

Inside Philanthropy

Meet the Funders Fighting the Common Core

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As school systems across the country implement the Common Core State Standards, a battle of the funders is shaping up over the new education standards, which have been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia.

In one corner are the advocates of the Common Core, led by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which helped develop the standards and has defended them against efforts by some states to roll them back. In the challengers' corner, a lineup of foundations and philanthropists – many of a politically conservative bent – ready to push back against the Common Core. Many opponents of the Common Core see it as excessive federal involvement in K-12 education, diminishing the power of families, schools, local school boards, and states. Others contend the Common Core is a means for indoctrinating students with a liberal worldview.

Some of the advocacy groups and think-tanks working against the Common Core keep information about their funders close to the vest. One such organization, the Heartland Institute in Chicago, does not release the names of its donors. However, some of the foundations and individuals financing the anti-Common Core movement include the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, a funder of the Heritage Foundation and the Heartland Institute. Bradley, of course, is a key funder of school choice programs, including charter schools and vouchers.

Other funders in the opponents' corner read like a "who's who" of well-heeled conservative philanthropists, including Pittsburgh media magnate Richard Mellon Scaife; Amway founders and Republican activists Dick and Betsy DeVos, and billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch. A spokeswoman for the Charles Koch Foundation told Politico that the foundation has made no grants aimed specifically at rolling back the Common Core. However, Politico reported that tax documents indicate that the Kochs have been prominent supporters of many of the organizations engaged in fighting the standards. These organizations include Heritage, the free-market Cato Institute, FreedomWorks, and Americans for Prosperity.

Some lesser-prominent funders are making their presence known in the battle over the Common Core. One such person is Sean Fieler, president of the Equinox Partners hedge fund who also funds and chairs an organization known as the American Principles Project, another group engaged in anti-Common Core advocacy. Fieler told Politico he has directed his group to spend \$500,000 organizing against the Common Core.

Many of the groups opposing the Common Core portray themselves as grassroots movements, but as Politico and others have reported, these groups are backed by individuals and foundations with extensive experience in lobbying and mobilization.