Moore: Cornering the education market

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By Michael Moore

It's testing time around Georgia, despite widespread criticism about the inability of the state's standardized tests to reflect student — let alone teacher — performance.

Georgia is hip-deep in the school assessment racket, which quietly lines the coffers of corporations beyond the view of an unsuspecting public.

Unfortunately, Georgia may soon be even deeper in the grip of these corporate interests.

Looming on the horizon is the multi-billion dollar battle for common core assessments. But what we don't realize is that the real battle is over far more than assessments; it covers all aspects of curriculum.

A quick reminder of how we got to this point.

Georgia's tests are not made by our state. CTB/McGraw-Hill, which is in the fifth year of a five-year, $62.5 million contract, makes our tests. CTB/McGraw-Hill also makes tests for at least 11 other states, Washington D.C., and the Department of Defense.

At the post-secondary level, the Pearson Company makes the Georgia Assessments for the Certification of Educators (GACE). Pearson makes certification tests for other states too.

The testing business is a
$2.3 billion business. But testing is not where the real money is made. If you want to pass the test, you're going to need preparation materials.

If your child brings home a text from Glencoe, Macmillan, SRA, Open Court or The Grow Network, among others, then your child is using a McGraw-Hill text. The test preparation materials business surely dwarfs the testing business.

This is still small beer compared with what's to come. This week, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Pearson Foundation (a non-profit organization owned by, well, the for-profit version of the Pearson company) announced that the two were working together to create complete online curricula for the new common core standards in math and English language arts for elementary through high school.

This off-the-shelf curricula includes the materials, the teacher preparation, teacher development and, of course, the assessments.

Interestingly, Phil Daro and Sally Hampton from America's Choice, who helped draft the common core standards, are heading up this development.

Confused? Did I forget to mention that Pearson bought America's Choice last summer?

This information is hardly surprising. Of the 14 members of the Common Core English/Language Arts Standards writing committee, seven worked for ACT or SAT, two of the biggest test makers in America.

Three members work for Achieve, another non-profit organization that helps states — guess what? — form assessments for standards, and happens to be the creator of the American Diploma Project Network.

See how nicely this dovetails with ACT and SAT? Another standards writer, David Coleman, formed the Grow Network, which he sold to—there they are again–McGraw-Hill.

I am usually not a conspiracy theorist. But my scorecard shows 11 members of the English/Language Arts Standards writing team had ties to companies with a financial interest in the committee's decision.

Adding insult to injury, no members of the Work Group were K-12 teachers and no teachers were mentioned in the Gates/Pearson curriculum announcement.

If you're following the money, it goes like this: Link the common core standards to winning "Race to the Top" money, then link this to these quasi non-profits (which really aren't non-profit) testing companies who get to use federal money to fund the creation of standards' assessments and who had a seat(s) at the standards writing table, and you've got the creation of quite the little market corner.

Georgia may be unintentionally proving the assessment of Grover "Russ" Whitehurst, a former research guru for the U.S. Department of Education and current director of the Brown Center for Education Policy at the Brookings Institute.

"It's easier to have good-sounding rhetoric about new materials, thinking, approaches, technology than it is to do it," he said.

Apparently, we are going to develop testing and curricula using the "Windows Model." We'll release it, and we'll fix the bugs later.

If you're a teacher, administrator or teacher educator, it has to be a bit overwhelming to realize that you not have a seat at the table; we don't even know where the table is.

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