’s Common Core classroom materials on Microsoft’s tablet, the Surface. That product allows Microsoft to compete for school district spending with Apple, whose iPad is the dominant tablet in classrooms.

Gates dismissed any suggestion that he is motivated by self-interest.

“I believe in the Common Core because of its substance and what it will do to improve education,” he said. “And that’s the only reason I believe in the Common Core.”

Bill and Melinda Gates, Obama and Arne Duncan are parents of school-age children, although none of those children attend schools that use the Common Core standards. The Gates and Obama children attend private schools, while Duncan’s children go to public school in Virginia, one of four states that never adopted the Common Core.

Still, Gates said he wants his children to know a “superset” of the Common Core standards — everything in the standards and beyond.

“This is about giving money away,” he said of his support for the standards. “This is philanthropy. This is trying to make sure students have the kind of opportunity I had . . . and it’s almost outrageous to say otherwise, in my view.”

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[Quiz: Can you solve these Common Core math questions?](#)

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