

Common Core: The Great Debate

Polling shows that the large majority of Americans know nothing about the proposed Common Core education standards, despite the fact that they are being implemented in 46 states. What exactly is Common Core? Supporters assert that it is a high-quality, voluntarily adopted set of national mathematics and language arts standards that will help transform American education by aiming all students at uniform, lofty goals. Opponents argue that adoption of the Core was federally coerced, the standards are of dubious quality, and one size simply cannot fit all. At a Cato Policy Forum in October, Chester Finn and Michael Petrilli, president and executive vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute; Emmett McGroarty, executive director of the American Principles Project; and Neal McCluskey, associate director of Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, debated what the true impact of Common Core is likely to be.

MICHAEL PETRILLI: Why should we have standards-based reform? In fact, why are standards important to begin with? Let's start with some perspective.

We've now had standards-based reform in this country for nearly 20 years. It started before No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and once that law went into effect, those standards went national. Since that time, we at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute have been studying those state standards that are now the foundation of the current system—and found most of them wanting. In fact, if you look at our reports over the last two decades, most of them identified no more than a handful of states with adequate standards. And year after year, they weren't getting any better.

Nevertheless, we also had all of this testing machinery put in place over that time, and the true standards became the tests, not these vague and nebulous standards. In most cases, the tests under No Child Left Behind were set at a very low level, with the goal of getting the lowest-performing children up to a basic level of literacy and numeracy.

The good news is that our schools have made some huge progress in meeting that objective. When you look at the scores from the National Assessment of Educational

Progress, you see big gains in student achievement from the lowest performing kids, many of whom are poor minorities. That trend began in the 1990s and continued on into the 2000s. In short, states showed that with low standards, they could get the lowest performers up to that level.

The position that we have been pushing for is that we can now raise that bar higher by setting solid content standards in reading and math, as well as rigorous tests to assess those higher-level skills. If we in turn set a high cutoff score on those tests, we may be able to raise student achievement much more broadly—not just at these low levels, but across the board.

We can't prove that that will be the case. What we can say is that when states like Massachusetts have implemented all of this—from good standards and tests, to high cutoff scores, to teacher retraining—you can see some very impressive results. Stronger common standards is the next step in education reform to drive the system toward higher performance.

EMMETT MCGROARTY: We all want children to be better students. The issue is what has happened in America to prevent that. Over the last century, we've devalued the content of what children learn. They've started reading simpler and simpler texts. According to Sandra Stotsky, professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas and a scholar I think we can all respect, what we need to do is get back to classic education where children are reading classic texts. Stotsky, as we know, oversaw "the Massachusetts miracle"—the successful bipartisan effort to reform public education in that state, starting in 1993. That state is now viewed as having the best public education system in the country, and it's probably a good model of success for a public school system.

Now, let's look at what the Common Core has done. In terms of reading, it has undertaken a fundamental shift by emphasizing



Michael Petrilli

“Stronger common standards is the next step in education reform to drive the system toward higher performance.”

informational texts—which are by and large less complex, require less analytical thinking, and train students less in terms of verbal and written expression. According to the Common Core, schools will have to “shift the balance of text and instructional time towards reading substantially more literary non-fiction.” These standards are giving priority, in other words, to more simplified texts.

One of the central theses of those who support standards-based reform is that we need accountability. But the real question we should be asking ourselves is accountability to whom? The problem with NCLB, for instance, is that it essentially shifted accountability away from parents—those who have the most at stake when it comes to educating their children—and toward the federal government.

The principal at work here is that you cannot serve two masters. In effect, if the state-government turns its attention toward the federal government, it will inevitably turn its back on the people. And the real problem with Common Core is that it will bring us two steps further down that road.

When you dig deeply into how the Common Core was developed, you find that interest groups enlisted the help of private associations to sell this program to the federal government, which in turn pushed it onto the states.

CHESTER E. FINN, JR.: Most of the discussion about the Common Core is not actually about education. It’s not about what kids are or could or should be learning. It’s about politics. Like many current issues in many policy domains, this particular topic is just the current kickball in a game in which the teams are really fighting to score political points.

The idea of having “common” standards per se is not a virtue. It only becomes one if the standards themselves have merit. We at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute looked at the Common Core, which came out in 2010, and found that there was quite a bit of substantive merit in there regarding what children should learn. On page 61 of the Grade 9–10 English standards, for instance, it reads: “Cite specific textual evidence to

support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.”

This, in other words, asks the student to get into the text and explain what’s going on—not how they feel about it, not whether



Chester E. Finn, Jr.

“The notion that we are going to have an education free market without any form of standards is simply insane.”

they agree with it, not whether it relates to what they had for breakfast. It asks what the author is trying to accomplish and where is the evidence for that. This is an appropriate instructional assignment for a 15-year old in English class. It’s worth getting American kids to acquire such abilities.

However, subsequent to 2010, both common science standards and common social studies standards have come out. According to Fordham’s expert reviewers, the science standards are inferior to what a number of states have developed on their own, and to my eye the social studies standards (they call it a “framework”) are just appalling. I wouldn’t sit here and recommend that anybody adopt either of those. They are not substan-

tively meritorious, despite the fact they are meant to be “common.”

I’d be very surprised, if one were actually to look with one’s own eyes at what is in the Common Core standards, if one could find much there that’s objectionable. To my eye, much that’s there—in both math and English—is praiseworthy in terms of what an eighth grader or tenth grader should know and be able to do.

It’s also true that “common-ness” brings some ancillary benefits. If the assessments are also common, for instance, this creates the ability to compare school-level results from district to district, school to school and state to state, which we have enormous difficulty doing today. There may also be economies of scale involved when it comes to, for example, buying textbooks or creating professional development materials for teachers. These are all collateral benefits, but—make no mistake—common standards are only worth pursuing when they begin with substantive merit regarding content, rigor, clarity, and so on.

When you take into account the fact that the Common Core is voluntary for states—in fact, five states rejected these standards off the bat—it is impossible to conclude that they are national. How can they be national if they are something that you join if you want to?

If you’re happy with the status quo in American education, then you should reject this type of standards-based reform. In fact, you should reject all reform. But I don’t happen to think that the present state of affairs is good for the kids or for the country as a whole. If you have a better idea, put it on the table.

And before someone says “school choice,” let me conclude by reading one quote from Neerav Kingsland, the chief strategy officer at New Schools for New Orleans: “Conservatives who are against the Common Core would be wise to take note that the urban system, [namely] New Orleans, that most resembles a free-market system only exists because of accountability and standards. The New Orleans system came to being because Louisiana, sequentially, implemented a statewide accountability system, created a state-takeover mech-

anism to act on schools that fared poorly on this system, and utilized charter schools to replace these failing schools.”

The notion that we are going to have a well-functioning, high-performing education free market without any form of standards is simply insane.

NEAL MCCLUSKEY: Let’s start by asking whether you can somehow separate politics from government-run education. You cannot. And you cannot look at Common Core and pretend that this is just about implementing standards, without also acknowledging that there are enormous political ramifications for those involved.

Why is the idea of common standards wrong? Simply put, it’s because all children are different. They learn different things at different rates during different times. They start from different places. They have different interests. The idea that they should all be fed into some sort of lock-step standardized system doesn’t fit with the reality of human beings.

Another problem, of course, is political control. There are indeed five states that have rejected these standards. But they said “No” to the same principle by which the federal government has gotten states to say “Yes” to all sorts of things. They take money from states whether those taxpayers like it or not, with the caveat that if those states want their money back, they will have to do what the federal government says. With the Race to the Top program, for instance, the federal government told states that if they wanted to compete for the \$4.35 billion involved, they would have to sign on for internationally benchmarked standards that are ideally

common to a majority of the states. Not coincidentally, there was only one thing that fit that description: Common Core.

The Fordham Institute is correct that the vast majority of states were not holding themselves accountable in the past. But

they are therefore the most motivated to influence education politics in their favor.

The simple fact is that this is a heavily federally pushed effort. But is the federal government fundamentally different than the states? Of course not. They still operate by the same principle of concentrated benefits and diffused costs. However, you are not as close to the federal government as you are to your state representatives. When you vote for candidates at the federal level, you’re voting on a whole basket of issues that states don’t deal with. And states at least compete with each other for residents and businesses.

Our education system should move in the opposite direction, away from federalization and toward the free market. This would involve more school choice, more freedom for educators, and a marketplace where competitors can focus on the needs of individual students.

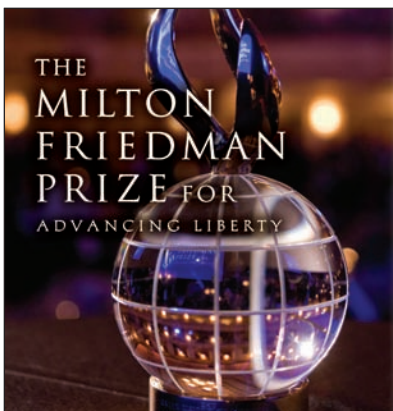
For standards-based reform to work, it must rest upon, as Chester has noted, a “tripod.” All schools must use the same standards. They need the same tests to compare how the children are doing. And there must be uniform punishments for those schools that do not do well. For national standards to work, then, there must be a national tripod of standards, testing, and accountability.

This raises the crucial question: who will be in charge of constructing and maintaining the tripod to get everyone uniformly on board? It’s a question nationalizers have been loath to tackle because the answer is obvious: Washington. Only the federal government has the ability, by taking taxpayers’ money then offering it back with rules attached, to coerce all states into doing the same things. ■



“Why is the idea of common standards wrong? Simply put, it’s because all children are different.”

there’s a reason for that. The people that you want to hold accountable—including teachers, administrators, and the like—have a huge advantage in politics. Their livelihoods are at stake, they are the easiest to organize, and



NOMINATIONS NOW BEING ACCEPTED

The Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty, named in honor of perhaps the greatest champion of liberty in the 20th century, is presented every other year to an individual who has made a significant contribution to advance human freedom.

Nominations are now being accepted for the 2014, prize—which will be presented on May 21, 2014 at the Award’s biennial dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City.

Nominations can be made at Cato.org/Friedman-Prize

