

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and Institute: Influence for Hire

Richard P. Phelps

Introduction

According to a recent publicly available filing with the Internal Revenue Service, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation is “the nation’s leader in advancing educational excellence for every child through quality research, analysis, and commentary, as well as on-the-ground action and advocacy in Ohio.” The mission statement for the legally separate but commonly owned Thomas B. Fordham *Institute* uses exactly the same words. Moreover, the two organizations share the same board of trustees. All of which would lead one to believe that the two entities—foundation and institute—should be considered two parts of the same whole.

But, the perhaps confusing bifurcation of the Fordham organization only begins the proliferation of organizations run by a network of movers and shakers. To the untrained eye, there may appear to be separate

2 Phelps, Fordham for Hire

organizations with different missions, points of view, and staffs. To the more patient observer, the same cast of characters cycles through the offices, web pages, and publications of a legally and financially related network of organizations. And, the Fordham principals can be found at the center of the web, deciding who (and who does not) gets to belong in the education reform establishment.

Fordham's website mission statement reads

"... our primary role—both nationally and in our home state of Ohio—is to frame the debate, occasionally in unconventional ways, and to identify problems that are ignored or glossed over by the mainstream."

Notice it does not read, "foster a debate", "inform the debate", or "promote a debate". The active verb is "frame" or, in some documents, "shape."

"Influence" seems to be a recurring, overarching theme in the work of the Fordham organizations. Which prompts the question: for what purpose? Is the influence used to make the world a better place for all, or just for those wielding the influence? Is the influence a means to an end, or an end in itself?

This report lifts most of its facts from Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and Institute Internal Revenue Service (IRS) filings,¹ the Fordham website, and

¹Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (2002–2015). Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax; Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2002–2015). Form 990-T: Exempt Organization Business Income Tax Return. Documents obtained through Citizen Audit,

Ohio Department of Education databases. Other sources are referenced as appropriate.

Fordham's IRS filings challenge a reviewer, with frequent changes in the person of the filer and the classifications of data elements. Apparently, the filers were challenged, too. In 13 of the 15 tax years from 2001 to 2015, Fordham requested a filing deadline extension.

History and Governance

For better or worse, the story of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (and, since 2001, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute) closely parallels the mid- to later-adult life of one Chester A. "Checker" Finn, Jr.

According to *Philanthropy News Digest*,

Thelma Fordham Pruett established the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in 1959 in honor of her late husband, who was an industrialist and prominent civic leader in Dayton, Ohio. The foundation mainly funded charitable organizations and educational institutions in the Dayton area until Pruett's death in 1995, when it decided to focus on national education reform. At that time, the foundation moved its headquarters to Washington, D.C., and also

<https://www.citizenaudit.org/>; the National Center for Charitable Statistics, <http://nccs.urban.org/>; Conservative Transparency, <http://conservativetransparency.org/donor/thomas-b-fordham-foundation/> Fordham Foundation Form 990s may be found here: [2001a](#) [2001b](#) [2002](#) [2003](#) [2004](#) [2005](#) [2006](#) [2007](#) [2008](#) [2009](#) [2010](#) [2011](#) [2012](#) [2013](#) [2014](#) [2015](#) Fordham Institute Form 990s may be found here: [2002a](#) [2002b](#) [2003](#) [2004](#) [2005](#) [2006](#) [2007](#) [2008](#) [2009](#) [2010](#) [2011](#) [2012](#) [2013](#) [2014](#) [2015](#)

4 Phelps, Fordham for Hire

assumed primary sponsorship of the Educational Excellence Network, an umbrella organization that promotes education reform.²

Until 1995, the Foundation's Board of Trustees consisted of (a perhaps naively trusting) Ms. Pruett and the family lawyers, two members of the Finn family (Checker Finn's father and grandfather). Ms. Pruett ran the foundation on a day-to-day basis from its founding until her death, 36 years later. At that point, according to Checker Finn, "because Thelma gave no clear guidance" regarding how to spend the foundation's money, the foundation board, now comprised entirely of Finns, decided that they "had a free hand."³

One might have assumed that it was the responsibility of the family lawyers to assure that the document was clearly written so that Ms. Pruett would "provide clear guidance" for the disposition of the foundation's assets. Curiosity alone might entice one to further investigate a transfer of funds that seems, on the surface at least, highly suspicious.⁴

Scott Pullins, a writer for an Ohio online publication clearly suspicious of Checker Finn and Fordham's Ohio activities, dug up the original

²*Philanthropy News Digest*. (October 21, 2003). Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Author. <http://philanthropynewsdigest.org/on-the-web/thomas-b.-fordham-foundation>

³See, Owens, D. (2015). *The origins of the Common Core: How the free market became public education policy*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

⁴See also, Pullins, S. (March 5, 2017). "The curious and murky beginnings of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation." *3rd Rail Politics*. <https://www.3rdrailpolitics.com/article/355>

incorporation papers from 1959 for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.⁵

Grandpa Finn and father Finn signed the document, along with Ms. Fordham Pruett. It includes statements such as:

Applying [the funds] exclusively to religious, charitable, scientific, literary, or educational purposes or activities

No part of the net earnings of which inures to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual

No substantial part of the activities of which is carrying on propaganda, or otherwise attempting, to influence legislation

The members of this corporation shall not have any interest in the property or earnings of this corporation in their individual or private capacity, and prior to any dissolution of this corporation, all of its property shall be applied and used and entirely consumed for the purposes hereinbefore provided.

Journalist Pullins argues that, contrary to Checker Finn's claim, Ms. Pruett seems to have provided guidance. Her lawyers, whose legal responsibility was to respect her wishes, may not have. Funds from the Thomas B. Fordham estate, under the supervision of Checker Finn, have been used frequently "to influence legislation". As for the "inures to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual" one might wonder how the charitable Ms. Pruett might regard the current quarter-million dollar compensation

⁵http://www2.sos.state.oh.us/reports/rwservlet?imgc12g&Din=B093_0851

6 Phelps, Fordham for Hire

packages for Checker Finn and current Fordham president Michael Petrilli, and their unusual investments in rather sketchy partnerships in offshore tax havens.

Moreover, according to Pullins,⁶

While this paragraph wasn't very well drafted, remember this was intended to be a small foundation in 1959, the meaning does seem clear. First, the members, which were the trustees, could not profit from the foundation, and second, the funds in the foundation were intended to be all given away and the foundation then dissolved.

Clearly the trustees decided to do neither. Instead, in 1996 and again in 2006 the articles of incorporation were amended.

The 1996 articles of incorporation changes made the foundation into a perpetual organization, broadened its scope of activities, and most importantly, allowed its officers and board to be compensated.⁷

Assuming that, at this point, the Finns have "gotten away with it", the more relevant point now is that Chester A. Finn, Jr., arguably our country's most influential voice in US education reform, came by his influence purely by chance. The Fordham Foundation origin story might just as well involve his

⁶Pullins, S. (March 5, 2017). "The curious and murky beginnings of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation." *3rd Rail Politics*.
<https://www.3rdrailpolitics.com/article/355>

⁷http://www2.sos.state.oh.us/reports/rwservlet?imgc12g&Din=5465_1134

winning the Powerball Lottery or discovering a long-lost chest full of doubloons buried in his back yard.

The happenstance of Finn's personal fortune might have suggested resisting any tendency toward a presumption of superiority in thought and deed, or any grand schemes to remake others' lives against their will. No one elected him. His spending decisions have rarely been subject to any sort of public review. Moreover, unlike most foundation founders, he did nothing whatsoever to earn the funds he now selectively distributes to others. Finally, only rarely does Fordham pay to evaluate the programs upon which it bestows funds. And, on the rare occasions when it does, the evaluators chosen tend to be in-group reliables.

The Buckeye State

In its first decade, 1995–2004, the Finn-controlled Fordham Foundation did what most foundations do—it spent money on “mission-related” activities and distributed funds to others. Fordham's first decade under Finn was largely devoted to publishing on education policy and contributing to national groups and causes, with mixed results. Remember Following the Leaders, the Education Leaders Council, or Edison Learning?

The Foundation also continued Thelma Fordham Pruitt's practice of donating funds to charities that perform unambiguously public services, such as the Red Cross, soup kitchens, and the like, mostly in Ohio and particularly in the Dayton area. But, as time passed, such donations became smaller and more episodic.

8 Phelps, Fordham for Hire

Many thousands more were given over to the cause of charter schooling in Ohio, though not with abundant success.⁸ Of the over twenty charter schools and sponsorship organizations that Fordham funded, only ten schools—to which Fordham had donated about \$750,000—remain open. Eleven other organizations—to which Fordham had donated almost \$3 million—did not survive. Casualties include the Colin Powell Leadership Academy (Dayton),⁹ the Dayton Urban Academy,¹⁰ Cincinnati's East End Community School,¹¹ the Harte Crossroads Public Schools,¹² ISUS Trade and Technology School (Dayton), New Choices Community School, the Omega School of Excellence,

⁸See, for example, Dyer, S. (August 26, 2013). "New state report cards show charter schools underperform," *Innovation Ohio*.

<http://innovationohio.org/2013/08/26/new-state-report-cards-show-charter-schools-underperform/>; Ravitch, D. (September 24, 2013). "The Failure of Charter Schools in Ohio, \$7 Billion Later," *Diane Ravitch's Blog*. <https://dianeravitch.net/2013/09/24/the-failure-of-charter-schools-in-ohio-7-billion-later/>; Russo, A. (February 2005). *A tough nut to crack in Ohio: Charter schooling in the Buckeye State*. Washington: Progressive Policy Institute.

https://archive.org/stream/ERIC_ED491215/ERIC_ED491215_djvu.txt; Pullins, S. (May 2, 2017). "The big lie in Ohio's education policy – Part I: How self appointed experts have gotten rich and powerful while destroying Ohio's schools." *3rd Rail Politics*.

⁹<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Colin-Powell-Leadership-Academy/113279528685611>

¹⁰Associated Press. (April 13, 2002). "Dayton charter school likely history: Lawyer: Urban Academy probably won't reopen.

¹¹*Cincinnati Enquirer*. (June 17, 2010). "Two charter schools face closure" <http://news.cincinnati.com/article/20100617/NEWS0102/6180318/Two-charter-schools-face-closure>

¹²*Columbus Dispatch*. (February 5, 2010). Audit: Charter schools misspent millions / Few records found from closed Harte Crossroads: Ethics probe possible.

the Springfield Academy of Excellence, and the W.E.B. DuBois Academy (Cincinnati).¹³

Meanwhile, \$35,000 of Fordham money went to Philips Exeter Academy, arguably the most prestigious and most amply endowed secondary institution in North America, for the "Finn Family Fund." (Though Fordham money was donated, the donation was attributed to the Finns.) Checker Finn is a 1962 Exeter graduate.¹⁴ Another \$50,000 went to Chaminade Julienne, a private school in Dayton. Fordham Trustee and Secretary Thomas A. Holton, Esq. served on its board. The Fordham organizations appear to have also paid Holton and his firm three-quarters of a million dollars or more directly in legal fees.¹⁵

Other Fordham donations went to the University of Dayton (\$230,000) and Parents Advancing Choice in Education (\$1.2 million); Holton served on their boards, too. Holton, by the way, worked at the same law firm that had employed Checker Finn's father and grandfather, the firm responsible for honoring Thelma Fordham Pruett's wishes. Upon the retirement of another trustee from the Fordham Board, David Ponitz, and his fulltime position as

¹³*Cincinnati Enquirer*. (June 17, 2010). "Two charter schools face closure" <http://news.cincinnati.com/article/20100617/NEWS0102/6180318/Two-charter-schools-face-closure>; WLWT.com. (January 8, 2009). "Former school leaders gets 4-year sentence for theft"; US Federal News Service. (October 24, 2006). "Ongoing special audit of W.E.B. DuBois Academy results in indictment"

¹⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Phillips_Exeter_Academy_alumni

¹⁵http://www.porterwright.com/thomas_holton/

10 Phelps, Fordham for Hire

president of Sinclair Community College, Fordham donated \$25,000 to the Sinclair Community College Foundation.

In the first decade under Finn, Fordham's Ohio charter strategy consisted largely of giving money to others to run things, even while it continued to advocate for charters in the media and its own publications. In the second decade, however, the strategy shifted to assuming some responsibility for running things—putting its money where its mouth was, so to speak.

Fordham has assumed sponsorship of up to a dozen Ohio charter schools over the past several years. Fordham claims over \$6 million in expenses and about \$3 million in income for this work. Mind you, Ohio currently hosts over 360 charter schools; so Fordham's current 11 represents about 3 percent of the state total.¹⁶ Moreover, Fordham is but one of sixty charter sponsorship organizations operating in Ohio, and it is not one of the larger ones.¹⁷

Fordham's nominal assumption of responsibility, however, does not discourage it from inserting itself deeply into Ohio state politics. Reacting to

¹⁶Ohio Department of Education. (July 27, 2017). *Community School Directory*. <http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Community-Schools/Directory-of-Community-Schools-Sponsors-and-Operat/Community-School-Directory.xlsx.aspx>

¹⁷For example, compared to Fordham's responsibility for 11 schools, the Educational Service Center of Lake Erie West oversees 57 charter schools, the University of Toledo 50, Buckeye Community Hope Foundation 46, St. Aloysius Orphanage 42, the Office of School Sponsorship 26, the Educational Resources Consultants of Ohio 23, and the North Central Ohio Educational Service Center 14. See Ohio Department of Education. (July 27, 2017). *Operator List*. <http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Community-Schools/Directory-of-Community-Schools-Sponsors-and-Operat/Operators.xlsx.aspx>

another perceived Fordham intrusion, this time regarding Ohio high school graduation standards, *3rd Rail Politics'* Pullins writes¹⁸

All jokes aside, Fordham owns this graduation standards mess. It was their idea and they convinced the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio General Assembly to go along for the ride.

And it's always been about money. Lots of money. \$8 million or more from the Gates Foundation starting in 2009.¹⁹

And what has all of the money, and whitepapers, and federal grants, and buzzwords like accountability and standards wrought? Worse schools.²⁰

In 2010, *Education Week* ranked Ohio schools as the 5th best in the nation. In 2012 Ohio dropped to number 12. And in 2016, after years of common core and higher standards and race to the top funds, Ohio was ranked 23rd.²¹

The Center for Education Reform shows Ohio dropping from 14th to 24th in a recent survey.²² And the conservative American Legislative

18Pullins, S. (April 13, 2017), "Fordham thinks Ohioans are idiots." *3rd Rail Politics*. <https://www.3rdrailpolitics.com/article/417>

19<https://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/Quick-Links/Grants-Database#q/k=Thomas%20B.%20Fordham>

20<https://3rdrailpolitics.com/article/266>

21<https://3rdrailpolitics.com/article/266>

22<https://www.3rdrailpolitics.com/article/381>

12 Phelps, Fordham for Hire

Exchange Council dropped Ohio to 29th place in the nation in 2015, down from 21st in 2011.²³

By 2017, the Gates Foundation had transferred at least \$12 million directly to Fordham.

In a related article, Pullins' colleague Conner Brown describes closed-door negotiations from which one of Fordham's own former staffers, Paulo DeMaria, was chosen as Ohio's state superintendent.²⁴ He remains there today.²⁵ Notably, DeMaria neglected to mention his Fordham connection in his Ohio Department of Education bio,²⁶ even though (as of July 26, 2017) the Fordham website still listed him as staff.²⁷ The new Ohio Education CEO, however, revealed his long association with the Common Core/Gates Foundation front organization, Education First.²⁸

23<https://3rdrailpolitics.com/article/266>

24Brown, C. (January 27, 2017). "How Fordham and Senator Lehner took over ODE and Ohio's charter schools." *3rd Rail Politics*.
<https://www.3rdrailpolitics.com/article/298>

25Pullins, S. (January 26, 2017). Revealed: DeMaria's Deep Fordham Ties. *3rd Rail Politics*. <https://3rdrailpolitics.com/article/291>

26<http://education.ohio.gov/About/Paolo-DeMaria-Superintendent-of-Public-Instruction>

27<https://edexcellence.net/people/paolo-demaria>

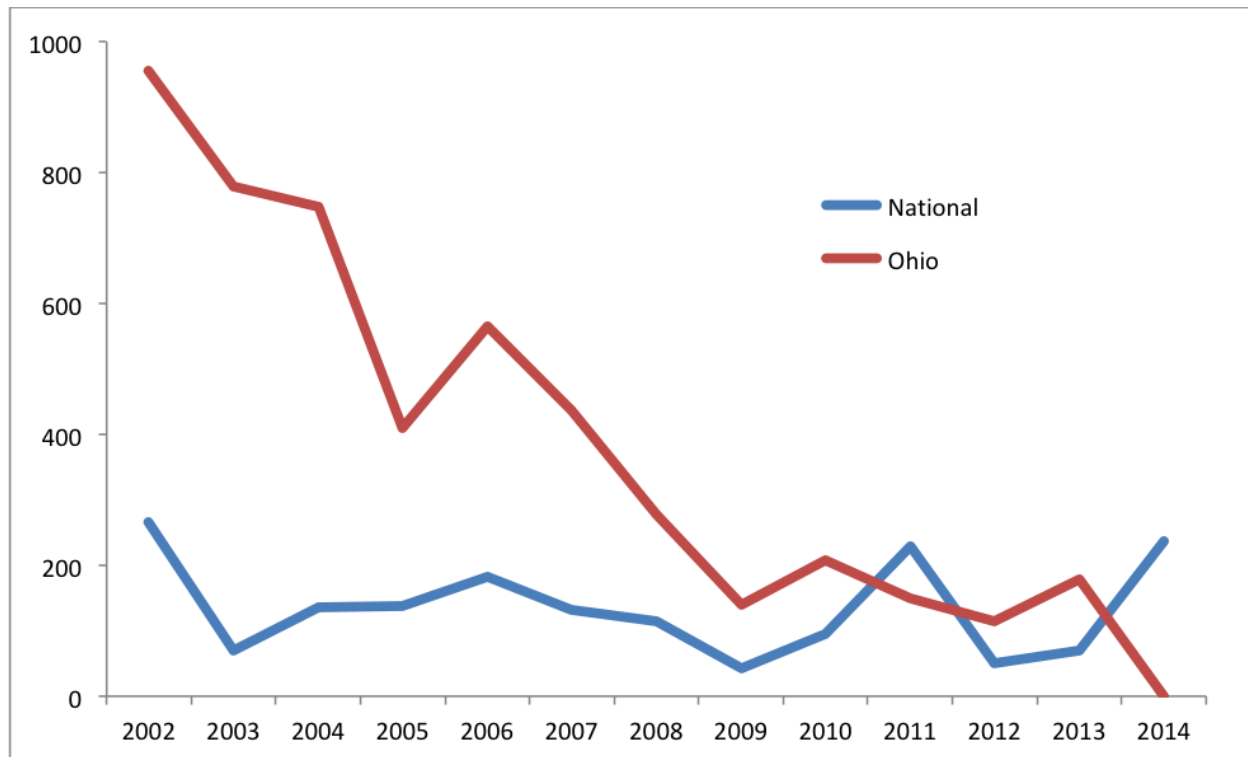
28<http://education-first.com/who-we-are/people/jennifer-vranek/>;
<http://education.ohio.gov/About/Paolo-DeMaria-Superintendent-of-Public-Instruction>

Before being chosen as chief executive officer of Ohio's K-12 education system, DeMaria served for six years as principal consultant for Education First Consulting, guiding policy, implementation and strategy projects for K-12 and higher education clients in several states.

Fordham's political triumph in Ohio, ironically, coincided with a steep decline in its contributions to within-state causes (see Figure 1).

14 Phelps, Fordham for Hire

Figure 1. Fordham Contributions to Ohio or National Organizations in \$thousands, 2002–2014

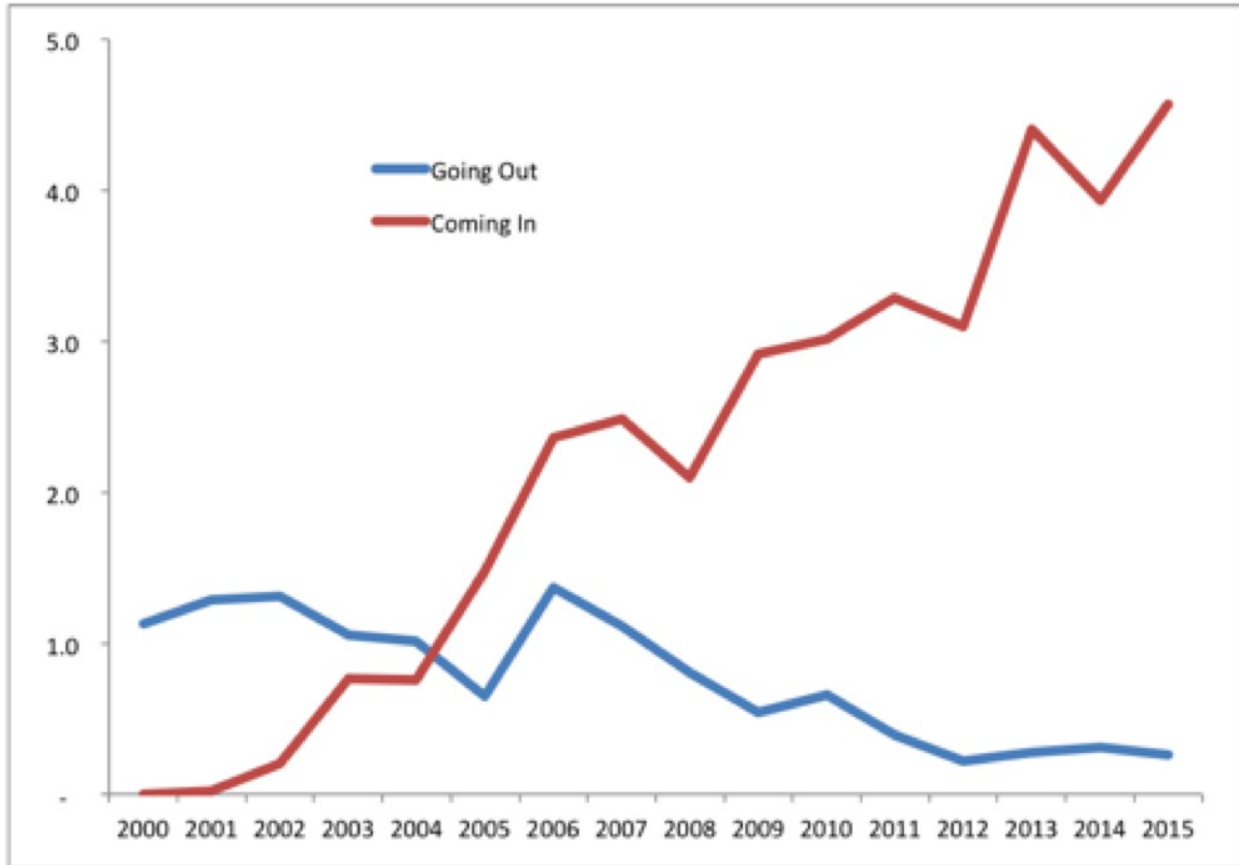


Bill Calls

Parallel to the decline in Ohio giving, Fordham's outgoing contributions generally have declined over time. Over \$1 million was distributed annually through 2004. By 2015, only \$261,200 was given away.

The Fordham organizations seemed to undergo a major change in behavior and focus around 2004–2005, at the start of Checker Finn's second decade at Fordham's helm. While the amount of contributions going out declined, the amount of contributions coming in rose (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and Institute: Contributions and Grants in \$millions, 2000–2015



Fordham’s transformation from primarily donor to primarily grantee was set by 2005 with \$2 million from ...guess who? Prior to 2007, most Fordham funds emanating from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—about \$2.6 million—were directed toward Ohio programs (which may explain the kink upwards around 2006 in Figure 1’s Ohio trend line). From 2008 on, however, virtually all of Gates \$10 million Fordham largesse paid for Common Core activity. Checker Finn, who had strongly opposed President Bill Clinton’s much milder attempt at a national evaluation system several

16 Phelps, Fordham for Hire

years earlier,²⁹ signed on with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation specifically to promote the Common Core.

Once Fordham had tapped the Gates money spigot, other donor funds gushed in. The Fordham organizations accepted \$200,000 in contributions or grants in 2002. By 2015, they were pulling in \$4.7 million, most of it Common-Core related. Common Core sympathetic donors contributing to Fordham from 2006 to 2015 included the Gates, Arnold, Boston, Bradley, Broad, Louis Calder, CityBridge, Cleveland, GE, Hewlett, Joyce, Ewing Marion Kauffman, Koret, Noyce, Overdeck, and John Templeton Foundations, as well as America Achieves, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Brookhill Institute of Mathematics, Carnegie Corporation, Collaborative for Student Success, College Board, Helmsley Trust, KnowledgeWorks, New Venture Fund, and PIE Network.³⁰

In addition, on its website, Fordham lists “partners,” presumably other organizations it works with. Common Core advocates in this group include: 50CAN, American Enterprise Institute, American Federation for Children, Brookings Institution, Center for American Progress, Center for Reinventing Public Education (U. Washington), Core Knowledge, Democrats for Education Reform, Education Cities, Foundation for Excellence in Education, Great! Schools, Hoover Institution, Philanthropy Ohio, Philanthropy Roundtable,

²⁹Finn, C.E., Jr. (September 9, 1997). “Throw These Tests Out of School,” *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB873751189862131000>

³⁰Fordham also receives large donations from some funders with little connection to the Common Core Initiative. Typically, they are school choice and charter school advocates (e.g., the Achelis and Bodman, Randolph, Hertog, Kovner, Nord Family, and Walton Foundations and the Doris and Donald Fisher Fund.)

STAND for Children, and Students First.³¹ That is, virtually all of Fordham's strategic partners press the Common Core cause.

Fordham became a giant Common Core advocacy grant-processing machine.³² The tail now wags the dog.

Most donations to Fordham fund Fordham activities. But, a substantial proportion also passes through to other Common Core advocates and groups.³³

Granted, the Common Core Initiative currently consumes a huge proportion of the independent funds circulating in U.S. education. It may well be that any education reform advocate today who wishes to be safely employed, well paid, and visible in education policy circles must sign on with Common Core. But, that's an excuse, not a virtue.

The Fordham organizations' mission statement tosses out laudatory, hopeful phrases, such as "produce relevant, rigorous policy research and analysis," "informed self governance," "quality research, analysis and commentary," and "advocating sound educational policies."³⁴

31<https://edexcellence.net/about-us/partners.html>

32<https://edexcellence.net/about-us/funding-and-finances.html>

33These include Bellwether Education, Center for American Progress, CONNCAN, Education Trust, GreatSchools.net, LGA Consulting, the Massachusetts Business Alliance, Philanthropy Ohio, Philanthropy Roundtable, PIE Network, Rodel Foundation, Six Consulting, Teach for America, and the Center for Reinventing Public Education (U. Washington). Some distributions were simply labeled by Fordham as "Common Core."

34<https://edexcellence.net/fordham-mission>

On its “Organizational Values” page, one finds³⁵

We strive for excellence in all of our products and activities.... For us, this means a dedication to quality, to rigorous thinking, to compelling, clear and clear-headed writing, and to exceptional creativity.

Yet, Fordham signed on with the Gates Foundation specifically to use its influence to help promote the Common Core—a program that could not then, in 2009, and cannot now produce any evidence to support the claims that justify its existence. Common Core supporters have, for example, asserted as fact: “college and career ready” standards; tests that cannot be “taught to”; international benchmarking; and standards built from the “top down” (i.e., starting with higher education’s needs and back-mapping to the lower grades). The latter two “facts” have already passed their mileposts—they never happened. We are still waiting on some, any, evidence to support the former two. Odds are the Common Core products will do worse on both issues than previously available products.³⁶

35<https://edexcellence.net/fordham-organizational-values>

36See, for example, Stotsky, S. (March 27, 2014). “Debunking Common Core Myths,” *Pioneer Institute Blog*.

<http://pioneerinstitute.org/featured/debunking-myths-and-claims-about-common-core/>; 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->

True to course, Fordham's Common Core publications present rigorous quality only if judged as propaganda pieces.³⁷

Likely, by engaging the Fordham organizations the Gates Foundation hoped to purchase their considerable influence. Critic Mercedes Schneider argues that Fordham's influence was critical in frightening states to sign on to the Initiative in its early days. In an exchange with Diane Ravitch, formerly a Fordham Foundation board member and now a Common Core critic, she cites Fordham's rankings of states' standards as key.

Schneider asked Ravitch what qualifications the Fordham organizations had to judge state academic standards. Ravitch replied³⁸

Fordham has no particular expertise. [But] Much to our surprise and delight, the media ate up the ratings. Whenever we released our grades for the states, there would be big stories in the newspapers in almost every state, and it helped to put [Fordham] on the map.

[enrollment-in-high-level-high-school-courses/](#)

37See, for example, Phelps, R.P. (2016, February 16). *Fordham Institute's pretend research*. Boston: Pioneer Institute.

<http://pioneerinstitute.org/featured/fordham-institutes-pretend-research/>;
Phelps, R.P. (2015, November 11). *Fordham report predictable, conflicted*. Boston: Pioneer Institute. <http://pioneerinstitute.org/blog/fordham-report-predictable-conflicted/>

38 Schneider, M. (2015). *Common Core dilemma: Who owns our schools?* New York: Teachers College Press, p. 59.

20 Phelps, Fordham for Hire

Once Fordham made it plain that states adopting the Common Core standards would be rated more highly than those not adopting, most states jumped on the bandwagon.

Yet, the Common Core Initiative flounders despite the obvious advantage enjoyed by its proponents—the gargantuan quantity of resources devoted to selling it compared to the puny amount available to those pushing back. One would think that the lack of success despite this disparity alone would convince Common Core advocates to cut their losses. But, so long as megabucks keep flowing, the stalemate shall endure.

Meanwhile, what about Fordham’s reputation? As Jamie Gass, Director of the Center for School Reform at the Pioneer Institute framed the issue:

Taking money from the Gates Foundation to both evaluate and promote standards that Gates financed is a conflict of interest; one that at the very least causes an objective observer to apply a higher level of scrutiny – even deep skepticism – to anything Fordham has to say about Common Core and the limits on federal authority.³⁹

³⁹Gass, J. (April 16, 2014). Common Core, the Fordham Institute, and the D.C. Edu-Blob. *Breitbart*. <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2014/04/16/common-core-the-fordham-institute-and-the-d-c-edu-blob/>

There's no doubt that the principals in the Fordham organizations care about influence.⁴⁰ It is an open question however, as to whether they care about reputation, at least outside their intimate circle of allies and donors.

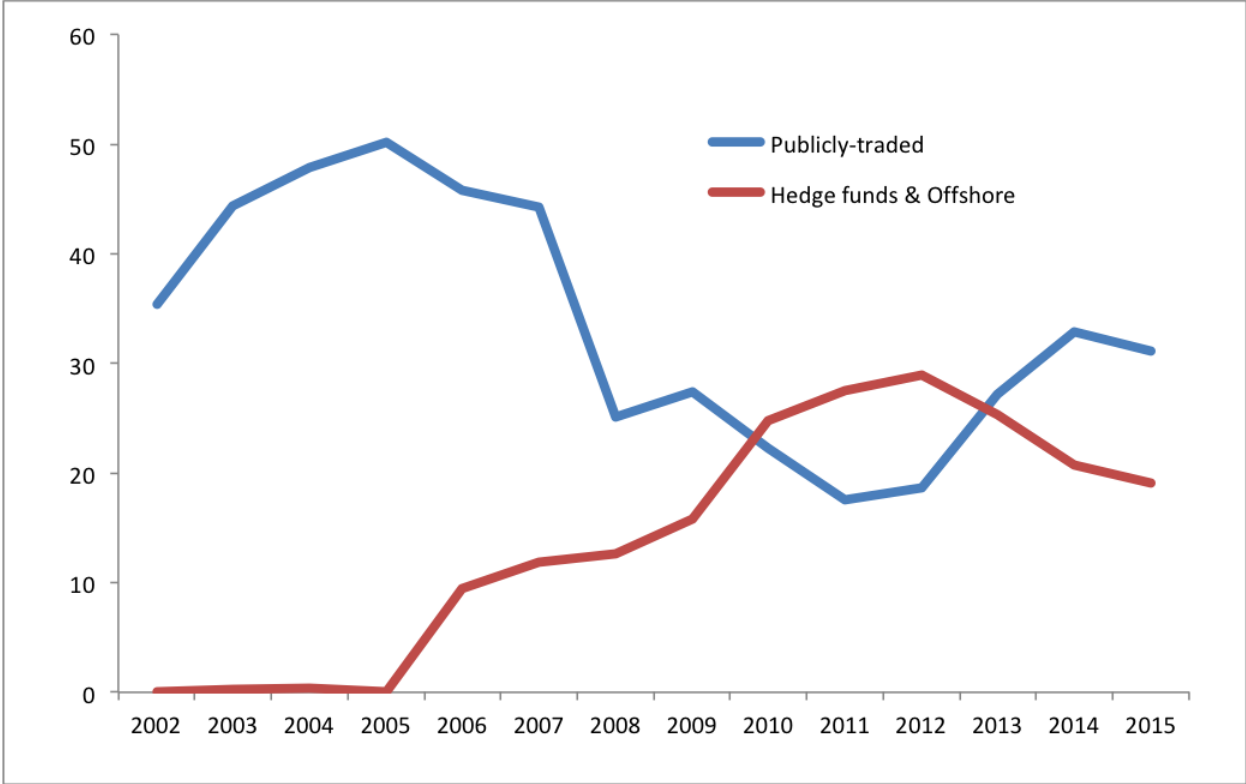
Hedge Funds and Offshore Tax Havens

About the same time that the Thomas B. Fordham organizations pivoted roles from primarily grant giver to primarily grant receiver, they found new places to stash (hide?) cash, in hedge funds and offshore tax havens (see Figure 3).

⁴⁰Myron Lieberman cites an interesting example in *The Educational Morass* (2007, pp. 295–296). The Thomas P. Fordham Foundation financed the Editorial Projects in Education (the parent organization to Education Week) production of a report on the “most influential” persons and organizations in U.S. education policy. Checker Finn served on a panel EPE consulted to judge who was most influential. Checker Finn was ranked among the top ten most influential by the report (Swanson, C.B., & Barlage, J. (2006, December). *Influence: A study of the factors shaping education policy*. Bethesda, MD: EPE Research Center.).

22 Phelps, Fordham for Hire

Figure 3. Thomas B. Fordham Foundation/Institute Investments by Type in \$millions, 2002–2015



Money formerly invested in ordinary US stocks and bonds now went to obscure holding companies such as Common Sense Offshore,⁴¹ Siguler Guff Distressed Opportunities Fund,⁴² OCH ZIFF,⁴³ Newlin Energy Partners,⁴⁴

⁴¹<https://www.cnbc.com/2013/10/10/investors-flee-fund-after-founders-prostitution-bust.html>

⁴²<http://www.sigulerguff.com/investment-strategies>

⁴³<https://dealbreaker.com/2017/08/dan-och-may-have-sold-his-soul-to-the-devil/>

⁴⁴<https://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/snapshot.asp?privcapId=8760902>

Liquid Realty Partners,⁴⁵ Amberbrook,⁴⁶ and Northgate Private Equity Partners.⁴⁷ Tax write-offs are just one incentive for investing in “distressed” firms and overseas shell companies. Your everyday stock and bond mutual fund typically does not offer such exotic financial instruments as the multi-million dollar interest rate swaps in which Fordham has participated for several years.

Hedge funds fees can be expensive, however. Fordham’s move to hedge funds started soon after Michael W. Kelly,⁴⁸ a Wall Street expert in private fund management, joined the Fordham board. Fordham’s annual investment fees escalated from around \$30,000 in the period 2008–2010 to \$328,046 in 2014.

Education Reform Is Us

From the beginning of the Finn-era Fordham Foundation, the beneficiaries receiving the largest proportion of outgoing funds represented steady customers and staunch political allies—organizations that Fordham worked with directly and continuously. In some cases they are spinoffs—entities that Fordham helped create and with which it continues regular working relationships. They include the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), the Philanthropy Roundtable, the now defunct Keys to Improving Dayton

45http://www.crenews.com/general_news/general/scott-landress-co-founder-of-liquid-realty-gets-barred-from-securities-industry.html

46<https://www.palico.com/funds/amberbrook-v/bac31bfb8d334f3c8a42a170c82b41ae>

47<https://www.crunchbase.com/organization/northgate-capital#/entity>

48<https://edexcellence.net/people/michael-w-kelly>

24 Phelps, Fordham for Hire

Schools (KIDS), and the publication *Education Next*, which Fordham personnel help edit and publish and which, in turn, frequently publishes the musings of Fordham staff.

In years of observing Fordham's behavior I haven't noticed much of the "humility, and ... willingness to change our minds—and admit when we are wrong" claimed on its website. More common has been a proclivity to suppress dissent, shun or ridicule those who disagree, and promote their in-group as the only legitimate spokespersons for the "other side" along a wide range of education policy issues.

Checker Finn waxes nostalgic about the early days of Fordham's predecessor, the Education Excellence Network, and Diane Ravitch's key, co-founding role in both.⁴⁹ But, now that she openly disagrees with them on some issues, Fordham President Michael Petrilli insults her as a "kook",⁵⁰ and her long-standing relationship with the Brookings Institution is revoked on an absurd technicality.⁵¹ An *Education Next* essay insults her personally and generally ridicules as an inferior intellect.⁵²

49Finn, C.E. (December 1996). Farewell—And Hello Again. *Network News & Views*. <https://edexcellence.net/about-us/farewell-and-hello-again.html>

50*The Education Gadfly*. (March 29, 2011). "Fordham Dancetitude: Mike Petrilli takes the Fordham Institute in new directions," *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjh9hpJqsrS>

51Ravitch, D. (June 11, 2012). "The day I was terminated." *Diane Ravitch's Blog*. <https://dianeravitch.net/2012/06/11/the-day-i-was-terminated/>

52Greene, Jay P. (Spring 2014). "Historian Ravitch Trades Fact for Fiction: Latest book indifferent to the standards of social science," *Education Next*, 14(2). <https://www.educationnext.org/historian-ravitch-trades-fact-for-fiction/>

Robert Pondiscio is “Senior Fellow and Vice President for External Affairs” at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. His *Education Next* essay, “Lessons on Common Core: Critical books offer more folly than wisdom,” typifies Fordham’s “humble” approach.⁵³ Pondiscio “reviews” six books written in opposition to the Common Core Initiative. Throughout the essay, he liberally portrays himself as a cool, measured, reasonable fellow, with the public —“parents and taxpayers alike who simply want a decent education for their kids”—on his side. The Common Core-critical book authors, meanwhile, are “carping”, “spleen venting,” “fear mongering”, and “conspiratorially minded” “excitable enemies.”

Pondiscio’s essay is short on substance and long on selective and colorful prejudicial quotations, adjectives and adverbs.⁵⁴ He characterizes Mercedes Schneider’s exhaustively researched *Common Core Dilemma*, for example, as “riddled with scare quotes and sarcasm.” Other descriptors employed for Common Core opponents include “bombast”, “overreach”, “dark mutterings”, “hyperbole”, “obsession”, “paranoia”, “folly”, “frets”, “paranoid conspiracy theories”, and “overreach”

Individuals Pondiscio agrees with, however, are “thoughtful”, “serious”, “sober”, and “principled.”

⁵³Pondiscio, R. (January 5, 2017). “Lessons on Common Core: Critical books offer more folly than wisdom,” *Education Next*.
<http://educationnext.org/lessons-on-common-core-critical-books-pondiscio/>

⁵⁴See also, Phelps, R.P. (September 8, 2015). “Common Core’s Language Arts,” *Nonpartisan Education Blog*.
<http://nonpartisaneducation.org/blog1/2015/09/08/common-cores-language-arts/>

“Lessons on Common Core” effortlessly contradicts.⁵⁵ For example, Pondiscio supports the Common Core Standards for the “desperately needed” direction they provide teachers,

“At a time when the nation’s 3.7 million teachers desperately needed help, when ‘What should we teach?’ was at long last being asked in earnest...”

At the same time, he argues that standards really don’t matter much and good teachers ignore them completely,

Far more compelling arguments can be made not about how much Common Core matters, but how little.

To be upset by academic standards is to invest them with a power they neither have nor deserve. In my five years of teaching fifth graders, I never—not even once—reached for English language arts standards when deciding what to teach. ... First things first: What is it you want to teach?

Pondiscio eases up a bit on his own “overheated” rhetoric for one book—the Pioneer Institute’s *Drilling Through the Core*. Perhaps not surprisingly, *Drilling* happens to be the only one among the six books written by authors

⁵⁵See also, Gass, J. (June 4, 2014). “To Be a National Curriculum, or Not to Be a National Curriculum: More Fordham-Finn Flip Flopping,” *Pioneer Institute Blog*.

<http://pioneerinstitute.org/news/to-be-a-national-curriculum-or-not-to-be-a-national-curriculum-more-fordham-finn-flip-flopping/>

one might legitimately characterize as elite—people Pondiscio might suppose he may need to work with sometime in the future—including a few individuals sometimes found inside his education reform tent, such as Stanford’s Williamson Evers.

Early on in his *Education Next* essay, and frequently in other venues, Pondiscio prominently brandishes his classroom teaching experience to establish his *bona fides* as a front-line educator. Moreover, on its website, the Fordham organizations proclaim⁵⁶

... we see much wisdom in “subsidiarity”— the doctrine that important matters ought to be handled by the competent authority that’s closest to the action, which in education usually means parents, teachers, and schools.

But teachers wrote the other five books Pondiscio reviewed, and he ridicules them mercilessly as ignorant rubes lacking the understanding that might qualify them to engage in a debate he believes to be beyond their intellectual reach.

Cronyism, Corruption, and Conflicts of Interest

Also unfortunately typical of Fordham essays on causes it is richly paid to promote: never once does Pondiscio mention his conflict of interest, nor those of Fordham.

⁵⁶<https://edexcellence.net/fordham-organizational-values>

As Joy Pullman, Managing Editor of *The Federalist*, describes the general problem,⁵⁷

Common Core's supporters are typically rich elites using their excess money to manipulate public opinion.

First, we have an obvious conflict of interest problem here. People deserve to know when a prominent official or self-proclaimed "expert" who is testifying before state legislatures or writing op-eds is making money from their persuasive efforts. It means their judgment is not entirely independent, even if they feel it so. Basic ethics requires someone with a financial or personal stake in the outcome of a public decision to recuse himself from participating in that decision. That has not been happening.

Second, it indicates rampant cronyism, which is a form of political and social corruption. We see that Common Core is infested with essentially the same set of people rewarding each other with taxpayer dollars and huge private grants, decades before there can be any proof that all this money laundering produced a genuine public good. Common Core is a giant experiment, remember. Bill Gates says he won't know if his "education stuff" worked for "probably a decade."⁵⁸

⁵⁷Pullman, 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/>

⁵⁸<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/09/27/bill-gates-it-would-be-great-if-our-education-stuff-worked-but/>

Former public officials (or semi-public officials, which is what I label the Common Core coauthors, because while we did not elect them we all must live with their decisions) are amply rewarded for doing what the rich and powerful wanted with sweet compensation packages following their “public service.”

Arguably, the Fordham organizations are the country’s most influential in education reform. Moreover, they have spun (or, purchased, depending on your point of view) a large, elaborate web of institutional and individual partnerships. A “common core” of people moves in, out, and across the groups. People inside the web know each other well, they share friends and enemies, and they owe each other favors. They are less likely to criticize others inside the network and, perhaps, more likely to criticize those outside the network.

Moreover, the network is replicating itself through such training vehicles as Fordham’s Emerging Education Policy Scholars Program.⁵⁹ If the graduates of these programs turn out to be just as censorial and clannish as some of those training them, our country can look forward to more narrow mindedness conceived and hugely expensive white elephants like the Common Core Initiative.

Conclusion

Checker Finn was involved in education policy before a large pot of money fell from the sky into his lap. He worked for Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of Education, for example. But, no honest observer would conclude that Finn

⁵⁹<https://edexcellence.net/about-us/emerging-education-policy-scholars-eeps.html>

30 Phelps, Fordham for Hire

would have the influence he has today without the fat wallet he can use to purchase it. The same goes for Bill and Melinda Gates and other education policy funders.

Many citizens abhor the influence of money on US politicians. But, look at the influence of money in the Common Core era on supposedly independently minded education reformers. Gates and other moneybag holders have shown to us that most education policy wonks can be bought.⁶⁰

That should frighten us all. It may be an obvious point, but it may also bear repeating, as Au and Ferrare put it in regards to Gates in particular,⁶¹

If the Gates and Gates Foundation funded reforms don't work, and there is not much evidence, if any, that they do work, what can the public do about it? What is the mechanism for holding Gates and his foundation accountable for any damage done... The answer is that there is no such mechanism.

Unfortunately, it falls to us unfunded non-elites to save us from the outfall of the profligate. We had better keep at it. Exposing the sophistry of the Fordham Foundation/Institute and friends to the policymakers who still naively trust them needs our continued attention.

⁶⁰I 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*, by working for and promoting the yet-to-be-validated Common Core tests.

⁶¹Au, W., & Ferrare, J.J. (2015). *Mapping Corporate Education Reform*. New York: Routledge, p. 10.