

Philanthropy at Its Best: The General Education Board's Contributions to Education, 1902–1964

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During the period after the United States' Civil War, numerous wealthy, northern philanthropists turned their attention to the plight of Southern African Americans' health care, social services, social equity, and education. As time passed, these philanthropists explored Southern African Americans' well-being with the purpose of helping all poor and disadvantaged peoples. In the early-twentieth century, the General Education Board (GEB) and the Julius Rosenwald Fund, two foundations particularly active toward meeting these ends, frequently worked on similar projects and, from time to time, even funded one another's projects. Their boards of directors sometimes overlapped, and many, if not all the major foundations' directors of the time, knew each other or at least knew of each other. Therefore, it is not surprising their philosophies of giving are, with few exceptions, quite similar. In fact, although Julius Rosenwald had already been a philanthropist for several years when he founded the Julius Rosenwald Fund, he drew his inspiration for the foundation's organization and operation from the General Education Board¹ founded by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. on behalf of his father, John D. Rockefeller, Sr.² During this same time, such foundations as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching existed with similar goals. In this paper, I focus on the General Education Board's influence on education analyzing its strengths and weaknesses and identifying lessons contemporary educators might do well to learn from the GEB's practices, outcomes, and use of political and economic power.

Overview

Founded in 1902, the General Education Board spent its last funds in 1960³ although it did not officially cease its existence until 1964.⁴ During those 58 years, the foundation spent “nearly \$325 million for the promotion of education in the United States.”⁵ John D. Rockefeller, Sr.'s interest in improving African-Americans' education had its roots in his Northern Baptist religious beliefs; in his wife's influence;⁶ in his father-in-law's history of helping enslaved African Americans escape to Canada;⁷ and in his son, John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s influence after having

attended a conference sponsored by Robert C. Ogden, one of Hampton Institute's founders.⁸ This Ogden-sponsored conference had a great impact on Rockefeller the younger who wanted to form a Negro Education Board until Washington and Lee University's President Henry St. George Tucker persuaded him the name would prove divisive. With white schools also widely regarded a disgrace, Tucker explained to Rockefeller: "You must lift up the 'poor White' and the Negro together if you would approach success."⁹ Indeed, the challenges facing the General Education Board were great. In the South at that time, the only education that could be called *real* education was in private, white-only schools that catered to the well-to-do and well-born. Horace Mann's common school recommendations concerning curriculum, teacher training, school funding through taxation, minimal requirements for facilities, teachers' salaries, and attendance had passed the South by.

The GEB's first priority was improving education beginning with elementary education by addressing needs as basic as transportation; then expanding to support high schools; educating farmers and their children; and finally, strengthening higher education using grants to raise faculty salaries and pensions to retain the best and the brightest. Eventually, the Board brought the influence of large amounts of money to states to begin improving education; supported rural, one-room school consolidation; transportation to school; and grants for primary-school supervisors. However, even a heavily endowed foundation had limitations. Substantial public tax support was necessary for meaningful reform to take place. The first Secretary of the GEB, Baptist minister Dr. Wallace Buttrick, attacked this problem by creating an

...organization which would launch a widespread, popular campaign for tax supported public elementary schools. Named the Southern Education Board, with a group of trustees almost identical to those of the General Education Board, the organization poured out an avalanche of statistics and arguments to the press and educational groups across the South. The results of its campaign, between 1901 and 1914, were in many ways remarkable—in the rise of literacy, of teachers' salaries, and of tax funds apportioned to the school. In over a dozen years the General Education Board contributed approximately \$100,000 to the work of the Southern Education Board, finally, absorbing most of the work of this sister organization in 1914.¹⁰

In 1912, the Board "offered to subsidize the appointment of special officials in state departments of education throughout the South who could devote full time to the improvement of [B]lack schools."¹¹

Elementary School Education

During the early to middle 1900s most persons in the Southern United States lived in rural areas. Most rural children did not go to secondary schools so elementary education was the area first addressed with GEB funding. Funding for consolidating one-room schools, providing transportation, involving the community through the cotton and tomato clubs (explained subsequently), and funding state officials to oversee education all assisted in creating community support.

High School Education

Eventually, the GEB had to address the high school question: are high schools within the public education system? Although in the *Kalamazoo* U.S. Supreme Court case of 1874 the Court stated high schools were part of the public education system and, therefore, could receive money, the public was opposed to expenditures for high school education. During the early-twentieth century, most people were employed directly or indirectly in rural pursuits; most hard-working rural citizens did not prize a high school education as either relevant or necessary to life.

The General Education Board attacked the high school education problem by supporting “in every state, attached to the faculty of the state university, a trained specialist in secondary education—a man who could inform, cultivate, and guide professional, public, and legislative opinion.”¹² Laws were changed favoring public, tax-supported high schools; hundreds of new high schools were built, and standards began to improve in secondary education.¹³ Although the benefits of this approach went at first to high-school-aged, white children, in 1915, high schools for African Americans began to be organized: euphemistically referred to as “county training schools to appease Southern opinion,”¹⁴ because stressing vocational and home-making training, these schools were not equivalent to white high schools. Through such schools, Booker T. Washington and the Hampton Institute made vocational education and training in home-making for Black children acceptable to Southern whites. In *The Big Foundations*, Nielsen states that after World War I the General Education Board was less active than previously in controversial educational programs in the South. A period of violent racial prejudice with increased Klan activity and riots resulted after the war.¹⁵ Nielsen contends the General Education Board purposefully turned its attention away from concentrated involvement in Southern, African-American education to “less controversial educational development across the United States.”¹⁶

Higher Education

While no longer focusing its attention on poor whites’ and African-Americans’ educations, the GEB did not completely turn away from its

previous concerns. For example, the GEB established grants for Negro higher education, grants for Negro state-education agents, and a new fellowship program that provided “advanced training for Southern white and [B]lack educators.”¹⁷ The fellowship program¹⁸ began in 1924¹⁹ and reflected affluent board members’ views of higher education: one goes to college to study—period. To have to work and study at the same time was antithetical to them. One African-American college president said: “It was the first time in my life that I didn’t have to make a living and study at the same time.”²⁰ According to Fosdick and Nielsen, almost every African-American administrator and faculty member in higher education had been a Board fellow by the time the fellowship program transferred to the Council of Southern Universities in 1954.²¹

Rural Education

According to the 1900 U.S. census, the South’s population was 58% farm, 18% urban, and 24% rural, nonfarm. Thomas Maloney states, “A typical African American farm family at the start of the twentieth century lived and worked on a farm in the South, did not own its home and was unlikely to have its children in school.”²² Therefore, the GEB initiated and invested in education outside the classroom, an area that was to have a dramatic impact on the lives of Southern farmers, both white and African American. Dr. Buttrick met Dr. Seaman Knapp of Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College and was impressed with his ideas about how to improve crop yield as well as his ideas on how to “sell” these ideas to doubting farmers through demonstration farms. Dr. Knapp preached the gospel of crop rotation and the “selection of better seed, earlier planting, a more thorough preparation of the soil, more careful evaluation, and earlier harvesting.”²³ The Board supported demonstration farms and agents; the “corn clubs,” made of boys following Dr. Knapp’s method when planting an acre of land, and the “tomato clubs,” made of girls using Dr. Knapp’s method when planting one-tenth an acre of land whose yield they then canned, reinforced the Board’s support. Often these young people converted their parents. The Board made an influential friend when the son of a Virginia state senator chairing the state finance committee harvested 114 bushels of corn—though the senator had previously derided claims the method could result in 100 bushels.²⁴ Although for those poor, rural farmers success using this method was literally a lifesaver after the trials of the boll weevil since farmers depended on cotton, as usual, rural, white farmers benefitted more than did African Americans. If one considers poor, rural children a “minority” in the sense of being disadvantaged, then one might argue the Board was probably as effective as possible considering the prejudices of the times and acknowledge the Board’s lasting legacy of

the corn and tomato clubs that eventually evolved into today's 4-H Clubs.²⁵

Higher Education Faculty

In higher education, the General Education Board not only concerned itself with the quality of education but with faculty salaries. After World War I, inflation so eroded the dollar the nation was in danger of losing university faculty on an unprecedented scale if something was not done and done fast. The General Education Board's resources were inadequate; thus, in December 1919, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. gave \$50 million to the Board to improve faculty salaries: participating universities had to add \$36 million to the \$50 million; place the money in an endowment exclusively for faculty salaries; and expend the funds by June 1924 for the grants to be made a permanent contribution to participating institutions.²⁶ By 1933, faculty salaries at participating colleges, while still low, were 30% higher than in 1920.²⁷

Medical Education

In 1910, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching funded a report that contributed to making far-reaching changes in U.S. medical education. Layman and Secretary of the General Education Board, Abraham Flexner, was asked to prepare a report on the state of medical education in the United States.²⁸ Approaching this task similar to the way Horace Mann studied schools in Massachusetts, Flexner visited all 155, U.S., medical schools and evaluated them on their quality of facilities, faculty, and students. Fosdick underscores the appalling state of U.S. medical education Flexner documents in his report: the medical facilities were direly inadequate with filthy, disorganized labs; most medical faculty worked teaching around their private practices; and pre-med students were grossly underprepared, for "of the 155 schools, sixteen required two or more years of college work for entrance, fifty demanded a high school education or its 'equivalent'; eighty-nine asked for 'little or nothing more than the rudiments or the recollection of a common school education.'"²⁹ The General Education Board funded the changes necessary for improved medical education.³⁰ The early grants concentrated on full-time teaching, a matter of some concern to many on the Board. Board trustee and Harvard's President Eliot opposed insisting on full-time teaching because it "was in contradiction to its policy not to interfere with the 'domestic management of an institution.'"³¹ In 1913, the GEB made its first grant to Johns Hopkins. By 1960, the GEB's initial \$94 million dollars and the conditional matches had become \$600 million spent for bringing US medical education out of the dark ages to a model for other countries—Flexner rightly called it a "revolution."³²

When Flexner evaluated the medical schools, he found that of the African-American schools, only Howard University in Washington, DC and Meharry Medical College in Nashville were “worth developing.”³³ While Howard University depended for its funding upon the not-always-generous U.S. Congress, Meharry depended totally upon its own resources. “From 1920 until 1936, when Congress had become more generous the Board contributed almost \$600,000 to”³⁴ Howard Medical School while “Meharry, which was in a much more precarious position financially, received \$8,673,706 between 1916 and 1960.”³⁵ These grants, when coupled with the fellowship program, provided impressive support for African Americans’ medical education. In fact, at the time the Board ceased to exist in 1964, “nearly half...[the African American] physicians and dentists...practicing in the United States received their training at Meharry.”³⁶ In 1962, Raymond B. Fosdick wrote that Howard and Meharry produced four-fifths of the country’s African-American doctors.³⁷

Learning from and Building upon the General Education Board’s Legacy

From the beginning, the General Education Board’s policy “to have no policy”³⁸ enhanced its creativity in turn leading to its extraordinary success improving U.S. education, especially in the South, for African Americans and poor whites. During its existence, the GEB provided \$62.5 million to improve African-American education.³⁹ By 1932, the number of accredited African-American high schools rose from zero to 32.⁴⁰ The fellowship programs and support for higher education provided strong African-American leadership for the future, a leadership that would pass on a legacy of hope long after the foundation’s funds were expended and its books closed. The advances in farmers’ education eventually established a scientific basis for maintaining a continually abundant food supply. The changes in medical education resulted in the United States’ going from a nation with abysmal medical facilities, training, students, and care to a nation with the finest in the world. These results have enhanced generations of human lives.

As impressive as these gains were, the Board received criticism for its emphasis on vocational education and homemaking; its more impressive gains for white children than African-American; its paternalistic attitude; its use of power to spread its philosophy; and its withdrawal of its previous level of support for Southern schools from 1940–1960.⁴¹ Although African Americans in the South only attained access to equal treatment and education with the power of the vote, one must continually remind oneself that access does not guarantee equal treatment; over 50 years after the withdrawal of the Board’s strong support in 1960, African Americans throughout the U.S. still work to achieve the equality and equity the law, in principle, guarantees. Indeed,

for most of U.S. history, African Americans, in the South in particular, have not been well treated as fellow human beings.

Although over the years of its operation, the General Education Board made many gains, many problems remained unsolved. Most noteworthy, the difficulties of instigating change became even more difficult when those changing or asked to change did not feel ownership. The Board's failure to grant participation to those involved in the Board's improvements was evident in numerous locales. For example, early on, African-American leaders most likely appreciated any assistance from the big foundations, but, as time passed, they complained the Board consistently failed to request their advice or consider it when given: "by the late 1930s, Black leaders cease[d] to attempt to reason with GEB leaders and other whites over the improvement of schools in their communities."⁴² In New York City, 1917, Raymond D. Fosdick and Abraham Flexner resigned from the School Board because their advocacy for changing the direction of New York City's public schools met with criticism: "Dr. Flexner Quits Education Board: His Connection with Rockefeller Organization Aroused a Storm of Criticism."⁴³ John Taylor Gatto complained the Board had a definite political agenda when using their power to "mold people through schooling."⁴⁴ When the Board tried to bring change to Indiana rural schools, James H. Madison described the cause of the problem:

The attempt by experts to change fundamentally the schools of Johnson and La Grange counties illuminates the assumptions, definitions, and solutions reformers presented generally for rural America in the first three decades of the twentieth century; it points also to the complex relationships and conflicts that ensued when cosmopolitan outside experts entered local communities to work with citizens, politicians, teachers, and school administrators. The ensuing battles included elements of arrogance, condescension, self-interest, and [naïveté] on the part of the professional experts and, on the part of the rural citizenry, large portions of stubbornness, provincialism, and parsimony. In their own minds, rural Hoosiers were protecting their locally controlled schools and their organic communities from alien outsiders, while professional experts saw themselves as liberal reformers bringing economy, efficiency, and progress to rural America. Above all, the demonstration project showed the wide gulf that separated these opposing views of school and community and the inability of either side to convert the other.⁴⁵

There is no question the General Education Board and other big foundations produced impressive results when funding educational

programs. The education of African-American university faculty and presidents, the founding of what became 4-H, the first accreditation of African-American high schools in the South, and the transformation of medical education are only a few of its successes. However, whenever someone else holds the purse strings, it behooves those who are the recipients to stop and think about whether the giver's agenda is compatible with the recipients' ethical standards. In the 1950s and early 1960s there was great pride in not taking federal funds for education. Today the controversy seems to accelerate as the federal government more and more determines states' needs with the federal government's power of the purse a strong incentive for states to scrutinize little while turning a blind eye to the implications of accepting funding. Needing and accepting federal funding are dilemmas and part of an ever-difficult balancing act states daily perform. Perhaps there will never be a time when dependency on external funding will cease to exist, and perhaps it should not because it has potential for so much good. However, the federal government, federal funding agencies, and private grantors need to be attentive to educating the public, government officials, and themselves on involving those these funding agencies will affect when funding programs and involving those who will be affected by whatever programs these agencies fund in local schools.

Endnotes

- 1 Waldemar A. Nielsen, *The Big Foundations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 338.
- 2 *General Education Board* (New York: General Education Board, 1964), 3; General Education Board Archives (1901–1964)–1967; Raymond B. Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving: The Story of the General Education Board* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 116–120, <http://www.rockarch.org/collections/rockorgs/geb.php>
- 3 Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 1.
- 4 General Education Board, *Archives*.
- 5 Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 1.
- 6 Raymond B. Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.: A Portrait*, (New York: Harper and Bros., 1950), 116. Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Sr. was born Laura Spelman. Spelman College for Negro women was named after her family.
- 7 Nielson, *The Big Foundations*, 333.
- 8 Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 3–5. Part of Hampton Institute's work involved visiting various Negro schools in the South.

- ⁹ *General Education Board: Review and Final Report, 1902–1964* (New York: General Education Board, 1964), 3.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ¹¹ Nielsen, *The Big Foundations*, 336–337.
- ¹² *General Education Board*, 6.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ¹⁴ Nielsen, *The Big Foundations*, 337.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 338–339.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 339.
- ¹⁸ In *Adventure in Giving*, Raymond B. Fosdick quotes Fisk’s President Stephen J. Wright as saying, “The G.E.B. fellowships made a critical kind of difference. By modern standards, I suppose, the recipients were selected in an almost haphazard way—no lengthy application forms or tests—and yet I doubt that there were many mistakes” (304). The record bears this out. About 85 percent of the recipients returned to the South to teach or work as educational administrators. The roster of college presidents alone is impressive: Rufus Clement of Atlanta University, James P. Brawley of Clark, Albert E. Manley of Spelman, Stephen J. Wright of Fisk, Alfonso Elder of North Carolina College at Durham, Samuel M. Nabrit of Texas Southern University, and others. Fosdick also notes, “Ralph J. Bunche became head of the political science department at Howard before he moved on to the broader stage of international affairs....” (305).
- ¹⁹ Fosdick, *Adventures in Giving*, 303.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Nielsen, *The Big Foundations*, 339; Fosdick, *Adventures in Giving*, 303.
- ²² “Maloney, Thomas, African American in the Twentieth Century,” EH.Net Encyclopedia, ed. Robert Whaples, <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/african-americans-in-the-twentieth-century/>
- ²³ Fosdick, *Adventures in Giving*, 42.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 52–53.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 142–146.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.
- ²⁸ Joseph W. Ernst, *Dear Father, Dear Son: Correspondence of John D. Rockefeller and John D. Rockefeller, Jr.* (New York: Fordham University Press in cooperation with Rockefeller Archive Center, 1994), 48.

- ²⁹ Fosdick, *Adventures in Giving*, 152.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.
- ³¹ *General Education Board*, 34.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 37.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ³⁷ Fosdick, *Adventures in Giving*, 187.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 317.
- ³⁹ Nielsen, *The Big Foundations*, 342.
- ⁴⁰ Matthew Davis, "The General Education Board and Institutionalization of Black Public Schooling in the Interwar South," *American Educational History Journal* 33, no. 2 (2006): 71–77.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² V. S. Walker, "Organized Resistance and Black Educators' Quest for School Equality, 1878–1938," *Teachers College Record* 107, no. 3: 380. Quoted in Matthew Davis, "The General Education Board and Institutionalization of Black Public Schooling in the Interwar South," 75.
- ⁴³ "Dr. Flexner Quits Education Board: His Connection with Rockefeller Organization Aroused a Storm of Criticism," *The New York Times*, 18 May 1917, 14.
- ⁴⁴ John Taylor Gatto, *Underground History of American Education* (New York: The Oxford Village Press, 2003), <http://www.johntaylorgatto.com/chapters/12o.htm>
- ⁴⁵ James H. Madison, "John D. Rockefeller's General Education Board and the Rural School Problem in the Midwest, 1900–1930," *History of Education Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1984): 181.