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Conflict of Interest Arises as Concern in Standards Push

By **Mary Ann Zehr**

A respected literacy-research organization is asking that a process be put in place to make more transparent potential conflicts of interest that writers of the common national academic standards might have, and to address them.

The Literacy Research Association sent a letter Oct. 21 to the groups overseeing the **development of common standards** that, among other points, expresses concern that many of the **authors** are “representatives of multiple commercial entities that stand to profit enormously from selling curricula, instructional materials, assessments, and consultancies as the standards are rolled out.”

Such connections should be “explicitly revealed and addressed,” says the letter from the group, formerly called the National Reading Conference.

While the letter does not cite specific names, a significant number of people selected to write the standards, which are geared initially toward college and career readiness, are representing ACT Inc., and the College Board. The authors’ names and primary affiliations are listed on the project’s materials.

Kathleen A. Hinchman, the president of the Oak Creek, Wis.-based professional association and the author of the letter, said the National Governors Association and the Council of the Chief State School Officers, the two organizations in charge of the common-standards endeavor, should provide a public document that goes further by identifying ties that the writers have to companies or organizations that might benefit financially from products aligned with the standards.

Jody Omear, a spokeswoman for the National Governors Association, said the letter from the Literacy Research Association is among the public feedback the NGA has received to the standards draft. “At this point,” she said, “it’s too early to comment on any of the comments.”

No ‘Reading First’ Repeat

Ms. Hinchman, a literacy professor at Syracuse University, in New York, said her organization wants to ensure that the creation and use of common standards is not plagued with the kinds of conflict-of-interest problems that arose with the federal Reading First program, which was

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funded with \$1 billion per year at its peak.

At least one federal official made a significant financial profit from a reading program that he wrote and promoted while he was an adviser to states about the federal program, according to a 2007 Senate report. Another Reading First contractor and researcher received a large boost in income during the program's tenure when she was also advising states on which assessments and texts to select to meet its requirements, that same report said. ("**Senate Report Cites 'Reading First' Conflicts,**" May 16, 2007.)

Some of those who made money off the venture were affiliated with universities rather than businesses and wrote curriculum materials, developed tests, or consulted.

In the common-standards effort, Ms. Hinchman said a writer might favor one standard over another because it could more easily be turned into an instructional material or an assessment tool that he or she, or those they are connected with, could profit by.

She noted the involvement of representatives of ACT Inc. and the College Board—organizations that potentially stand to make money on tests based on those standards, she said.

The College Board owns both the SAT college-entrance exam and Advanced Placement program, among others. ACT Inc., produces the ACT college-entrance exam, as well as other assessments. Both are nonprofits.

"Much is still to be determined at the federal and state levels about the purposes, character, and shape of the assessments that would be designed to measure the common standards," said Cynthia B. Schmeiser, the president of ACT's education division, in an e-mail. "But one thing is for sure, the common standards have and will be accessible to all, providing no advantages to one testing company over another."

Gerald E. Sroufe, the director of government relations for the American Educational Research Association, said his organization doesn't share the apprehensions of the Literacy Research Association.

The creation of common standards, he said, doesn't lend itself to the kinds of conflict-of-interest issues that emerged with Reading First, the federal government's flagship reading program in the No Child Left Behind Act. "The common standards are so very general that I don't see that they benefit anyone by virtue that they are being adopted," he said. "These are more like objectives, even though they are called standards."

Mr. Sroufe said that it would be hard for the NGA and the CCSSO to select people to write the standards who don't have a lot of overlapping relationships with companies or organizations that might try to profit from those guidelines. "It's hard to find someone who knows something about the field who doesn't have some kind of stake in it," he said.

Plus, he said, "I don't think their involvement in the common standards [process] is because they think they can corner the market."

Neal P. McCluskey, an education analyst at the Cato Institute think tank, said possible

conflicts of interest are difficult to avoid because the education community isn't very big. "Invariably, there are going to be lots of connections," he said.

He suggested that it would be tough to gauge how meaningful it would be to publicize explicit information about the various business connections of standards' writers. "If you want people to say they have a conflict of interest, the only value is if people [then] say, 'We don't have to follow the standards,' " which he contends would undermine the value of creating them in the first place.

Enough Information?

Some observers, though, say the Literacy Research Association has a valid concern.

"It makes a lot of sense to indicate the relationships between people who are designing education policy and their various roles in government and business," said Patricia H. Hinchey, an associate professor of education at Pennsylvania State University.

With the connections spelled out, she explained, someone could say, "You supported X rather than Y, and oddly, X lends itself to a business agenda. Why is that?" Ms. Hinchey is also a research fellow with the Education and Public Interest Center at the University of Colorado.

Kylene Beers, the president of the National Council of Teachers of English, said she doesn't believe that the connections of standards' writers need to be spelled out further than they are now. Already, Ms. Beers said, anyone can see that most of the writers are representing ACT Inc., of Iowa City, Iowa; the New York City-based College Board; or Achieve, a Washington group launched by governors and business leaders. That, she said, is sufficient information about their affiliations.

But, Ms. Beers added, the Literacy Research Association has a valid concern in saying that possible conflicts of interest need to be addressed. She said the same people who are members of the working groups to write standards should not participate in writing tests based on those standards.

"If you want to wear one hat, you may not be able to wear both hats," she said. "Creating standards that help you sell a product is not in the best interest of our students."

But Roy Romer, a senior adviser to the president of the College Board and a former Colorado governor and Los Angeles schools superintendent, said he can't see any problem with having the same individuals who write standards also write tests based on those standards.

The standards for college and workplace readiness that have been drafted for mathematics and English/language arts, he said, are too general to be translated into, "I favor this kind of task," or something that would produce a specific example for a test-writer.

"I don't see any conflict of interest," Mr. Romer said. "The standards are not something we dictated or had a carbon copy of. We threw our ideas on the table with a whole lot of people."