



**Global Competition:** Uniform education standards sometimes help nations improve academic outcomes—and sometimes have no effect. The one thing all countries that use them have in common is government control.

# Exiting the National Standards Bandwagon

*The call for national education standards has never been louder. But should the federal government have that much power?*

by Lindsey Burke

**A**larmingly, the push to nationalize what is taught in every public school in America has never had more momentum.

Without congressional approval, the White House has used a combination of carrots and sticks to spur states to sign on to the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Common Core includes standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics, and federally funded national assessments have been crafted to align with the standards.

The Common Core effort, originally spearheaded by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School

Officers (CCSSO), became quickly entangled with Washington. Billions in federal funding was used to create incentives for states to adopt the standards, yet the effort has left state taxpayers to pick up the tab for their implementation, conservatively estimated to cost more than \$16 billion.

Growing concern over the national standards push is well-founded: The impetus to centralize control over education has never been greater. While the current administration has been a driving force behind the Common Core standards, state leaders have also jumped on the bandwagon. With little public notice, 45 states already have agreed to adopt the Common

Core national standards.

But just why did state leaders agree so quickly to hand control over to Washington bureaucrats and national organizations?

## Carrots and Sticks

In 2009 the Department of Education offered \$4.35 billion to states in Race to the Top grants, partly on the condition that they adopt “standards common to a significant number of states.” The only standards option that qualified at the time (and currently) was the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Moreover, suggestions that \$14.5 billion in federal Title I money for low-income school districts could be tied to standards adoption, and more recently, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waivers have been offered to those that adopted

the common standards, coaxing many state leaders to go along with the overhaul.

The constitutional authority for education rests with states and towns, and ultimately with parents—not the federal government. It has crossed this line in the past, but dictating curriculum content is a major new breach that represents a critical level of centralization and a major setback for parental rights.

National standards are the antithesis of reform that would put educational control in the hands of those closest to the students: local school leaders and parents. But it is not too late for state leaders to regain control over the content taught in their local schools.

The push to nationalize the content of what is taught in every local public school across America is riddled with problems. In addition to wresting constitutional authority away from states, towns and parents, national standards and tests are unlikely to increase academic achievement, will lead to the standardization of mediocrity, will create significant new expenses for states, and will significantly grow the federal role in education while further removing parents from the equation.

### Unlikely Achievement

The math and ELA standards have drawn criticism from content-matter experts across the country, and even from members of the Common Core standards validation committee.

Former U.S. Department of Education official and mathematician Ze'ev Wurman notes that the math standards are deficient in several key areas. Notably, the standards do not expect students to learn Algebra I by eighth grade, “reversing the most significant change in mathematics education in America in the last decade,” which is “contrary to the practice of the highest-

achieving nations,” according to a study published in the summer 2012 edition of the journal *Education Next*.

University of Arkansas professor Sandra Stotsky, a member of the Common Core standards ELA validation committee, refused to sign off on the proposed standards. Stotsky argues that by adopting the Common Core national standards, states like California and Massachusetts will “significantly weaken the intellectual demands on students in the areas of language and literature.” She notes that weaknesses in the ELA standards were to be expected, since the standards were prepared by the “same special interests that gave us the poor state standards they were designed to replace.”

National standards are also unlikely to boost American student performance over that of other nations. Many of the countries that perform worse than the United States on international assessments, such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), have national standards. The Cato Institute’s Neal McCluskey points out that eight countries outperformed the United States on eighth-grade math on the TIMSS in 2007, the most recent year for which data is available. All eight had national standards—as did 33 of the 39 countries that performed worse than the U.S. In all, 11 of the 12 worst-performing countries on the TIMSS math assessment that year had national standards.

National standards, it seems, are not the critical differential in explaining international competitiveness.

### Information Only a Bureaucrat Could Love

Not only are national standards unlikely to improve academic

achievement, but they are designed to address a question that only bureaucrats are asking: How is one set of students performing compared to another set of students in a given state?

Comparisons of state data are unlikely to be the type of data parents find useful. Information about how their children are mastering course content, gleaned from school assessments and by talking to teachers, will be far more valuable to them than that provided through national standards—information that is more useful to bureaucrats who distribute funding.

Not only would national standards not provide information that is useful to parents, they would further remove parents from the educational decision-making process. One of the most powerful ways in which parents can affect school improvement is by influencing state and local policymakers on matters concerning the academic content and standards that are taught in their children’s schools. National standards and tests would completely remove parents from this important aspect of local school governance, separating parents from the decision-making process.

If parents are to have a say in what is taught in local schools—and if standards and class content are to be strengthened—policymakers should pursue the opposite: Competition among various standards should be encouraged in order to spur improvement.

### Standardizing Mediocrity

National standards will also result in the standardization of mediocrity, rather than establishing high bars for excellence. The same pressures that have caused states to water down their own standards—by education unions and federal sanctions, among others—will also afflict the Common Core national standards. The rigor of the stan-

dards will align to the mean among states, undercutting those with higher standards, like Massachusetts.

One aspect of the national standards push that has largely escaped discussion is the likely cost to states to cover their implementation and maintenance. Although many states received grants through the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top program, many more did not. For those states that did receive grants—ranging from \$100 million to \$700 million—the one-time funding is unlikely to cover the massive standards and assessments overhaul currently facing states and local school districts.

According to the Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research, taxpayers in states that have agreed to adopt Common Core national standards will be on the hook for nearly \$16 billion in new spending, cumulatively, in order to align state and local education systems to the new standards over the next seven years. That cost is four times the amount of money awarded to states through Race to the Top (RTT).

Already-strained state budgets will be further burdened by the standards overhaul necessary for Common Core implementation. Overhauling state accountability systems will likely be far more costly than the RTT funds appropriated to states thus far, putting state and local taxpayers on the hook for a standards overhaul that may yield few results.

And, despite the tremendous price tag that will likely accompany the nationalization of standards and assessments, the biggest cost to families will be measured not in dollars, but in educational liberty.

### Historic Overreach

The push for national standards punctuates decades of growing federal involvement in education,

and will dangerously concentrate power over what is taught in local schools in the hands of Washington bureaucrats and national organizations—far from the influence of local taxpayers and parents, who have the most at stake in their children's educational well-being. In fact, this overreach is so significant that a new report from the Pioneer Institute argues that the U.S. Education Department has skirted the law to advance Common Core national standards.

### A new report suggests the U.S. Department of Education is playing fast and loose with the law to get states to sign on to the national education standards.

Penned by Robert Eitel, former Deputy General Counsel at the U.S. Department of Education under Secretary Margaret Spellings, and Kent Talbert, former General Counsel at the Department during the same time, the report suggests that the Department of Education is exceeding its statutory boundaries by encouraging the adoption of national standards and tests through financial incentives and conditions-based NCLB waivers.

The authors argue that the Department of Education “has designed a system of discretionary grants and conditional waivers that effectively herds states into accepting specific standards and assessments favored by the Department.” The Pioneer Institute found that the current administration's support of the Common Core national standards push violates three federal laws: NCLB, the

Department of Education Organization Act, and the General Education Provisions Act. Eitel and Talbert concluded:

“Left unchallenged by Congress, these standards and assessments will ultimately direct the course of elementary and secondary study in most states across the nation, running the risk that states will become little more than administrative agents for a nationalized K–12 program of instruction. ... The Department has simply paid others to do that which it is forbidden to do.”

### Exiting the Standards

The movement to nationalize standards and testing—and, ultimately, curricula—is a challenge to educational freedom in America and is costly in terms of liberty, not to mention dollars.

For four and a half decades, the federal role in education has been growing. While costly in terms of taxpayer dollars spent and local control of education lost, this growth in federal control has failed to improve outcomes for America's children. National standards will further expand Washington's role in education, and will remove parents from decisions about the content taught in local schools.

Instead of abdicating responsibility for standards and assessments—and ceding more control over education to Washington and national organizations—state leaders should begin by determining how the decision was made to cede standards-setting authority, and, at the same time, prohibit any spending on standards implementation. Finally, states should determine how to reverse course and regain control over the content taught in local schools. ■

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