

Virginia's Right to Resist National Standards

by Neal McCluskey

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There's a revolution happening, and you probably don't even know it. While you've been worrying about wars, spills, and bailouts, Washington has been taking over schools nationwide. So far, Virginia has resisted, but already more than 30 states have capitulated to national mathematics and language arts standards. And amazingly, almost no one's heard about this. But that's exactly what standardizers, who know national standards' fatal flaws, want.

The immediate impetus for this has been the Race to the Top (RTTT), a competition for \$4.35 billion in federal funds. Adopting standards created by something called the Common Core State Standards Initiative is crucial for states to compete.

In an impressive defense of state sovereignty, Virginia stayed out of the most recent round of RTTT, taking itself out of the federal bribery scheme. But many national-standards aficionados have been rhetorically abusing the commonwealth ever since, trying to get it blindly to follow the crowd.

Despite this, national standards have probably been flying almost as far under the radar in the commonwealth as elsewhere. Which raises the question: Why the secrecy?

The answer is that keeping this all hush-hush has been the key to national-standards proponents getting their way.

The last national standards push — which included history, English, science, and other subjects — was in the 1990s, and it disintegrated almost the moment the first proposed standards were released. Everyone, it seemed, was paying attention, and every diverse American found something in the very detailed standards to hate.

Avoiding a similar public outcry explains why today the CCSSI has furnished only mathematics and language arts standards, and why the latter identify almost no specific works students must read. Math is relatively uncontroversial, as is English — if you don't prescribe any actual readings.

The problems, of course, are that focusing on just two subjects threatens to narrow the curriculum, while dodging essential reading would hollow it out. Do more, though, and Americans might have something of substance to grab onto.

Another reason for keeping things muted has been, it seems, to deceive the public about what — and who — is driving the standards. Contrary to proponents' incessant refrain, standardization has been neither "state led" nor "voluntary," and it's been the heavy hand of Washington that's been shoving everything along.

While creation of the Common Core was spearheaded by associations of governors and state education chiefs, those groups do not represent individual states. Meanwhile, the National Conference of State Legislatures opposes national standards.

Of course, many state school boards have adopted the standards, but they might just be happily passing the standards buck. Much more important, thanks to RTTT and Obama administration plans to connect national standards to even bigger piles of money — the latter will be the next honey-pot offered to Virginia — adoption is no more "voluntary" than adhering to the No Child Left Behind Act or the minimum drinking age. If states want federal dollars — which were taken from their citizens to begin with — they must do as they're told.

Finally, national standardizers have almost certainly tried to keep their efforts muffled because there is simply no meaningful evidence that national standards work. Despite proponents' superficial claims about needing national standards to compete in the world economy, or all countries that outperform us having such standards, the research reveals that, all else equal, countries with national standards do no better than those without. Research also reveals that the freer the education system — the more autonomous schools and consumers are — the better.

It's not hard to understand why. Government schooling is almost always controlled by the people it employs because they are the most motivated to be involved in education politics. And like most people, they would prefer as little outside accountability as possible. Conversely, more freedom means more competition, and that means real accountability — answering to customers — as well as constant innovation.

So why are national curriculum standards the biggest federal takeover you've never heard of? Because they need silence to win. And here's another big secret: Should Virginia ever succumb to national standards, national tests are likely coming next.

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