

## Case 2

# General Education Board Support for Public High Schools

*Rockefeller Foundation, General Education Board, 1902*

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*Background.* John D. Rockefeller's philanthropic tendencies were well developed long before his success in business enabled him to amass a personal fortune to act on those tendencies. His own personal religious devotion, which left an indelible mark on his giving, has been well noted, but the influences of his family's interests also led to some of his specific philanthropic tendencies. Southern Negro education, for instance, was an interest he inherited from his grandparents, who supported a Baptist seminary for African American women in Atlanta, renamed Spelman College in their honor.

When Rockefeller's son, John D. Rockefeller Jr., completed college, he joined his father's office, where he was assigned to work with his father's advisor Frederick Gates in the administration of the family's charitable activities. The younger Rockefeller also inherited the family interests in philanthropic activity. In 1901, he joined a trip to attend a conference on African American education in the South and to visit significant African American education sites, including the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Later, he would call the trip "one of the outstanding events in my life."<sup>17</sup>

At the conference, Henry St. George Tucker, president of Washington and Lee University, gave perhaps the most influential address. Mindful of the poor state of rural education for whites in the South and the likely racial backlash that would result if whites perceived their educational opportunities to be inferior to those available to African Americans, Tucker cautioned against focusing exclusively on the problem of African American education. Instead, Tucker advocated, philanthropists from the North would do better to devote their resources to improving education for all in the South. "You must lift up the 'poor white' and the Negro together if you would approach success," Tucker cautioned.<sup>18</sup>

*Strategy.* Rockefeller Jr., inspired by the conference and Tucker's remarks, convened a group of experienced educators and leaders to consider possible approaches to improving education in the South. The group was constituted in 1902 as the General Education Board (GEB) with a million-dollar pledge from Rockefeller Senior and with the express purpose of "the promotion of education within the United States without distinction of race, sex, or creed."<sup>19</sup> While Rockefeller hoped to prompt other philanthropists to support the organization in part by leaving his name off of the Board's name, no other philanthropists opted to support a Rockefeller philanthropy.<sup>20</sup>

One of the Board's first objectives was to help develop a system of public secondary education in the South, in hopes of increasing the rate of attendance for both primary and secondary education.<sup>21</sup> At the turn of the century, most high schools in the South were private academies catering to wealthy planters; those without the means or the social standing necessary for entrance into these academies had little hope for attaining a high school education. Aiding elementary schools, the GEB's first initiative, was limited in its effectiveness by a lack of teachers adequately trained to staff the schools. Consequently, aid to primary schools was linked to high school aid, and that, in turn, required increased support for college and university education to produce high school teachers.<sup>22</sup>

Promoters of secondary education in the South faced a number of obstacles. There was considerable opposition to public high schools in the South. Public opinion opposed the high costs of creating public schools. Because, in contrast to the northern states, the South was relatively rural and much poorer, the tax base for financing public education was much lower. Southern states would have to charge relatively high tax rates to fund public education. Further, private academies feared the prospect of tuition-free competition. In some states, such as Georgia, state law actually

prohibited public funding of secondary education.<sup>23</sup>

In response to this political environment, the GEB adopted the strategy of supporting a “specialist” in each southern state, trained in secondary education, linked to a state university, and subordinate to the state superintendent of schools. Each state specialist would have a set of requirements for advocating to the state legislature for public high school support; typically, the state specialist was also permitted to teach at a state university, an attractive benefit for the state university, if those requirements were first met.<sup>24</sup>

The GEB first employed its strategy of funding a specialist in Virginia in 1905, at a cost of \$3,000-per-year. Later that year, specialists were funded in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee. By 1910, twelve states had such specialists cultivating support for public secondary schools where there were none before. These specialists submitted monthly reports to their state universities and to the GEB, writing of the seemingly insurmountable obstacles, either of perceptions that public schools resembled institutions for the poor or of perceptions that public schools would be unnecessarily duplicative of the private schools.<sup>25</sup>

One of the requisite, if undeveloped, skills of the specialists was lobbying on behalf of legislation permitting local taxation in support of public high schools. Virginia’s specialist attained the votes necessary for the legislation by securing pledges of state legislators that they supported public high schools and then threatening to publish the pledges in the legislators’ home newspapers if they backed down from their commitments. North Carolina’s specialist mobilized the state Federation of Women’s Clubs against the governor’s opposition to public secondary schools and won passage of his legislation without opposition. In 1910, Georgia’s specialist finally convinced the state legislature to amend the constitution to allow local support of public secondary schools.<sup>26</sup> Upon securing state enabling legislation, the specialists then engaged in local campaigns supporting bond proposals to build the local high schools. Once the schools were built, the specialists’ task then turned to lengthening the school year, improving curriculum, and recruiting students to the schools.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to advocating to public officials for publicly funded high schools, the GEB pursued a complementary strategy for building support for high schools by strengthening the tax base. The GEB conducted a series of agricultural demonstration projects throughout the South intended to improve agricultural methods in the region, increase agricultural output, and build the South’s capacity to fund public education.<sup>28</sup>

In almost all of the GEB’s grants, Rockefeller’s own philosophy of helping recipients help themselves resulted in a familiar strategy in other Rockefeller philanthropies of conditional giving, or of requiring grantees to match the Rockefeller grants with funding from other sources. In the case of promoting public support for secondary education, the GEB would often make imposition of local school taxation a condition of receiving its support.<sup>29</sup>

*Impact.* By 1912, state specialists could be credited with the passage of state enabling laws in twelve southern states, allowing state specialists to then build support at the local level for tax levies in support of the creation public schools.<sup>30</sup> By 1914, four years after the constitutional amendment enabled the state specialist in Georgia to campaign for local bond issues to create high schools, he had secured support for more than 200 new schools.<sup>31</sup> Across the south, the state specialists turned immediately from lobbying state legislators to campaigning in local districts; they, acting on behalf of the GEB, directly facilitated the creation of 800 public high schools. This strategy successfully turned public opinion in the South from detesting publicly financed education to expecting local government provisions for public secondary education.<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

17. Raymond B. Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving: The Story of the General Education Board* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), 4.

18. *Ibid.*, 4–10.

19. Ibid., 4–10.
20. Ibid., 4–10.
21. “Rockefeller Board to Enter New Field,” *New York Times*, 6/15/1915, 5.
22. Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 25.
23. Ibid., 26.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 27.
26. Ibid., 30–32.
27. Ibid., 35–36.
28. Charles D. Biebel, “Private Foundations and Public Policy: The Case for Secondary Education During the Great Depression,” *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 1976), 4.
29. Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving*, 22.
30. Ibid., 32–33.
31. Ibid., 34.
32. Ron Chernow, “Mystery of the Generous Monopolist,” *New York Times*, 11/18/1998, G18.