



# Common Core National Standards and Tests: Empty Promises and Increased Federal Overreach Into Education

*Edited by Lindsey Burke*

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## About the Authors

**Lindsey M. Burke** is the Will Skillman Fellow in Education Policy at The Heritage Foundation.

**Brittany Corona** is a research assistant in Domestic Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

**Jennifer A. Marshall** is the director of Domestic Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

**Rachel Sheffield** is a policy analyst in the Richard and Helen DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society at The Heritage Foundation.

**Sandra Stotsky** is Professor of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas. She was formerly Senior Associate Commissioner at the Massachusetts Department of Education and in charge of the development of the state's widely praised English Language Arts standards.

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**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
(202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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# *Common Core National Standards and Tests: Empty Promises and Increased Federal Overreach Into Education*

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Americans who cherish limited government must be constantly vigilant of pushes to centralize various aspects of our lives. Government intervention is a zero-sum game; every act of centralization comes at the expense of liberty and the civil society institutions upon which this country was founded.

Education is no exception. Growing federal intervention in education over the past half century has come at the expense of state and local school autonomy, and has done little to improve academic outcomes. Every new fad and program has brought not academic excellence but bureaucratic red tape for teachers and school leaders, while wresting away decision-making authority from parents.

Despite significant growth in federal intervention, American students are hardly better off now than they were in the 1970s. Graduation rates for disadvantaged students, reading performance, and international competitiveness have remained relatively flat, despite a near tripling of real per-pupil federal expenditures and more than 100 federal education programs. Achievement gaps between children from

low-income families and their more affluent peers, and between white and minority children, remain stubbornly persistent. While many of these problems stem from a lack of educational choice and a monopolistic public education system, the growth in federal intervention, programs, and spending has only exacerbated them.

Federal intervention in education has been enormous under the Obama Administration, and has been coupled with a gross disregard for the normal legislative process. And today, Americans face the next massive effort to further centralize education: the Common Core State Standards Initiative.

The battle over national standards and tests is ultimately a battle over who controls the content taught in every local public school in America. Something as important as the education of America's children should not be subjected to centralization or the whims of Washington bureaucrats. What is taught in America's classrooms should be informed by parents, by principals, by teachers, and by the business community, which can provide input about the skills

“In my three decades of public service, I have consistently focused on protecting the right of parents to make decisions for their children. Put simply, there are really only two options when it comes to who will determine the substance of a child's education: it will be either a bureaucrat who doesn't know the child's name, or a parent who would pour out their last drop of blood for the child.... Nothing is more important to America's future than making sure that the education of the hearts and minds of our children is securely in the purview of the parents who love and understand them most.”

—Representative Trent Franks (R-AZ)

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students need to be competitive when they leave high school.

Choice in education through vouchers, education savings accounts, online learning, tuition tax credit options, homeschooling—all of these options are changing how education is delivered to students, matching options to student learning needs. It's the type of customization that has been absent from our education system. Choice and customization are critical components necessary to improve education

in America. Imposing uniformity on the system through national standards and tests and further centralizing decision-making will only perpetuate the status quo.

The good news is, citizens and leaders in a number of states are fighting to regain control over standards and curriculum, defending against a nationalization of education. Ultimately, we should work to ensure that decisions are made by those closest to the student: teachers, principals, and parents.

## Join the Fight Against Common Core

Lindsey M. Burke

Two competing forces are pushing on America's K-12 education system today. One is an effort to infuse education choice into a long-stagnant system, empowering parents with the ability to send their children to a school that meets their unique learning needs.

The other is an effort to further centralize education through Common Core national standards and tests.

Across the country, education choice options have been proliferating rapidly, including vouchers, tuition tax credits, special needs scholarships, and education savings accounts. Educational choice is a revolution because it funds children instead of physical school buildings and allows dollars to follow children to any school—or education option—that meets their unique learning needs.

**Choice Empowers Parents** to direct their child's share of education funding, giving them options beyond an assigned government school.

**Choice Pressures Public Schools** with a much-needed competitive atmosphere, which works toward improving educational outcomes for students who take advantage of choice options as well as students who choose to attend their local public schools.

**Choice Helps Kids.** Seventeen states and Washington, D.C., now have private school choice programs—and more states are considering implementing choice options. Education choice represents the type of innovation and freedom that will provide long-overdue reform to the K-12 education system, and holds the potential to truly raise educational outcomes for every child across the country.

But at the same time this encouraging shift toward education choice is underway, there is a push to take education in the exact opposite direction through Common Core national standards and tests.

**Common Core Is An Effort to Centralize Education** by dictating the standards and assessments that will determine the content taught in every public school across the country.

**Common Core Has No Evidence** that it will improve academic outcomes or boost international competitiveness. But the Obama Administration

EVERY CHILD IS UNIQUE.  
COMMON CORE EDUCATION STANDARDS  
PUT EACH CHILD INTO ONE MOLD.



has pushed states to adopt national standards and assessments in exchange for offers of billions of dollars in federal funding and waivers from the onerous provisions of No Child Left Behind.

**Common Core Assumes** that top-down, uniform standards and assessments—driven by federal bureaucrats and national organizations—are preferable to the state and local reform efforts guided by input from parents, teachers, and taxpayers.

States have been competing to improve their education systems by implementing education choice options and other reforms such as alternative teacher certification, transparent A-F grading systems, and a focus on reading achievement.

American education is at a crossroads: One path leads toward further centralization and greater federal intervention. The other path leads toward robust education choice, including school choice and choice in curricula.

Common Core takes the path toward centralization, and state leaders should seize the moment to resist this latest federal overreach. National standards and tests are a challenge to educational freedom in America, and state and local leaders who believe in limited government should resist them.

—Originally published on *The Foundry*, May 29, 2013.



## Gov. Pence Pauses Indiana Common Core Standards

*Lindsey M. Burke*

Indiana has just given every state that agreed to adopt Common Core national education standards and tests a lesson in prudent governance. On Saturday [May 11, 2013], Governor Mike Pence (R) signed the Common Core “Pause” bill into law, halting implementation of Common Core until state agencies, teachers, and taxpayers better understand the implications of Common Core adoption.

Indiana law now requires that the Common Core standards be evaluated and compared to existing state standards, and that a cost assessment be conducted by the state’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB) before implementation moves forward. It’s something every state that adopted Common Core should have done before agreeing to do so. Specifically, the law states that

after May 15, 2013, the state board may take no further actions to implement as standards for the state or direct the department to implement any common core standards developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative until the state board conducts a comprehensive evaluation of the common core standards.

While the common standards Indiana adopted remain in effect, the state has taken the necessary steps to evaluate the merits of Common Core standards and assessments, and their costs.

What exactly does the Common Core Pause law require? The Indiana Department of Education must provide a written evaluation of the Common Core standards before July 1, 2013, which must be submitted to the governor, legislative council, state board of education, and the legislative study committee established by the Pause law. The legislative study committee will evaluate Common Core, and produce a report by November 1, 2013, to:

1. Compare Indiana’s existing state standards to Common Core standards;
2. “[C]onsider best practices in developing and adopting the standards, seeking information from a broad range of sources,” which should include teachers, content matter experts and “any other

standards the study committee considers to be superior standards”; and

3. Evaluate the cost to the state and school districts of moving toward Common Core assessments.

In addition to the state Department of Education evaluation and the legislative study committee report, the Common Core Pause law requires that by September 1, 2013, the Office of Management and Budget provide a fiscal impact statement on the cost of Common Core to taxpayers. Specifically, the Pause law states that the Indiana OMB, “in consultation with the state board, shall provide an opinion concerning the fiscal impact to the state and school corporations if the state board: (1) fully implements the common core standards; and (2) discontinues the implementation of the common core standards.”

Finally, the law requires the state board of education to hold at least three public meetings and take public testimony on Common Core standards and tests.

While the law does not prohibit the use of Common Core standards implemented by the state board, the board may not require the use of Common Core assessments until the board receives the evaluations conducted by the state Department of Education, the legislative study committee, and the state OMB. Pence stated:

I have long believed that education is a state and local function and we must always work to ensure that our students are being taught to the highest academic standards and that our curriculum is developed by Hoosiers, for Hoosiers.... The legislation I sign today hits the pause button on Common Core so Hoosiers can thoroughly evaluate which standards will best serve the interests of our kids.

Pence is exactly right. States and local school districts should determine the standards and assessments that are used in their classrooms, not national organizations or Washington bureaucrats. Indiana has provided a good model for other states that want



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to determine whether or not Common Core is a wise undertaking.

Hitting the “Pause” button is a good first step, but no matter the outcome of the evaluations by various agencies in Indiana, the idea of ceding control over the content taught in any state should give governors and policymakers pause. It is, as state constitutions and statutes demonstrate, the responsibility of states and local school districts to define and implement standards, assessments, and curricula.

Common Core national standards represent an unprecedented surrender of state educational control to Washington. Conservative leaders can reclaim control over the content taught in their local schools by resisting the imposition of national standards and tests and preventing their implementation.

*—Originally published on The Foundry, May 17, 2013.*

## Common Core Implementation Proves Problematic

*Brittany Corona*

New York and Kentucky have begun testing based on the new Common Core education standards, and they are quickly seeing frustration among educators, parents, and students.

The states that have signed on to the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) are supposed to fully implement the standards by the 2014–2015 school year. Common Core is a set of uniform math and English language arts standards and corresponding assessments that will nationalize the content taught in every public school in the country.

Earlier this month, 49 New York principals wrote a letter to New York education commissioner John King explaining the problems teachers are finding with the Common Core assessments. While the principals state that they agree with Common Core in theory and “are committed to helping New York realize the full promises of Common Core,” they write that its implementation has been haphazard:

Because schools have not had a lot of time to unpack Common Core, we fear that too many educators will use these high stakes tests to guide their curricula, rather than the more meaningful Common Core Standards themselves. And because the tests are missing Common Core’s essential values, we fear that students will experience curriculum that misses the point as well.

The New York principals reported problems with the assessments, including:

- Difficult and confusing questions (some on unrelated topics).
- Unnecessarily long testing sessions—“two weeks of three consecutive days of 90-minute periods”—that require more “stamina for a 10-year-old special education student than of a high school student taking an SAT exam.”

- Field-test questions that do not factor into a child’s score but take up time.
- Confusing directions for the English language arts sessions.
- Math problems that repeatedly assess the same skill.
- Multiple choice questions that ask the student to choose from the right answer and the “next best right answer.” The fact that teachers report disagreeing about which multiple-choice answer is correct in several places on the English language arts exams indicates that this format is unfair to students.

Kentucky, the first state to implement Common Core, has experienced similar testing problems. Last month, the Kentucky Department of Education “discontinued scoring for all constructed-response questions in each of the four CCSS-aligned high school end-of-course exams.” Leaders said that the slow turnaround times for scoring and lack of diagnostic feedback on how scores are determined would cause the results to be delayed past the end of the school year.

In two states in which the Common Core assessments have been tried, they have posed problems. Both New York and Kentucky should be red flags for states moving forward with Common Core implementation.

Common Core and the effort to create national standards and tests is further federal intervention into what children are being taught in school. With full implementation set for next year, states should reject the national education standards while there is still time.

—Originally published on *The Foundry*, June 12, 2013.



## Common Core Standards' Devastating Impact on Literary Study and Analytical Thinking

*Sandra Stotsky*

Since coming to office, the Obama Administration has been intent on standardizing what is taught at each grade level in all of the nation's schools. It has used its flagship "Race to the Top" competitive grant program to entice states to adopt the K–12 standards developed by a joint project of the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). It has also suggested, in its 2009 Blueprint for Education Reform, that adoption of these common standards could one day be a qualification for states wanting future Title I dollars for low-income schools.

Parents, teachers, and education leaders along the political spectrum are increasingly raising questions about the constitutionality and transparency of this joint project, called the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). They are also expressing concern about the high cost of implementing the standards and the national tests that will be based on them, as well as the potential loss of local control of curriculum and instruction.

**Common Core: A Step Backwards for English Standards.** Little attention has been paid to the academic quality of the mathematics, literature, and writing standards that NGA and CCSSO developed, despite the fact that they were not internationally benchmarked or research-based. The fatal flaws in the Common Core English Language Arts (ELA) standards went unnoticed because over 45 state boards of education and/or their governors hastily adopted the standards in 2010, in some cases long before they were written or finalized.

Most states agreeing to adopt the Common Core English Language Arts standards may well have thought they were strengthening high school English coursework. However, the architects of Common Core's ELA standards never claimed that their standards would do so. Rather, they claimed that these standards would make all students "college-ready."

This extravagant promise was and remains undergirded by a belief that a heavy dose of informational or nonfiction reading (50 percent of reading instructional time in the English class at every grade level) will result in greater college readiness than a

concentrated study of complex literature in the secondary English class will.

**Loss of Classic Literature.** Why do Common Core's architects believe that reading more nonfiction and "informational" texts in English classes (and in other high school classes) will improve students' college readiness?

Their belief seems to be based on what they see as the logical implication of the fact that college students read more informational than literary texts. However, there is absolutely no empirical research to suggest that college readiness is promoted by informational or nonfiction reading in high school English classes (or in mathematics and science classes).

In fact, the history of the secondary English curriculum in 20th-century America suggests that the decline in readiness for college reading stems in large part from an increasingly incoherent, less challenging literature curriculum from the 1960s onward. This decline has been propelled by the fragmentation of the year-long English course into semester electives, the conversion of junior high schools into middle schools, and the assignment of easier, shorter, and contemporary texts—often in the name of multiculturalism.

From about the 1900s—the beginning of uniform college entrance requirements via the college boards—until the 1960s, a challenging, literature-heavy English curriculum was understood to be precisely what pre-college students needed. Nonetheless, undeterred by the lack of evidence to support their sales pitch, Common Core's architects divided all of the ELA reading standards into two groups: 10 standards for informational reading and nine for literary reading at every grade level.

This misplaced stress on informational texts (no matter how much is literary nonfiction) reflects the limited expertise of Common Core's architects and sponsoring organizations in curriculum and in teachers' training. This division of reading standards was clearly not developed or approved by English teachers and humanities scholars, because it makes English teachers responsible for something they have not been trained to teach and will not be

trained to teach unless the entire undergraduate English major and preparatory programs in English education are changed.

Common Core's damage to the English curriculum is already taking shape. Anecdotal reports from high school English teachers indicate that the amount of informational or nonfiction reading they are being told to do in their classroom is 50 percent or more of their reading instructional time—and that they will have time only for excerpts from novels, plays, or epic poems if they want students to read more than very short stories and poems.

**Long-Term Consequences.** A diminished emphasis on literature in the secondary grades makes it unlikely that American students will study a meaningful range of culturally and historically significant literary works before graduation. It also prevents students from acquiring a rich understanding and use of the English language. Perhaps of greatest concern, it may lead to a decreased capacity for analytical thinking.

Indeed, it is more than likely that college readiness will decrease when secondary English teachers begin to reduce the study of complex literary texts and literary traditions in order to prioritize informational or nonfiction texts. This is because, as ACT (a college entrance exam) found, complexity is laden with literary features: It involves characters, literary devices, tone, ambiguity, elaboration, structure, intricate language, and unclear intentions. By reducing literary

study, Common Core decreases students' opportunity to develop the analytical thinking once developed in just an elite group by the vocabulary, structure, style, ambiguity, point of view, figurative language, and irony in classic literary texts.

It will be hard to find informational texts with similar textual challenges (whether or not literary nonfiction). A volume published in 2011 by the National Council of Teachers of English on how English teachers might implement Common Core's standards helps us to understand why. Among other things, it offers as examples of informational or nonfiction texts selections on computer geeks, fast food, teenage marketing, and the working poor. This is hardly the kind of material to exhibit ambiguity, subtlety, and irony.

**Common Core Is Not the Answer.** An English curriculum overloaded with advocacy journalism or with "informational" articles chosen for their topical and/or political nature should raise serious concerns among parents, school leaders, and policymakers.

Common Core's standards not only present a serious threat to state and local education authority, but also put academic quality at risk. Pushing fatally flawed education standards into America's schools is not the way to improve education for America's students.

—Originally published as *Heritage Foundation Issue Brief No. 3800, December 11, 2012.*

## Why National Standards Won't Fix American Education: Misalignment of Power and Incentives

Lindsey M. Burke and Jennifer A. Marshall

National education standards and assessments are getting renewed attention from the Obama Administration as the missing ingredient in American education reform. Proponents of national standards argue that establishing “fewer, higher, and clearer” benchmarks and aligned assessments will empower parents with information about what their children should know and which skills they should possess and that they will hold schools accountable for producing those results. National standards and testing, they say, will ensure that all children are ready for college or the workforce and will advance the educational standing of the United States.

On the one hand, such a critique of the *status quo* is well founded. Parental empowerment is essential and currently lacking. The monopoly that is the public education system must be more accountable to parents and taxpayers. Too many students leave high school without basic knowledge or skills. American education should be more competitive, particularly given the amount of money that taxpayers invest.

On the other hand, national standards and testing are unlikely to overcome these deficiencies. These problems are too deeply ingrained in the power and incentive structure of the public education system. A national standards debate threatens to distract from these fundamental issues. Centralized standard-setting would force parents and other taxpayers to relinquish one of their most powerful tools for school improvement: control of the academic content, standards, and testing through their state and local policymakers. Moreover, it is unclear that national standards would establish a target of excellence rather than *standardization*, a uniform tendency toward mediocrity and information that is more useful to bureaucrats who distribute funding than it is to parents who are seeking to direct their children's education.

Common national standards and testing will not deliver on proponents' promises. Rather than addressing the misalignment of power and incentives from which many public education problems arise, national standards and testing would further complicate these same problems. An effort by the Clinton Administration to produce national

standards and tests during the 1990s was roundly rejected because of strong opposition among Members of Congress, state leaders, and others.<sup>1</sup> This renewed push for common national standards and assessments should be similarly resisted.

Instead, federal policy can improve the alignment of power and incentives in public education by enhancing transparency of existing accountability tools and providing flexibility in program funding for states to do the same. State policy should advance systemic reforms that better align power and incentives with educational outcomes, including enhanced accountability and parental empowerment through educational choice. By pursuing this combination of reforms, Americans can better address the core issues that continue to inhibit meaningful education reform.

### Misconceptions About the Promise of National Standards and Testing

Advocates paint the national standards and testing movement as the key missing ingredient in K–12 education reform while dismissing concerns that this would lead to further misalignment of power and incentives in American education. The following are a few of the most frequently cited arguments in favor of national standards and tests:

- **Misconception #1: National standards and tests will make U.S. students more competitive with their global counterparts.** Proponents argue that national standards will make American students more competitive with their international peers. They point to international evaluation measures such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), in which American students rank in the middle of the performance distribution. Proponents note that countries that outperform the United States have national standards and that the U.S. needs national standards to move up in the ranking.<sup>2</sup>

But the relationship between existence of standards and strong educational outcomes is not clear. While the countries that outperform the

United States on international tests have national standards, so do most of those countries that score lower than the U.S.<sup>3</sup> In further defiance of the hypothetical rule, Canada handily outscores the United States on international exams but has no national standards.<sup>4</sup> Even the relationship between the quality of state standards in the U.S. and academic performance is weak and inconsistent across subject areas.<sup>5</sup>

More careful attention is needed to understand the role that national standards play in other countries before asserting that national standards would add the same value in the United States. Alternatively, state standards and tests might be a closer analogy to standards and assessment systems in countries with populations the size of American states. There are limits to international comparisons in education given the size, diversity, and federal system of the United States.

- **Misconception #2: National standards are necessary so that parents can understand how their children’s academic achievement compares to that of other students across the country.** The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) claims that “the common core state standards will enable participating states to work together to make expectations clear to parents, teachers, and the general public.”<sup>6</sup> The case for national standards and testing, however, has neither addressed the question of why current tools are inadequate to inform parents about their children’s educational progress nor specified with much precision why Americans should expect the proposed system to improve the situation. Moreover, rather than making public schools more accountable to families, the new regime is likely to make them more responsive to the centralized scorekeeper. In this way, national standards and testing fail to address the critical problems of power and incentive structures in public education today.

What kind of information do parents need about their children’s educational performance? First, they need to know whether their children are mastering the curriculum content. State criterion-referenced tests, which measure a student’s mastery of the content outlined by state

standards, currently supply this kind of information. Parents also need to know that when the state test determines that, for example, a child has mastered third-grade content, the child is keeping pace with third-grade students across the country. In other words, parents need to know how rigorous their state standards and tests are. To provide this information, some states also offer norm-referenced tests, which measure student achievement compared to other students nationally.

Another tool that can provide comparative information is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is administered to a sample of students in each state. In this way NAEP provides an external “audit” and common gauge on the quality of state standards and tests.

The meaningful information that parents and other taxpayers need is already available. The tools already exist to supply straightforward information on student, teacher, and school performance—sometimes referred to as report cards on the school system. All states are currently required by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to create such report cards. Some states, such as Florida and Massachusetts, supply more detailed reporting and straightforward information than others. What has been missing in some other cases is transparency about that information. If access to information has been inadequate, that does not justify a national standards and testing regime. Rather, policies should insist on clear reporting of the essential data to parents and other taxpayers.

Public policy should also empower parents to act on that information. Providing information is important, but it does not go far enough to address the misalignment of power and incentives in public education. Parents not only need to know about their children’s educational standing, but also need the power to do something about it. In many states, parents lack any recourse to remove their children from underperforming schools.

If the relevant information to empower parents currently exists, does the U.S. need a new national standards and testing regime? According to

advocates of new national standards and testing, existing tests are inadequate. NAEP holds no sway over teachers and students because results are not reported by schools or students. The curriculum-based exams developed at great expense by states in recent years are unacceptable, they say, because differences among the tests make national comparisons difficult.

These arguments show the considerable difference that a new national standards and testing system would make: It would empower the federal government. National comparisons are valuable for those who make national decisions; a national exam that has influence over curricula is a useful tool for national policymakers. National standards and assessments would provide an infrastructure and yield information that lines up neatly for federal interventions.

In the years since significant federal interventions in local education began in 1965, federal policymakers have sought more of the type of information that would equip centralized direction of education in America. During the development of NAEP in the 1960s, officials at the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare were eager to glean from the test results “more precise information on how well the nation’s schools are doing their job...to help Congress chart the future course of Federal school support.”<sup>7</sup>

“Federal school support” means centralized allocation of resources: In other words, “spread the wealth” goes to school. The kind of comprehensive, comparable data that a national test would supply is also a prerequisite for the liberal goal of creating an equal “opportunity to learn” and achieve to high standards through the equalization of resources among schools. Spending equalization, however, has not succeeded in raising student achievement, as the case of Kansas City shows.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the negative record, the Obama Administration’s “Blueprint for Reform” of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind) clearly aims for this goal, with numerous calls for “resource equity” among schools.<sup>9</sup> In this way as well, national standards and testing would provide the kind of information

that empowers national policymakers and bureaucrats more than parents and other taxpayers.

- **Misconception #3: National standards are necessary because state standards vary in quality.** Some states, such as Massachusetts, California, Indiana, and Virginia, have highly regarded standards. A number of other states have uneven quality of standards across subjects, and some are not up to par generally. Teachers union pressure, pervasive political correctness, and pedagogical and content disputes hamper the quality of state standards.

The variation in state standards is one of the most frequently cited reasons for adopting national standards and tests.<sup>10</sup> But the same pressures that detract from the quality of many state standards are likely to plague national standards as well. As a result, the rigor and content of national standards will tend to align with the mean among states, undercutting states with higher quality standards.<sup>11</sup>

For example, the Obama Administration’s proposal would force Massachusetts to abandon its highly regarded state standards and sign on instead to a set of national standards that are well beneath the rigor and content of the current state standards. If it fails to do so, Massachusetts would stand to lose \$275 million a year in federal funding for Title I.<sup>12</sup> For states like Massachusetts, the Obama Administration’s plan means facing the prospect of losing out on federal funding if they refuse to water down their standards.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan refers to the varying quality of state standards as “50 different goal posts.”<sup>13</sup> That is a catchy phrase, but it begs the question of whether the national standards movement is more concerned with uniformity than it is with excellence. Uniform minimum-competency standards on a national level would provide a one-size-fits-all approach that would likely lead to decreased emphasis on advanced work and a generally dumbed-down curriculum.

Centralized standards and testing would eliminate the possibility of competitive pressure for increasing standards of excellence.



## **The Failure to Address Fundamental Problems in American Education**

Contrary to the claims of proponents, the stubborn persistence of more fundamental problems in American education makes it unlikely that national standards and tests would substantially improve educational outcomes. Ultimately, reform strategies must address the fundamental power and incentive structures in public education and configure them in a way that is most likely to increase the quality of educational outcomes.

Currently, two major factors exert the most influence generally on public education and introduce motivations that can compete with the objective of improving student educational outcomes: teachers union power and funding incentives.

Teacher unions exert influence because of their mandatory dues-paying membership and contract-negotiating power. Their interests (including job security, salaries, and benefits) should be understood as distinct from student educational outcome objectives.

Funding incentives are a powerful motivator that is also distinct from the student learning objective. In particular, federal funding has had influence far beyond its 10 percent share of local school funding since the advent of systemic education reform in the 1990s.

Between 1965 and the early 1990s, the federal education role consisted in categorical education programs, designed to address a specific issue (high-poverty schools, for instance) or population (such as non-English speakers). Beginning with Goals 2000 during the Clinton Administration, federal policy began to pursue a standards-based systemic reform agenda, expanding to stipulate criteria that have school- and system-wide influence, not just discrete programmatic application as is generally the case with categorical programs.

No Child Left Behind is a good example of the systemic influence of the federal funding incentive. In exchange for federal funding, NCLB required states to test at specific intervals (using state exams), with the requirement that all students be proficient in math, English, and science by 2014. States, districts, and schools must demonstrate adequate yearly progress toward that goal in order to continue to receive federal funding.

At face value, this appears to be a push for higher standards. In reality, some states have dumbed

down their definition of proficiency on state tests in the interest of receiving federal funds. Federal funding is an incentive that can trump interest in actual progress on student outcomes. The two goals can and do diverge when power and incentives are misaligned.

Meanwhile, parents and students have a much weaker voice in the current power and incentive structure: They have neither the power to withhold funding nor collective bargaining authority. On the other hand, they have the most at stake in children's ultimate educational success and, therefore, the greatest vested interest in quality outcomes for students. Positive student outcomes are more likely to result from the alignment of incentives of those with the most at stake in students' educational outcomes.

National standards and tests do not fundamentally alter this misalignment between basic power and incentives in public education today. They will not produce the promised outcomes. More disturbingly, the initiative to create and implement national standards and tests is likely to detract further from the real reforms that would align the incentives and power in public education so that they lead to better outcomes.

But national standards and testing would not just fail to empower parents. National standards would force parents and taxpayers to surrender one of their most powerful tools for improving their schools: control of academic content, standards, and testing. Moreover, a national criterion-referenced test will inevitably lead to a national curriculum—a further misalignment of means and ends in education intended to equip self-governing citizens for liberty, and not a prospect most Americans would embrace.

When President Jimmy Carter was intrigued by a national test proposed by Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI) in 1977, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Joseph Califano warned that “[a]ny set of test questions that the federal government prescribed should surely be suspect as a first step toward a national curriculum.... In its most extreme form, national control of curriculum is a form of national control of ideas.”<sup>14</sup>

## **What State Policymakers Should Do**

**Strengthen state-based accountability systems.** Instead of signing on to common standards that will drive state curricula, state education leaders should strengthen state standards and tests.

States should follow the example of models like Massachusetts or Virginia in creating solid standards and aligned assessments. State standards can also be strengthened by continually raising the bar on achievement. As students reach content proficiency, the proficiency bar should be raised to further challenge students to meet the demands of college coursework and competitive careers.

States with outstanding standards and tests have taken great pains to ensure proper and precise learning sequencing. This is appropriate at the state level, where teacher certification and other integrated factors of a quality education system are determined.

The Bay State requires teachers to be proficient in all aspects of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and in all subject matter content, and it aligns teacher testing to state standards.<sup>15</sup> Mastery of general content knowledge and subject matter knowledge required by teachers helps to ensure that standards are aligned both horizontally, so that students learn content aligned by grade level, and vertically, to eliminate redundant content and verify subject mastery.<sup>16</sup> An initial criticism of the common core standards was that there were “grade-sequencing problems in some places...such as requiring a math skill in one grade level without prerequisite skills in the previous grade level.”<sup>17</sup>

**Provide school-performance information to parents and taxpayers.** States should publish the standards along with cut scores (passing-grade thresholds for a particular test) and clear definitions of what it means for a student to be deemed proficient. States could publish this information in a *Consumer Reports*-type guide that is accessible to parents and taxpayers. At the university level, parents and students already have access to this type of information through independent reviewers such as the Princeton Review,<sup>18</sup> the College Board,<sup>19</sup> and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute.<sup>20</sup>

It is critical that what it means to be proficient in a subject is defined clearly; determining student performance on assessments without a clear definition of proficiency is analogous to “reading a map

without a scale.”<sup>21</sup> In order to ensure that the public has a clear understanding of a state’s cut scores, the scores should be published for tested subjects with an explanation of how those scores were determined.

**Empower parents to act on school-performance information.** Ultimately, providing parents with clear information about school performance is useful only when parents can act on that information. Transparency is the first step. Empowering parents to hold schools accountable through school choice is the important next step to improve educational outcomes. Parents in Florida, for example, have access to high-quality information about their children’s school performance and, as a result, are able to make informed decisions about school enrollment.

Schools and districts in the Sunshine State are graded on a common-sense, straightforward A-to-F grading scale; parents understand that it is better to have a child in a school that has received an A than it is to have that child in a school that has received an F. Additionally, parents in Florida have access to education tax credits, private school choice for special-needs students, virtual education, charter schools, and public school choice. Transparency about school performance enables parents to be well informed; these many choices hold schools accountable to parents.<sup>22</sup>

## What Federal Policymakers Should Do

**Permit state flexibility and autonomy in exchange for transparency.** As the Obama Administration considers reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act this year, federal policymakers should pursue policies that will increase transparency in state accountability systems and improve accountability to parents. To those ends, policymakers should provide states with increased flexibility and freedom from federal red tape so that their focus is aligned not with the federal funding incentive or the demands of teachers unions, but with direct accountability to parents and students.

—Excerpted from *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 2413, May 21, 2010.*



## Teachers Lose Under National Standards Proposal

*Lindsey M. Burke*

There are numerous misconceptions about the impact that national education standards and tests would have on education. But a new misconception has surfaced: that centralized standards-setting will free teachers to teach.

National standards proponents claim that standardizing what every public school child in America will learn will somehow liberate education. Take Melinda Gates's recent remarks during the Foundation for Excellence in Education summit in October:

Let's say I'm a beginning teacher in a rural area of a small state, about to teach equivalent fractions to 3rd graders for the first time. But there are so many options. I could draw diagrams on the board. I could show that four quarters are equivalent to one dollar. But how do I know what works best?

It used to be that having all of these options was a benefit for teachers; teacher training programs and education schools have long stressed the concept of differentiated instruction. After all, children learn differently. But Gates seems to believe that teachers couldn't possibly make that decision without the official help. She continued:

If my state has implemented the common core, I should be able to consult an on-line library where I could watch videos from "Teachers of the Year" in every single state to see how they make this concept clear and hold the kids' attention.... [National standards] will give teachers and schools more freedom, not less.

What would liberate education is a thriving marketplace of ideas, not nationalization. As Jay Greene notes, "a nationalized education system in the US could be done but it would run roughshod over the needs and legitimate interests of many individuals."

National standards are unlikely to make U.S. students more competitive, will fail to provide meaningful information to parents, and will put more emphasis on uniformity rather than standards of excellence. And children won't be the only ones to lose out: With Washington dictating what will be taught in every classroom across the country, teachers will be anything but free to teach how they see fit.

—Originally published on *The Foundry*, December 19, 2011.



## Common Core: Homeschoolers Face New Questions on College Admissions

*Brittany Corona*

New information on Common Core “alignment” by the ACT, SAT, and even GED exams raises questions about the impact Common Core will have on private and homeschooled students and their ability to “opt out” of the federally incentivized standards if they want to apply for college.

David Coleman, new head of the College Board—which administers the SAT—said in an interview with Education Week that one of his top priorities is to align the SAT with the new standards. “The Common Core provides substantial opportunity to make the SAT even more reflective of what higher education wants.”

Valerie Strauss at *The Washington Post* reported in February that the College Board sent an e-mail to all members of the College Board stating, in part:

In the months ahead, the College Board will begin an effort in collaboration with its membership to redesign the SAT® so that it better meets the needs of students, schools, and colleges at all levels.... In its current form, the SAT is aligned to the Common Core as well as or better than any assessment that has been developed for college admission and placement, and serves as a valuable tool for educators and policymakers.

In 2010, the ACT also released “The Alignment of Common Core and ACT’s College and Career Readiness System,” which offers assurance that the “ACT pledges to work with other stakeholders

to develop strategies and solutions that maximize the coverage of the Common Core State Standards to meet the needs of states, districts, schools, and students.”

Even in states that do not sign on to Common Core, schools could find themselves having to align content with Common Core material in order to ensure student success on the SAT or ACT—something that could affect private schools.

Moreover, recent alignment of the GED assessment, sometimes used by homeschoolers to demonstrate content mastery, could pull homeschoolers into the Common Core web. The GED just made a major shift from its 2002 Series GED test to its 2014 GED test. Its justification: “The shift to the Common Core standards is happening nationwide at the current time.”

Proponents of the standards have tried to argue that Common Core is optional for states. But alignment of tests like the SAT, ACT, and GED poses new questions about the extent to which states, private schools, and homeschooled students will be compelled to accept national standards and tests.

Thankfully, tests like the SAT and ACT can be changed or replaced, even though they have begun a transition to Common Core. If a significant number of states pull out of Common Core, these exams can be modified, or there could be an opening in the market for other college entrance exams to take root.

—Originally published on *The Foundry*, June 23, 2013.



## Wall Street Journal: Conservatives Oppose National Standards

Rachel Sheffield

Opponents of national standards and tests see the push as furthering “federal intrusion into state education matters,” asserts *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) today.

While the standards have been touted as “voluntary” by proponents, the Obama Administration’s heavy promotion of the standards—tying Race to the Top dollars to a state’s adoption of the standards, by suggesting that federal Title I money for low-income schools could be tied to their adoption, and, most recently, by making No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waivers contingent upon a state’s adoption of common standards—makes them anything but “voluntary.”

And if these standards were simply an option on the table for states to pick up of their own volition, it’s curious that U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan would come down so forcefully—or at all—on South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley for expressing interest in steering away from adopting the standards.

That states are becoming increasingly uneasy about ceding control of the content taught in their school systems is not surprising.

“Conservative lawmakers and governors in at least five states, including Utah and Alabama, recently have been pushing to back out, or slow down implementation, of Common Core,” reports WSJ. “They worry that adoption of the standards has created a de facto national curriculum that could at some point be extended into more controversial areas such as science.”

And the science standards will likely come sooner rather than later. While states have been told that they must sign on to Common Core’s math and English language arts standards to receive federal funding and NCLB waivers, a framework for common science standards produced by the congressionally chartered National Review Council will be unveiled this Friday.

The push to nationalize education standards is troubling on many levels.

Massachusetts watered down its current standards by adopting the Common Core, and students across the country will be affected by what some content matter experts have decried as the low quality of the standards. For example, Ze’ev Wurman, a former official in the U.S. Department of Education, also notes that the standards don’t expect Algebra I to be taught in eighth grade “reversing the most significant change in mathematics education in America in the last decade.”

Sandra Stotsky, professor of Education Reform and author of the highly rated Massachusetts state standards, said that the standards “come in at about between a sixth- and eighth-grade level on average, and that will constitute college readiness.”

Of considerable concern as well is the high cost of the standards. The Pioneer Institute recently calculated that the total price tag for implementing the standards would be a hefty \$16 billion. Pioneer also released a report back in February pointing out three federal laws that prohibit federal involvement in curriculum and arguing that the Obama Administration has “simply paid others to do that which it is forbidden to do.”

Rigorous standards are an important part of promoting high quality education. However, more Washington control over schools is the wrong approach to improving education. States around the nation are moving in the opposite direction by giving parents greater control of education through policies like school choice. Rather than putting more power into the hands of the federal government, continuing to put educational decision making into the hands of those closest to the child will give American students the best opportunity for a bright academic future.

—Originally published on *The Foundry*, May 9, 2012.





## National Education Standards: An Exit Strategy for States

### Imposing Centralized Education Authority

- Unprecedented Federal Overreach:** President Obama's push for national standards and tests is an unprecedented federal overreach into education. The Common Core State Standards Initiative is entangled with federal incentives and policy and would significantly weaken state control over the content taught in local schools.
- More Federal Strings, Less Parental Control:** With little public notice, many states agreed to adopt the Common Core national standards. This movement is a challenge to

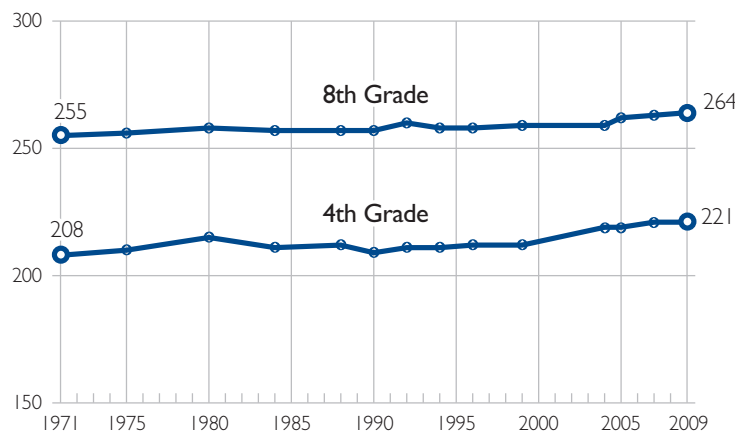
education freedom in America and costly in terms of liberty—not to mention dollars. State leaders who believe in limited government and liberty should resist this imposition of centralized standards-setting.

- Surrender of State Education Authority:** State constitutions and statutes demonstrate that the responsibility to define and implement standards, assessments, and curricula lies with states and local school districts. As states move to implement national standards and tests—an unprecedented surrender of state educational authority—conservatives should call on state leaders to reverse course and stop ceding

## Key Education Trends: 1970s to Today

### Reading Scores Remain Flat

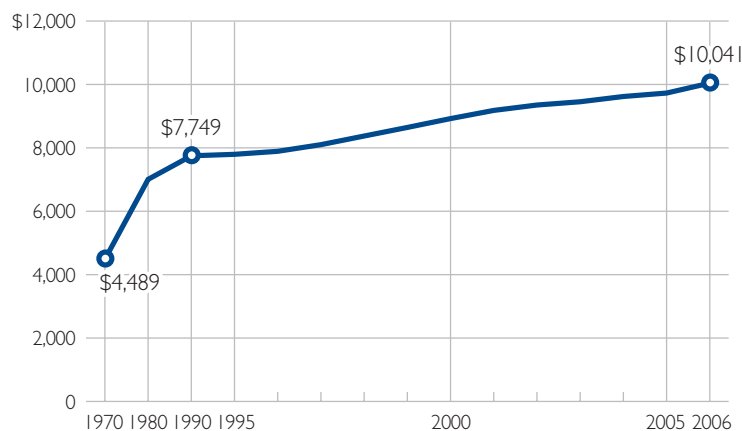
*4th- and 8th-Grade Reading Scores in the National Assessment of Educational Progress*



Source: Data from 1971 to 2008 from National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008 Long-Term Trend Data, at [http://nationsreportcard.gov/ltr\\_2008/ltr0003.asp](http://nationsreportcard.gov/ltr_2008/ltr0003.asp) (October 1, 2010). 2009 data from National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Center for Education Statistics, at <http://nationsreportcard.gov> (October 1, 2010).

### Education Costs Have More than Doubled

*Per-student spending in public elementary and secondary schools in 2007–2008 dollars*



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, at <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=66> (July 30, 2010).

standards-setting and curricular control to national organizations and Washington.

- **A Threat to Education Freedom:** The push for centralized control over what every child should learn is a challenge to educational freedom in America. State leaders should work to improve excellence in their local schools through state and local policy.

### **Restoring State Education Authority**

- **Determine How State Ceded Its Authority:** To get off the Common Core national standards bandwagon, state leaders and concerned citizens should first find out how the state adopted the standards. For most states, the state board of education, which has wide-ranging authority over standards and assessments, is the body that made the decision to adopt the standards. Advocates of federalism should be concerned that their state officials have ceded authority of the standards and assessments that drive what is taught in local schools to distant, national organizations.

- **Prohibit Spending for Standards Implementation:** Overhauling existing state standards and assessments to implement the Common Core would be a costly endeavor for states. Governors and state policymakers concerned with the national standards push can refuse to expend any state or local resources to align state standards, tests, curricula, or professional development with the Common Core national standards and tests.

- **Determine How to Reverse Course:** The rushed adoption of the Common Core in many cases preceded the elections of 2010, which brought in new governors, legislators, and school board members. Conservative leaders should be concerned about the authority handed to centralizers by their predecessors and take steps to reverse course.

*—Originally published as Factsheet No. 96, December 20, 2011.*

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## National Education Standards: Been There, Didn't Do That

Lindsey M. Burke

While 45 states and the District of Columbia jumped on the national education standards bandwagon, it's not too late to hit the brakes. We've been down this road before.

During the 1990s, the push to nationalize standards and testing reached a fever pitch. There were the infamous national history standards, which were so poor (no mention of the Apollo 11 moon landing; not a single mention of the Constitution; the absence of Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, and the Wright brothers) that the U.S. Senate rejected the resolution 99-1.

President Bill Clinton's *Goals 2000: Educate America* proposal, coordinated with his 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), called for states to establish standards and tests aligned with national models. While technically voluntary, ESEA funding was conditioned on states shifting toward standards-based reform.

In what sounds remarkably similar to the Obama Administration's Race to the Top grants, in 1994, *Education Week* described the Clinton-era effort as one in which "states agree to set content and performance standards and draft reform plans in

exchange for federal grants." And as *The Washington Post* wrote in 1995, the effort had significant support:

It was once hailed as the next great hope to improve the nation's schools, a landmark measure embraced by nearly every governor, approved with bipartisan votes in Congress and praised by countless leaders in education and business.

But despite the significant momentum behind the effort, the idea of establishing national standards and tests was ultimately rejected. States and local school districts understood that Washington was overstepping its bounds to an unprecedented extent and chose instead to retain their educational sovereignty.

The eulogy of the Common Core national standards initiative could read just the same. If state and local leaders, school superintendents and teachers, parents, and taxpayers fight against this latest—and perhaps greatest—federal overreach into what is taught in schools across America, it just might.

—Originally published on *The Foundry*, November 5, 2012.



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214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002

(202) 546-4400  
[heritage.org](http://heritage.org)