

National Curriculum Standards Are Bad for Arkansas

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Public Hearing on the Common Core State Standards

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Chairman Key, Chairman McLean, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. My name is Neal McCluskey and I am the associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a nonprofit, non-partisan, public policy research organization. My comments are my own and do not represent any position of the institute.

I have been asked to briefly discuss the research on the effects of national standards on academic achievement, and the checkered history of centralization in education.

I should say first that the conversation about what we know about the effects of national standards on educational outcomes is one that the country should have had before the Obama administration, at the urging of Common Core supporters, pushed states to adopt the Common Core national curriculum standards through the Race to the Top program.¹ But that \$4.35-billion contest essentially told states, at the nadir of the “Great Recession,” that they had to promise to adopt the national standards before the final version of the Common Core was even published, much less rigorously vetted and debated by the public. The offer of waivers from the most onerous provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act, which left states only one option other than adopting the Core to demonstrate that they had “college- and career-ready standards,” cemented adoption of the Core for states that had applied for Race to the Top grants but did not win them.

This is not to say a few arguments weren’t offered by national standards proponents before Race to the Top, but they were typically superficial, and too little time was available to develop a needed public discussion of their merit.

¹ For Common Core supporters urging federal inducements; see National Governors Association, Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, Inc., *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education*, <http://www.achieve.org/files/BenchmarkingforSuccess.pdf>, p. 37. The report calls for the federal government to furnish “incentives,” including additional funding and regulatory relief, to move states along the path toward “common” standards.

As I laid out in the Cato Institute report *Behind the Curtain: Assessing the Case for National Curriculum Standards*, the two primary arguments offered were: (1) in a modern nation it doesn't make sense to have 50 different standards, and (2) the countries that consistently beat the United States on international assessments have national standards.²

The first argument has never, that I've seen, been backed by much more than intuition. And logically, to the extent that the fifty states have different populations, economies, and needs, it makes more sense to let them tailor education standards to their unique situations. Even better would be to let individual communities set their own standards. And the ideal would be to attach money to children—*who are all unique human beings*—give educators autonomy to offer different products and specialize in the needs of unique subsets of kids, and let education be tailored to individuals, not illusory “average” kids.

How about the second argument, that the countries that beat the United States have national standards? Again, this is superficial—numerous variables go into national academic achievement other than level of standards-setting—but even on a superficial level it is flat-out wrong. While it is true that most countries that outperform the United States on international exams have national standards, so do most that we beat, creating a *non-correlation* between national standards and achievement. Adding to that, on some exams, some countries that have beaten us have *not* had national standards.³

Fortunately, there has been more empirically rigorous research, research that attempts to control for the numerous variables affecting academic outcomes, done on the effect of national standards on achievement. But not much. And what it suggests is that, at best, for standards to matter they must be linked to high-stakes *for students*, such as grade completion or graduation. And once national culture is factored in even the effect of high-stakes tests essentially disappears.⁴

It appears that countries in which the culture already values academic achievement, especially in areas easily measured by tests, do well on international exams. But it is likely not the exams and standards that primarily drive the achievement, but the desire for academic achievement that drives having the standards and exams. Meanwhile, many of those countries are looking to the United States to see how they can foster “critical thinking” and other abilities that are not easily measured by tests, but in which they believe they are seriously lacking.

² For (1), see Arne Duncan quoted in Oliver Stanley and Molly Peterson, “Duncan to Spend Billions to ‘Transform’ U.S. Schools (Update 1),” Bloomberg.com, April 16, 2009. For (2) see Randi Weingarten, “The Case for National Standards,” *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2009.

³ For a break down of the testing data, see Neal McCluskey, “Behind the Curtain: Assessing the Case for National Curriculum Standards,” *Cato Policy Analysis* no. 661, February 17, 2010, pp. 8-9.

⁴ McCluskey, pp. 9-12.

Certainly more research can and should be done on this topic, but the people of Arkansas and the rest of the country deserved to hear what we know—and don't know—about national standards before Washington coerced their adoption, and before Arkansas gave in to that coercion.

Looking more broadly, there is no reason to conclude that centralization of control is beneficial to education. It is true that the United States, and eventually much of the world, adopted public schooling systems, in which government entities control formal schooling. But that appears to be as much based on copy-cat behavior as reasoned analysis, as well as a desire by political leaders to assert control over the citizenry. Prussia, France and the Netherlands were the early models of government-controlled schooling to which Americans like Horace Mann, and others, looked. The Prussian and French systems were very much geared toward asserting state control over the people, and after decades of massive conflict over the schooling system in the Netherlands, that nation eventually moved to a system of widespread school choice. Moreover, at least based on literacy levels, the US showed no failure of people to attain education prior to the advent of the common schools, with literacy more widespread in the United States than almost any other nation. In 1840, roughly 90 percent of white adults were literate.⁵

More empirically, Andrew Coulson, my boss at Cato, has examined the results of over 150 international, statistical comparisons of education systems, and found that private-sector schools consistently outpace publicly provided, and the freer the system, the better.⁶

The logic I offered earlier explains why this is: all children are unique, and the best system is the one that most enables educators to focus on the needs of unique subsets of kids. That is school choice, not national standardization. In addition, choice drives competition and accountability: educators have to earn the business of customers rather than getting it automatically through government. That forces them to respond to the needs of their customers, who will leave if not satisfied. It also spurs crucial innovation, because the pressure is to provide as good or better of a product, at less cost, in order to earn business. This is crucial because, contrary to the assumption undergirding the Common Core, human beings are not omniscient and don't know what the "best" standard is even if there could be one for all, unique kids. It is competing standards that reveal how things could be done differently, and done better, not granting a monopoly.

Finally, even if the Common Core standards were excellent—and as I believe you will hear, that is debatable—political reality means that the standards will likely be hollowed out if they have serious stakes attached to them. This is what we've seen in state after state, and, indeed, that is why many Common Core supporters want national standards: they've seen states repeatedly fail

⁵ Albert Fishlow, "Levels of Nineteenth Century American Investment in Education," *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 26, No. 4, December 1966, p. 418.

⁶ Andrew Coulson, "Comparing Public, Private and Market Schools: The International Evidence," *The Journal of School Choice*, Vol. 3, 2009, pp. 31-54.

to set and maintain high standards coupled with strict accountability.⁷ But they ignore that governments at any levels face the same, basic problem: concentrated benefits and diffuse costs. The people with the most at stake in education policy will be the most involved in education politics, and that is the employees whose very livelihoods come from the system. And like anyone, what they would ideally like is to get paid as much as possible without anyone holding them accountable for performance. The disproportionate political power they have, by virtue of their high motivation and relatively easy ability to organize, gives them a huge advantage in getting what they want.

Perhaps this hollowing out might not happen in Arkansas, but even if not it very well could at the federal level, or whatever entity—and none has been specified—eventually takes over Common Core governance.⁸ Already Arkansas is unable to change the Common Core, other than adding 15 percent more material to the Core, which it must take in its entirety. That would be even worse were Washington to gut the Core, but condition further funding or regulatory relief on states keeping the Core. And there is no better system for giving power to special interests than consolidating power at one, national level.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

⁷ See, for instance, Chester E. Finn, Jr., Liam Julian and Michael Petrilli, *To Dream the Impossible Dream: Four Approaches to National Standards and Tests for America's Schools*, (Washington: The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2006).

⁸ Note that *Benchmarking for Success* vaguely calls for the federal government, in the “long term,” to “change existing federal laws to align national education policies with the lessons learned from state benchmarking efforts and from federally funded research” (p. 37). This could easily be seen as encouraging more permanent federal control of standards and tests should federal officials deem national standardization successful for any reason.