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The Organization Named Achieve: Cradle of Common Core Cronyism

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Achieve is corporate America's direct connection to national education policy. Mainstream business leaders seem to trust it, and their foundations give it money. Achieve lists all of the following as contributors:[1]

> Arconic Foundation; AT&T Foundation; The Battelle Foundation; Bayer USA Foundation; Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; The Boeing Company; Carnegie Corporation of New York; Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation; Chevron; The Cisco Foundation; DuPont; ExxonMobil; The GE Foundation; GSK; IBM Corporation; Intel Foundation; The Joyce Foundation; The Leona & Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust; Lumina Foundation; Microsoft; PwC Charitable Foundation; The Prudential Foundation; S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation; State Farm Insurance Companies; Travelers Foundation; and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

1(as of August 23, 2018) https://www.achieve.org/contributors

Achieve's budget is large—over $10 million in revenues and expenditures annually. Its declared mission[2]

> Dedicated to supporting standards-based education reform efforts across the states. Achieve helps states raise academic standards and graduation requirements, improve assessments and strengthen accountability.

Whether Achieve actually achieves its mission is open to debate. Over two decades, it has grown substantially and spun off several other organizations that extend its reach. Has Achieve used its resources wisely? Is it now what it was meant to be twenty years ago when 86 governors and corporate CEOs created it? That is the subject of this report.

This report lifts most of its facts from Achieve Inc. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) filings[3] and the Achieve website (https://www.achieve.org/). Other sources are referenced as appropriate.

Some History

Achieve's origin story involves Summits—four or, perhaps, five of them. It was birthed at the 1996 "National Education Summit" of US state governors and corporate heads, where

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2Achieve Inc. (2015). Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax, p. 2.

3Achieve Inc. (2000–2015). Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax. Documents obtained through Citizen Audit, https://www.citizenaudit.org/; Guidestar https://www.guidestar.org/Home.aspx; and the National Center for Charitable Statistics, http://nccs.urban.org/.
Achieve Form 990s can be found here: 2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2012b 2013 2013b 2013c 2014 2014b 2015 2016

> …the nation's governors and business leaders pledged to work together, state by state, to raise standards and achievement in public schools. The Summit also led to the creation of Achieve to help states raise academic standards, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability.[4]

In attendance from each of the 43 participating states were the sitting governor and a corporate CEO. Washington State, for example, sent Governor Mike Lowry and Kerry Killinger, the CEO of the now-defunct Washington Mutual bank.[5]

IBM's CEO Louis Gerstner, taking the lead for the corporate side, would issue the prophetic call to action[6]

> We could debate ideas for days and weeks. Instead, let's act'. Let's take risks. Let's start to make change happen. There has to be a starting point for change, and here it is.

Other K–12 education Summits hosted by Achieve would be held in 1999, 2001, and 2005.

But, already by 1999 the two-by-two Noah's Ark method of filling the Summit chairs exclusively with governors and corporate CEOs was relaxed. Instead, some states sent their state education superintendents, others

4http://www.achieve.org/Summits

5The CEO of Boeing also attended, as a member of the "corporate leaders" group.

6Achieve. (1996). *A Review of the 1996 National Education Summit*, p. ii. http://www.achieve.org/files/1996NationalEducationSummit.pdf

state board of education members, and still others staff members from the governor's or state superintendent's office. Over time, US education's vested interests increased their attendance substantially.[7]

Registrants for the first, 1995 Summit comprised only the 43 governors and 43 corporate CEOs. Among the 115 registrants at the second, 1999 Summit were: 18 state education superintendents; 10 state executive staff; 4 local education officials; 11 non-CEO business managers; and 18 heads of education associations (e.g., National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Education Association, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development).

A final Summit devoted to K–12 education issues was held in 2005,[8]

> The National Education Summit on High Schools was hosted by Achieve and the National Governors' Association, with 45 governors, CEOs from some of the nation's largest businesses, and leading K–12 and postsecondary education leaders participating. On the Summit's final day, Achieve announced the launch of the American Diploma Project (ADP) Network – a coalition that now includes 35 pioneering states.

Notably, neither Microsoft nor the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation was involved in the Summits at first. A representative from the foundation

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7 Achieve. (1999). *The 1999 National Education Summit*, 1999 Education Summit Overview, pp. 14–16. http://www.achieve.org/publications/1999-national-education-summit-overview

8 Another national education summit would be held in 2007, but it concentrated on higher education issues.

attended the second, 1999 and third, 2001 Summits, as just one among a hundred attendees. At the final, 2005 Summit, however, Bill Gates delivered a keynote address[9] and "The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation also provided support for Summit planning activities and publications."[10]

What is Achieve Now?

Achieve still bills itself as a research and advocacy organization run by state governors and corporate leaders in tandem. In its early years, Achieve's board of directors fit that image well. From 1996 to 2001, six governors and six corporate CEOs sat in the boardroom. The six governors were equally balanced between the two major political parties, and fairly scattered geographically, too (e.g., in 2001, CA, GA, MI, OH, OK, WA). All six business board members were then-current CEOs of major national corporations (e.g., in 2001, Boeing, Intel, IBM, Prudential, State Farm, and Williams.

Time has degraded the heft of Achieve's board membership (see Figure 1). As of 2018, the board comprised fewer representatives from the worlds of business and politics (now four and two, respectively), and more from education and nonprofit institutions. There remained only one sitting governor (one ex-governor has been added).[11] Two former, but no current, corporate CEOs serve. In their place are two lower-level executives (a vice chairman and a vice president) from the same company, Prudential

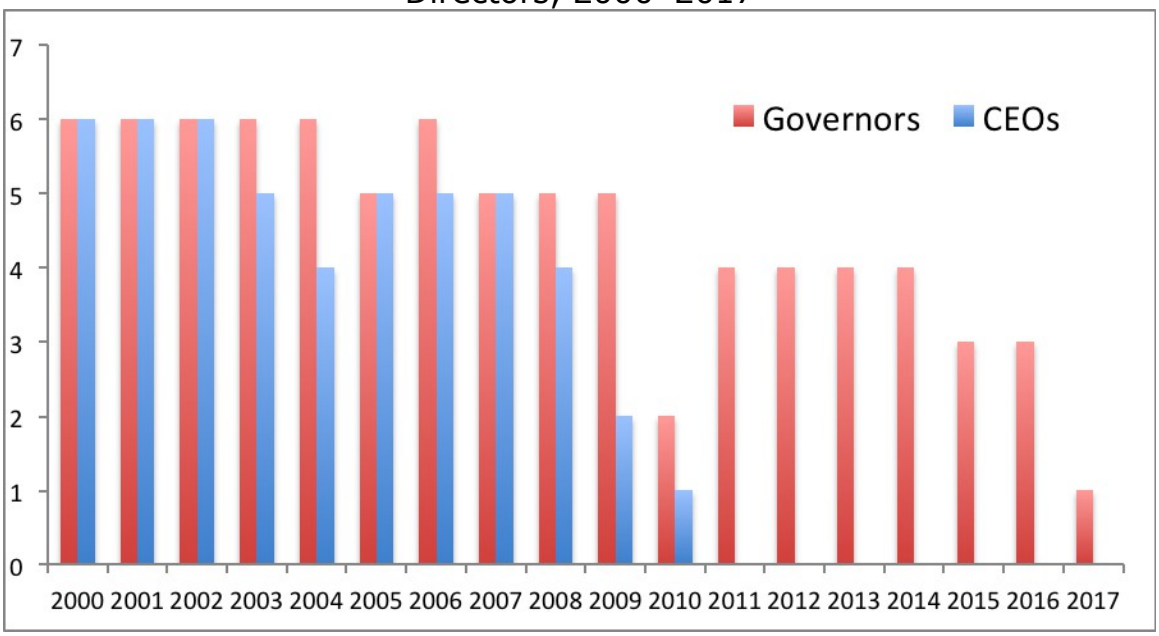
9Achieve. (2005). "Bill Gates at National Education Summit." http://www.achieve.org/videos/bill-gates-national-education-summit

10Achieve. (2005). *National Education Summit on High Schools*, The 2005 National Education Summit, p. 4. http://www.achieve.org/publications/2005-national-education-summit-briefing-book

11Only one governor serves on Achieve's board currently—Bill Haslam of Tennessee. One former governor serves: John R. "Jock" McKernan, Jr., the governor of Maine from 1987 to 1995.

Financial.[12]

Figure 1. Number of Governors and Corporate CEOs on Achieve's Board of Directors, 2000–2017



Rounding out the current, smaller board are a physics professor, the president of a Hispanic advocacy group, UnidosUS, and the CEO of Empower Schools, a charter school chain.

At the beginning, Achieve was a fairly neutral, general advocate for higher academic standards. It has since become a full time advocate for the very specific Common Core Initiative. Over the years, as pro-Common Core governors and corporate leaders serving on the Achieve board moved on to other endeavors, replacements apparently could not be found.

Furthermore, the quantity of resources expended in Achieve's early days

12 https://www.achieve.org/our-board-directors

pales in comparison with the amount spent in the more recent years of Common Core focus (see Table 1). Achieve's first five major projects, from Benchmarking Standards through the American Diploma Project account for just 15% of Achieve's 21st century expenditures.

Table 1. Achieve expenditures by program, in chronological order by program introduction, 2000–2015

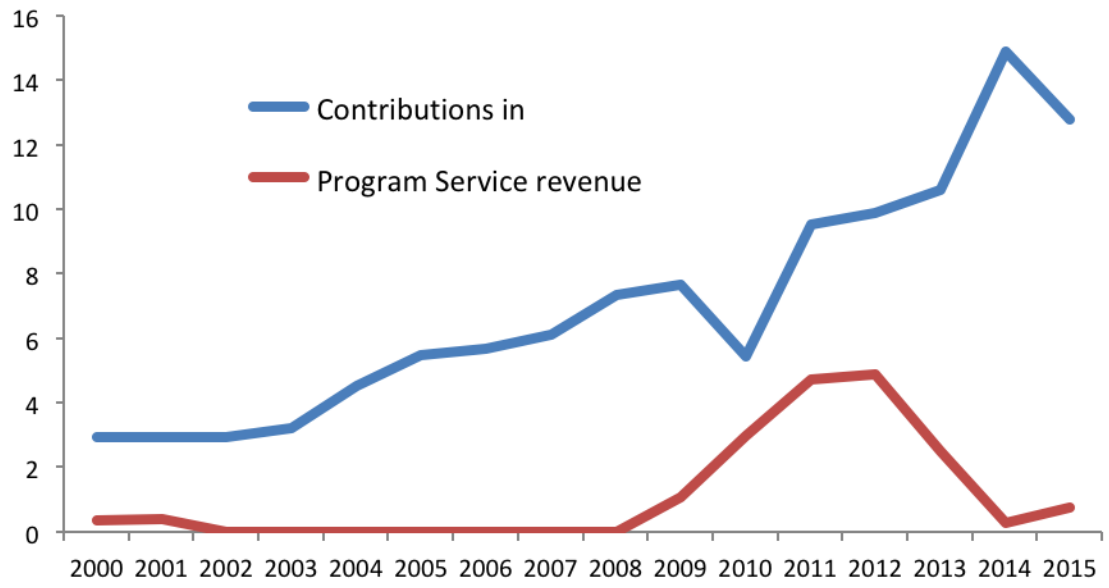
Program	Fund Amount	%
Benchmarking standards	$4,132,691	3.9%
Math Achievement Partnership	$3,028,752	2.9%
Standards database and website	$1,309,170	1.2%
Public Leadership	$4,207,523	4.0%
American Diploma Project	$2,930,210	2.8%
Advocacy	$4,113,703	3.9%
State Content and Policy	$17,197,095	16.2%
College and Career Ready Initiatives	$28,059,923	26.5%
PARCC	$15,845,490	14.9%
Next Generation Science Standards	$16,435,658	15.5%
Business Center for College and Career Ready America	$1,291,773	1.2%
Strategic Communication and Outreach	$7,449,089	7.0%
TOTAL	$106,001,077	100.00 %

The much larger expenditures since—the remaining 85%—have accrued to the Common Core Initiative. As with other once-independent education nonprofits, Common Core advocacy has consumed Achieve and completely transformed it.[13]

13Malkin, M. (April 4, 2014). "Yes, Common Core has lobbyists," *National Review*. http://www.nationalreview.com/article/375035/yes-common-core-has-lobbyists-michelle-malkin

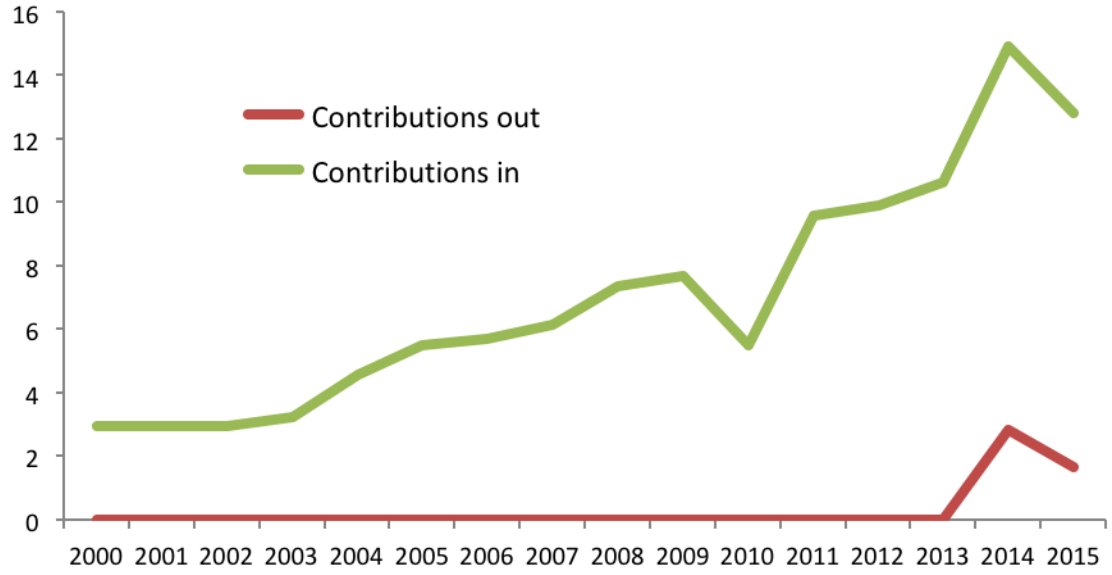
Achieve has always been primarily a consumer and user of funds. Efforts at generating its own sources of income—program service revenue—have been few and short-lived (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Achieve's revenue from contributions and program service revenue in $millions, 2000–2015.



Until 2013, Achieve absorbed all donations for its own work, with no significant investment savings and no grant giving. Since then, however, Achieve has awarded some grants (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Achieve: Contributions coming in and going out in $millions, 2000–2015



Where have these Achieve grants gone? Table 2 summarizes Achieve's grant funding as Achieve categorizes it.

Table 2. Achieve grant funding by program function, 2014–2015

Purpose	Funding amount
"Support state coalitions in promoting college and career ready standards."	$3,947,000
"Assist districts in determining effectiveness of standardized test"	$160,500
"Support state common core standards"	$157,000
"Subgrant award for High Quality Assessment Program"	$40,000
"Coalition Support Network"	$150,000

In other words, all of Achieve's grants have paid for Common Core promotion. About 30% of the grants went to other Common Core sympathetic nonprofit groups: Thomas B. Fordham Institute; Partnership for Learning; Education Trust; Hunt Institute; Council of Chief State School Officers; Alliance for Excellent Education; and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. The other 70% went to state and local groups promoting Common Core.[14]

Ironically, in its annual IRS filings, Achieve consistently claims zero expenditures for "lobbying" and "advertising and promotion." Yet, those two labels would validly describe its funding activity. [15]

We must do something!

Rhetoric from the 1995–2005 National Education Summits overflowed with we-must-act exhortations, such as:

> There can be no turning back ...The stakes for our young people, and for the nation's future, are too high.
>
> — 2001 National Education Summit, Statement of Principles

> The time for analysis and evaluation has passed. We have to act, and act decisively, to save our schools.

14State groups included Foundation for a Better Louisiana, Tennessee State Collaborative, North Carolina Chamber of Commerce, Expect More Arizona, Reaching Higher New Hampshire, Advance Illinois, New Jersey PTA, Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, and the Colorado Department of Education. Local groups included school districts in: Hartford, CT; Columbus, OH; Knox County, TN; Bensenville, Urbana, Galesburg, Unity Point, and West Aurora, IL; Schenectady and East Moriches, NY; and Riverside, White River, and North Thurston, WA.

15See "Part IX. Statement of Functional Expenses" in Form 990.

—Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., 1999 National Education Summit

Haste was celebrated; waste may have been overlooked. The governors and corporate CEOs were not education experts, so whom they turned to for advice would determine Summit outcomes.

And, they built a Rube Goldberg machine.[16] The Common Core Initiative never made much sense, and never could have worked as intended. Consider some of the main points in the Common Core sales pitch:[17]

- It was said that we needed to compare student achievement across states, yet the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) had been doing that since the 1990s.

- It was said that we needed tests that would predict college readiness, yet the ACT and SAT already did that.[18]

- It was said that we needed tests aligned to high school curricula, yet most states had already developed such tests.

- It was said that we needed to hold all children in all states to the same standards on the same scale, which assumes that the leaders

16 https://wonderopolis.org/wonder/what-is-a-rube-goldberg-machine

17 Stotsky, S. (March 27, 2014). "Debunking Common Core Myths," Pioneer Institute. http://pioneerinstitute.org/featured/debunking-myths-and-claims-about-common-core/

18 Phelps, R. P. (2016, May 21). 'One size fits all' national tests not deeper or more rigorous. *Education News*. http://www.educationnews.org/education-policy-and-politics/one-size-fits-all-national-tests-not-deeper-or-more-rigorous/

of the traditionally poorest performing states would be fine with over 90 of their student populations declared failures while similar proportions of students in Minnesota and Massachusetts were declared advanced.[19]

- The assessment consortia tests, PARCC and SBAC, were promoted as valid, reliable, and better than the tests they were meant to replace without genuine evidence. Indeed, the two tests still do not meet the minimal standards for test construction as specified in the industry *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*.[20]

The Common Core Initiative did make sense from one perspective: that of the progressive/constructivist advocates who had failed at transforming US curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the 1990s (with the failure of the New Standards Project).[21] With Common Core, their several-state failure of old could now be imposed on the nation as a whole. Common Core was a Trojan horse sneaking fuzzy pedagogy into our schools under the cover of other rationales.[22]

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19 For more on this issue, see Phelps, R.P. (November 2015). "Setting Academic Performance Standards: MCAS vs. PARCC." *Policy Brief*. Boston: Pioneer Institute. http://pioneerinstitute.org/featured/study-poor-performance-of-other-states-in-parcc-consortium-would-translate-to-lower-standards-for-mass/

20 Phelps, R.P. (2015, November 11). *Fordham report predictable, conflicted*. Boston: Pioneer Institute. http://pioneerinstitute.org/blog/fordham-report-predictable-conflicted/

21 Hoff, D.J. (August 8, 2001). "'New Standards' Leaves Legacy Of Unmet Goals," *Education Week*. http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2001/08/08/43standards.h20.html

22 Despite all the adjectives and adverbs implying newness to PARCC and SBAC as "Next Generation Assessment", it has all been tried before and failed miserably. Indeed, many of the same persons involved in past fiascos are pushing the current one. The allegedly "higher-order", more "authentic", performance-based tests administered in Maryland (MSPAP), California (CLAS), and Kentucky (KIRIS) in the 1990s failed because of unreliable scores; volatile test score trends; secrecy of items and forms; an

How were the forthright intentions of the governors and corporate CEOs high jacked to serve the goals of education's vested interests? It might be because the governors and CEOs were sincere but naïve, and the vested interests insincere but clever. Vested interests adopted the governors' and CEOs' rhetoric, but steered programs in their preferred direction.

What goes around, comes around

Achieve may have originated as a noble effort to get governors and corporate CEOs more involved in education. But, those two groups have many other priorities to distract them. They have only a limited amount of time to spend getting to know a single issue.

Judging from the paltry few "resources" listed and summarized in the

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absence of individual scores in some cases; individuals being judged on group work in some cases; large expenditures of time; inconsistent (and some improper) test preparation procedures from school to school; inconsistent grading on open-ended response test items; long delays between administration and release of scores; little feedback for students; and no substantial evidence after several years that education had improved. As one should expect, instruction had changed as test proponents desired, but without empirical gains or perceived improvement in student achievement. Parents, politicians, and measurement professionals alike overwhelmingly rejected these dysfunctional tests.
See, for example, **For California**: Michael W. Kirst & Christopher Mazzeo, (1997, December). The Rise, Fall, and Rise of State Assessment in California: 1993-96, *Phi Delta Kappan*, 78(4) Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives, One Hundred Fifth Congress, Second Session, (1998, January 21). National Testing: Hearing, Granada Hills, CA. Serial No. 105-74; Representative Steven Baldwin, (1997, October). Comparing assessments and tests. *Education Reporter*, 141. See also Klein, David. (2003). "A Brief History Of American K-12 Mathematics Education In the 20th Century", In James M. Royer, (Ed.), *Mathematical Cognition*, (pp. 175–226). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing. **For Kentucky**: ACT. (1993). "A study of core course-taking patterns. ACT-tested graduates of 1991-1993 and an investigation of the relationship between Kentucky's performance-based assessment results and ACT-tested Kentucky graduates of 1992". Iowa City, IA: Author; Richard Innes. (2003). Education research from a parent's point of view. Louisville, KY: Author. http://www.eddatafrominnes.com/index.html; KERA Update. (1999, January). Misinformed, misled, flawed: The legacy of KIRIS, Kentucky's first experiment. **For Maryland**: P. H. Hamp, & C. B. Summers. (2002, Fall). "Education." In P. H. Hamp & C. B. Summers (Eds.), A guide to the issues 2002–2003. Maryland Public Policy Institute, Rockville, MD. http://www.mdpolicy.org/docLib/20051030Education.pdf; Montgomery County Public Schools. (2002, Feb. 11). "Joint Teachers/Principals Letter Questions MSPAP", Public Announcement, Rockville, MD. http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/press/index.aspx?pagetype=showrelease&id=644; HumRRO. (1998). Linking teacher practice with statewide assessment of education. Alexandria, VA: Author. http://www.humrro.org/corpsite/page/linking-teacher-practice-statewide-assessment-education

briefing books and published proceedings for the Summits, governors, corporate CEOs, and other interested policymakers were exposed only to the most superficial sources of information on education policy, what the most casual researcher might find on the first page of internet search results.[23] Not meta-analyses or peer-reviewed scholarly systemic reviews of the literature, indeed scarcely any scholarly journal articles at all. Rather, the surface scratch of information common to issue briefs from professional education associations, advocacy groups, and the most highly promotional think tanks.[24]

The 1996 Summit summary included a brief section "Resources: Education Standards and Technology", which listed mostly the standard, incumbent groups, such as the Education Commission of the States, Council of Chief State School Officers, and National Governors Association. [25] Prophetically, the only organization among the 11 "Resources" that specialized in curriculum and test development was the New Standards Project, the ill-

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23A sampling of the citations and references in Achieve's own reports reveals much the same. Celebrity researchers and well-funded advocacy groups overwhelmingly dominate Achieve's information sources.

24Achieve. (1996). *A Review of the 1996 National Education Summit*, pp. 20–21. http://www.achieve.org/files/1996NationalEducationSummit.pdf
Achieve. (1999). *The 1999 National Education Summit*, 1999 Education Summit Briefing Book, pp. 63–98.
http://www.achieve.org/publications/1999-summit-briefing-book
Achieve. (2001). *The 2001 National Education Summit*, 2001 Education Summit Briefing Book, pp. 53–64.
http://www.achieve.org/publications/2001-national-education-summit-briefing-book
Achieve. (2005). An Action Agenda for Improving America's High Schools, p. 22.
http://www.achieve.org/publications/2005-summit-action-agenda
Achieve. (2005). *National Education Summit on High Schools*, The 2005 National Education Summit, p. 19.
http://www.achieve.org/publications/2005-national-education-summit-briefing-book

25Achieve. (1996). *A Review of the 1996 National Education Summit*, p. 21.
http://www.achieve.org/files/1996NationalEducationSummit.pdf

fated 1990s forerunner of the Common Core Initiative.[26]

Among the resources referenced, one finds mostly texts from celebrity researchers and vested interest advocacy groups—the same people who had been in charge of education policy for years, arguably the same people who had created the perceived crisis. These lists of "resource participants" can be found in 1996,[27] 1999[28] and 2001[29] Summit documents.

At the 2001 National Education Summit, the chairman of the Achieve board of trustees, IBM's Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., declared in reference to the alleged education crisis in the United States[30]

> This cannot be solved alone by the schools. This is a national problem. It demands that the entire nation participate in its solution."

In fact, scarcely any of the nation's population participated in the solution.

There was much talk of an education crisis and a "damn the torpedoes, full

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26The Common Core Initiative would resurface the principals from the defunct New Standards Project, including Marc Tucker, Lauren Resnick, Phil Daro, and the crew from the Center for Research on Education Standards and Student Testing (CRESST).

27Achieve. (1996). *A Review of the 1996 National Education Summit*, pp. 20–21. http://www.achieve.org/files/1996NationalEducationSummit.pdf

28Achieve. (1999). *The 1999 National Education Summit*, 1999 Education Summit Overview, p. 16. http://www.achieve.org/publications/1999-national-education-summit-overview

29Achieve. (2001). *The 2001 National Education Summit*, 2001 Education Summit Overview, p. 19. http://www.achieve.org/publications/2001-national-education-summit-overview

30Achieve. (2001). *The 2001 National Education Summit*, 2001 Education Summit Overview, p. 3. http://www.achieve.org/publications/2001-national-education-summit-overview

steam ahead" attitude in the early days—the mid-90s to mid-00s. Ten years later, it would seem the vested interests were in full control of the movement originally meant to sidestep them.

Moreover, what began as an effort to involve two influential groups with little vested interest in the education status quo would end up with those two groups almost completely absent from organization management (but still, apparently, active in funding).

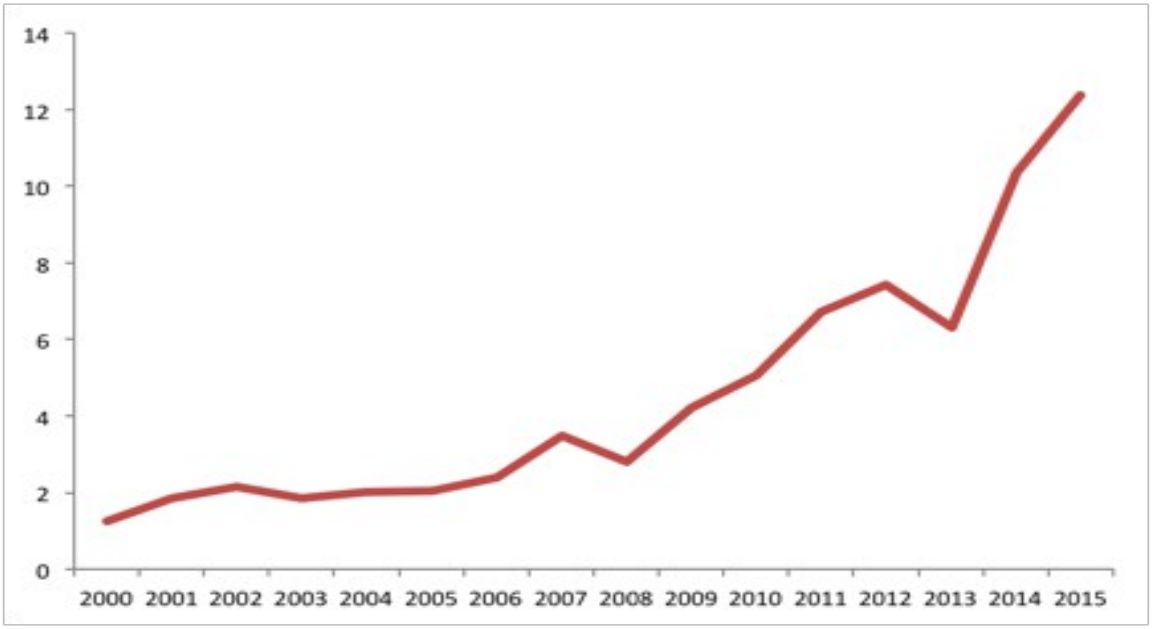
In the Money: Where are they now?

After F. Scott Fitzgerald asserted that the rich were different than most of us, Ernest Hemingway is reported to have responded, "Yes, they have more money." Likewise, the "nonprofit, charitable" organizations primarily responsible for managing the Common Core Initiative bear little resemblance to your hometown's soup kitchen.

Achieve's growth has not been steady but, rather, exponential. Figure 4 combines the total employee compensation figures for Achieve and its spinoff, PARCC, for the years 2000 to 2015.[31] From just a handful of employees in the late 1990s, Achieve and PARCC combined directly employed 118 by 2015, as well as a large number of consultants and contractor staff.

31Figures do not include contractual payments to consultants. Note also that PARCC Inc.'s fiscal year matched the calendar year, whereas Achieve's fiscal year pushed six months ahead. For example, Achieve's 2015 fiscal year spanned the period July 1, 2015 to June 30, 2016.

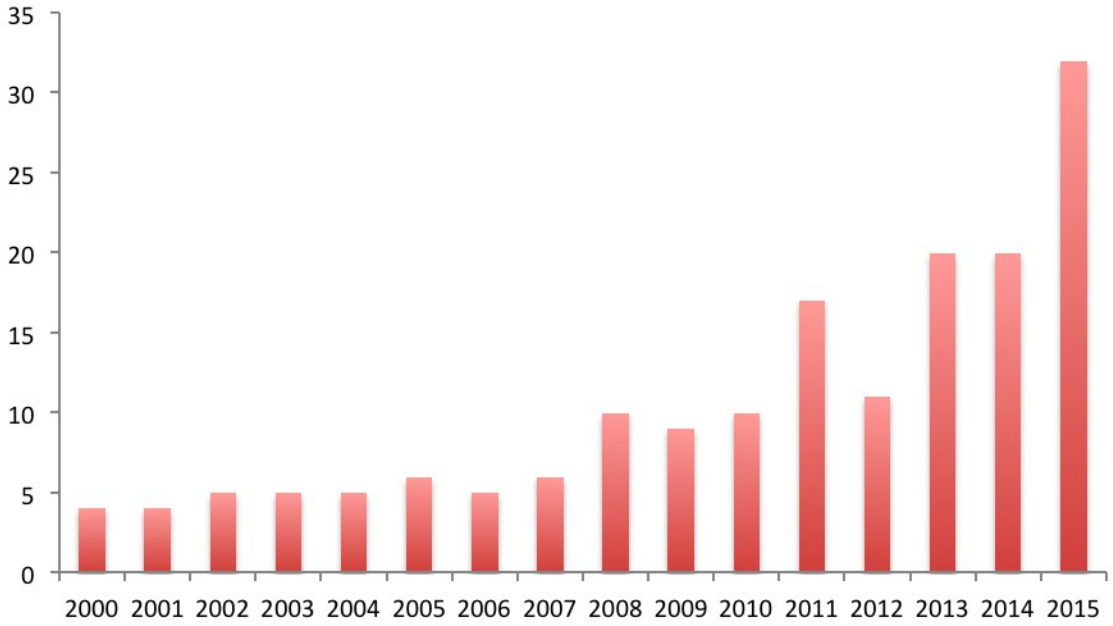
Figure 4. Achieve and PARCC total employee compensation in $millions, 2000–2015



The principals at the center of things managed nicely in capturing their share of the Common Core Initiative windfall. Figure 5 traces the growth in the number of Achieve and PARCC employees earning in excess of $100,000 annually in total compensation.[32]

32Again, contract payments to consultants are not included; some contractors, most prominently Jennifer Vranek, Sue Pimentel, and Sheila Byrd collected over $100,000 as consultants over several years.

Figure 5. Number of Achieve and PARCC employees paid more than $100 thousand per year, 2000–2015



Common Core promoters tout its alleged broad origins among educators and the general populace. In truth, just a few small, but interconnected, groups hatched the CCI.[33] In the past decade, these few have spawned hundreds more that continue to push it. To the untrained eye, any one of these groups might appear to have independent origins and missions. But, study the funding sources and the staff resumes of a few of the many Common Core proselytizers and one will start to notice a strong network pattern.[34]

33Robbins, J. (January 10, 2015). "Jane Robbins: Common Core Proponents Mislead," SayAnythingBlog.com. https://www.sayanythingblog.com/entry/jane-robbins-common-core-proponents-mislead/; Sandra Stotsky, R. James Milgram, Ze'ev Wurman, Williamson M. Evers, Robert S. Eitel, Kent D. Talbert, Richard P. Phelps, Anthony Esolen, Ralph Ketcham, Mark Bauerlein, Peter Wood. (2015). *Drilling through the Core*. Boston: Pioneer Institute. http://pioneerinstitute.org/drilling-through-the-core/

34This behavior is sometimes called "astroturfing" https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/astroturfing. Stergios, J. (May 1, 2012). 'Self-dealing among education officials." *Rock the Schoolhouse Blog*. http://pioneerinstitute.org/education/self-dealing-among-education-officials/; Kiesecker, C. (November 10, 2016). "Reviewing Achieve Inc.'s National Common Core Standards,"

Bill Gates is wealthier than the other owners of Microsoft stock because he was one of the two founders of the firm. He has received a percentage of every profit from day one. Likewise, the "social entrepreneurs" who "got in on the ground floor" of CCI's launch have gained the most from its "success."[35]

Critics contend that Common Core programs and materials are convoluted, counter-intuitive, and difficult to implement.[36] That may be a problem for the millions of educators, parents, and students who must use them. But, it delivers a windfall to those with perceived Common Core expertise; they can charge what the market will bear in consulting fees.[37]

Laura McGiffert Slover took charge of PARCC Inc. when Achieve spun off the Common Core assessment consortium Partnership for Assessment of

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Missouri Education Watchdog blog. http://missourieducationwatchdog.com/reviewing-achieve-inc-s-national-common-core-standards/

35Pullman, J. (January 5, 2015). "Ten Common Core Promoters Laughing All The Way To The Bank," *The Federalist*. http://thefederalist.com/2015/01/05/ten-common-core-promoters-laughing-all-the-way-to-the-bank/

36See, for example, McQuillan, M., Phelps, R. P., & Stotsky, S. (2015, October). *How PARCC's false rigor stunts the growth of all students*. Boston: Pioneer Institute. http://pioneerinstitute.org/news/testing-the-tests-why-mcas-is-better-than-parcc/; Bauerlein, M., & Stotsky, S. (September 2012). *How Common Core's ELA Standards Place College Readiness at Risk*. Boston: Pioneer Institute. http://pioneerinstitute.org/download/how-common-cores-ela-standards-place-college-readiness-at-risk/; Milgram, R.J., & Stotsky, S. (September 2013). *Lowering the Bar: How Common Core Math Fails to Prepare High School Students for STEM.* Boston: Pioneer Institute. http://pioneerinstitute.org/news/lowering-the-bar-how-common-core-math-fails-to-prepare-students-for-stem/; Phelps, R. P., & Milgram, R. J. (2014, September). *The revenge of K–12: Common Core and the new SAT will lower standards in US higher education*. Boston: Pioneer Institute. DOI:10.13140/2.1.1277.0244 http://pioneerinstitute.org/featured/common-core-math-will-reduce-enrollment-in-high-level-high-school-courses/

37Notably, most of Achieve's best-paid consultants live in rather nice locales, such as: Bend, Oregon; Chevy Chase, Maryland; Gleneden Beach, Oregon; Hanover, New Hampshire; Mercer Island, Washington; and Trophy Club, Texas.

Readiness for College and Careers in 2014.[38] Margaret Horn, Jeffrey Nellhaus, and Douglas Sovde from the Achieve staff went with her. PARCC floundered and was soon replaced by a few new organizations, one of which Slover now heads.[39] Her total take in 12 years at the three organizations was over $2 million.

Sue Pimentel, the English Language Arts standards writer, worked at Student Achievement Partners, with David Coleman and Jason Zimba, and at StandardsWork, a small company she co-founded, as well as Achieve. For several years, she collected payments from two of the organizations simultaneously. In 2013, she pocketed six-figure salaries from all three. From these three organizations alone, she amassed a cool $3 million in just nine years.

At least one can find some of Slover's and Pimentel's compensation totals in public documents. Matt Gandal, who left his position as vice-president at Achieve in 2012, formed his own limited liability company (LLC) in 2013. Alissa Peltzman from the Achieve staff joined him. Given the manner in which he has organized his new firm, the account books are closed to the public, so we cannot see what he now pays himself. He was making a quarter-million dollars a year at Achieve. His Education Strategy Group employs twelve.[40]

38In its IRS filing, Achieve declared "Achieve transferred PARCC management to PARCC, Inc. an unrelated entity on June 30, 2014."

39Specifically, CenterPoint Education Solutions http://centerpointeducation.org/; Another organization resulting from PARCC's implosion is New Meridian https://www.newmeridiancorp.org/

40http://edstrategy.org/who-we-are/our-people/

Jennifer Vranek's LLC currently employs 49.[41] According to her Education First Consulting website

> Before starting Education First, Jenn made advocacy grants at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, led Washington's Partnership for Learning, launched the American Diploma Project at Achieve, and researched academic standards at the American Federation of Teachers. Honored as one of Puget Sound Business Journal's 40 Under 40 in 2010, she also volunteers as an advisory board member for Washington's Stand for Children."

Vranek's former employer, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, also headquartered in the Pacific Northwest, may be Education First's best customer (or contributor, as the case may be), providing $4.7 million in revenue in just four years.

Those who stayed on at Achieve remained well paid, too. Michael Cohen, the president, accumulated over $4 million in compensation from 2003 to 2016. In ten years of work, COO Sandra Boyd collected over $2.3 million. Moreover, they have enjoyed a travel budget exceeding $1 million annually.

In other news, former Achieve staffer Stephen Pruitt became the Commonwealth of Kentucky's Commissioner of Education, and former Education First staffer, Paolo DeMaria, became Ohio's Superintendent of Public Instruction.

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41 http://education-first.com/who-we-are/our-people/

Common Core promotion: A runaway train

As noted in Table 2, Achieve has dispensed some of its recent grant funding to the "High Quality Assessment Project (HQAP)," which seems to be headquartered at former Achiever Jennifer Vranek's Education First Consulting.[42] According to Education First, which "directs HQAP's grantmaking and technical assistance,"

> The HQAP network has realized its most critical goal: Participating bellwether states are on track to implement high quality assessments two years in a row. Thanks to the hard work of grantees and dedicated support from the network, HQAP-supported states have beaten back legislative battles aimed at dismantling college- and career-readiness reforms and ramped up efforts of advocates. Equally important is *how* this goal has been achieved. HQAP has guided advocacy organizations to develop a strong point of view about the importance of high-quality assessments, tackle policy obstacles and reach new constituencies – like teachers and parents – with the case for these assessments.

If given the choice between a "high quality" something and a "low quality" something, who wouldn't pick the former? Of course, what appears to be "high quality" lies in the eyes of the beholder. In the eyes (and financial incentives) of Achieve and Education First the PARCC and SBAC assessments are high quality, and state-developed tests are not.

Nicely illustrative of the current state of the foundation funded education reform movement is a HQAP publication from Education First.[43] Relevant

42 http://education-first.com/impact/featured-story/high-quality-assessment-project/

43 O'Hara, Erin. (May 2016). *Choices and Trade-offs: Key Questions for State Policymakers when*

characteristics include:

- Laudatory claims about the PARCC and SBAC tests were made for which there existed no legitimate evidence

- The experts interviewed for the piece were Common Core Initiative insiders paid to promote it: 4 from Matt Gandal's Education Strategy Group; two from Education Counsel; and others from well-paid Common Core contractors, Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), Center for Assessment, and HumRRO.

- The term "high quality" is selectively defined by referring not to industry standards of test quality characteristics but to standards devised specially by the Common Core copyright holding CCSSO to make PARCC and SBAC look good despite their fatal flaws.[44] PARCC and SBAC do not meet the minimum requirements for test quality according to industry standards from legitimate assessment authorities such as the American Psychological Association and the International Test Commission.[45]

Selecting High School Assessments. Education First, High Quality Assessment Project. http://education-first.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Education-First-HQAP-High-School-Assessment-Guide-May-2016.pdf
One finds the same characteristics in Education First's *Measuring More of What Matters Most for Future Student Success*, http://education-first.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Education-First_HQAP_National_What-Matters-Most_Apr2017.pdf

44https://ccsso.org/resource-library/criteria-procuring-and-evaluating-high-quality-assessments; Phelps, R.P. (2016, February 16). *Fordham Institute's pretend research*. Boston: Pioneer Institute. https://pioneerinstitute.org/featured/fordhams-parcc-mcas-report-falls-short/

45E.g., the APA/NCME/AERA *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*; the International Test Commission's (ITC) *Guidelines for Test Use*; *Guidelines on Quality Control in Scoring, Test Analysis, and Reporting of Test Scores*; *Guidelines on the Security of Tests, Examinations, and Other Assessments*; *International Guidelines on Computer-Based and Internet-Delivered Testing*; the European Federation of Psychologists' Association (EFPA) Test Review Model; the Standards of the Joint

It could be that many, if not most, of the supportive foundations do not fully understand what they are funding, and are keying on heuristic cues to decide. Other foundations fund Common Core programs, so they do too.[46]

Pack funding may be killing our democracy. Foundations can have a more concentrated impact when funding as a group.[47] That impact can be good. But, it also can be bad, and is more likely to be bad when decided reflexively.

The Common Core Initiative may now seem to be failing.[48] But, those convinced (or hoping) that the Common Core Initiative runs on its last legs might consider:

- Foundations, lots of them, continue to provide enormous sums to push it.

- Hundreds of organizations, with thousands of staff, remain wholly

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Committee on Testing Practices.

46For more on foundations and education reform, see: Tompkins-Stange, M.E. (2016). *Policy Patrons: Philanthropy, Education Reform, and the Politics of Influence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

47Huang, J., & Seldon, W. (July 7, 2014). *Lessons in Funder Collaboration What the Packard Foundation Has Learned about Working with Other Funders*, The Bridgespan Group. https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/philanthropy/lessons-in-funder-collaboration; Samali, M., Laidler-Kylander, N., Simonin, B., & Zohdy, N. (April 25, 2016). "Why and How Do Nonprofits Work Together?" *Philanthropy News Digest*. http://pndblog.typepad.com/pndblog/2016/04/why-and-how-do-nonprofits-work-together-1.html

48National Conference of State Legislatures. (August 24, 2017). "State Implementation of the Common Core State Standards." http://www.ccrslegislation.info/CCR-State-Policy-Resources/common-core-status-map/

devoted to promoting it.[49]

- The majority of influential opinion leaders in education policy, standards, and assessment either remain on the Common Core payroll or have publicly committed to supporting it.[50]

Conclusion

In its own words[51]

> Achieve is led by governors, business leaders, and influential national leaders committed to improving K-12 educational outcomes for all students.
>
> Created in 1996 by a bipartisan group of governors and business leaders, Achieve is leading the effort to make college and career readiness a priority across the country so that students graduating from high school are academically prepared for postsecondary success.

Over time, however, the presence of governors and corporate CEOs in Achieve's management has diminished—from 12 on the board of directors in

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49 Au, W., & Ferrare, J.J. (2015). *Mapping Corporate Education Reform*. New York: Routledge, p. 10; Schneider, M.K. (2014). *A Chronicle of Echoes: Who's Who in the Implosion of American Public Education*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age.

50 I would argue that Common Core money has even corrupted the profession of psychometrics—the technicians who develop and analyze standardized tests. Some of the country's most influential psychometricians have violated their own "bible" of good practice, the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (http://www.apa.org/science/programs/testing/standards.aspx) by working for and promoting the consequential use of not-yet-validated Common Core tests.

51 http://www.achieve.org/our-board-directors

the period 1996–2000 to just 2 in 2017, an 83% decrease. Meanwhile, influence increased substantially from two other professional groups—the *status quo* vested interests in US education and the "shadow bureaucracy" of foundations and the nonprofit advocacy organizations they fund.[52]

A summary of the 1996 National Education Summit announced Achieve's formation and its mission[53]

> Within one year, an external, independent, non-governmental group will be in place to provide public leadership, a national clearinghouse, national and international benchmarking, technical assistance, and support for public reporting on the annual progress made by each state and by business.

This does not well describe its current manifestation. Achieve and its spinoff groups now lobby full time for the Common Core and its related curricula, instruction, and assessments.

So, is Achieve now what it was intended to be twenty years ago when 86 governors and corporate CEOs created it? …No.

52For more on the organizational networks, see: Pullman, J. (2017). The Education Invasion: How Common Core Fights Parents for Control of American Kids. New York: Encounter Books; Schneider, M.K. (2015). *Common Core dilemma: Who owns our schools?* New York: Teachers College Press.

53The 1996 National Education Summit. (n.d.). *A Review of the 1996 National Education Summit*. http://www.achieve.org/files/1996NationalEducationSummit.pdf