The Common Core of a Bipartisan Education Problem

Andrew Stewart

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The roll-out of the Common Core education standards, reinforced by the Race to the Top program that demanded the curriculum be implemented in the schools to gain future federal funding, is perhaps one of the few unique issues, along with rejection of the neoliberal trade agreements like NAFTA, that have garnered widespread bipartisan populist attention. While the career politicians in both parties are adamant about Common Core because of its ability to bust teacher unions, Donald Trump, for example, has said he wants to toss the whole program out if elected.

The rejection can also be seen on the Left. Dr. Henry Giroux, the critical pedagogy scholar, had this to say in an interview with TruthOut:

> What is particularly disturbing is how alleged reforms such as the Common Core standards, which decontextualize teaching and learning by claiming that the larger conditions that place all kinds of constraints on public schools, teaching, and how students learn do not matter. This is a very privatizing and commerce driven form of education that depoliticizes as it decontextualizes the most important aspects of schooling and pedagogy. How can we talk about learning without talking about the machinery of inequality that drives how schools are financed, the right-wing policies that are implementing the fundamentalist modes of learning such as creationism, or the deskilling of teachers by suggesting that their only role is to teach to the test? This is truly a pedagogy of repression and ironically is being championed not just conservatives, the billionaires club, but also some progressives.

This sentiment can also be found in the statements of Prof. Diane Ravitch:

> The Common Core standards have been adopted in 46 states and the District of Columbia without any field test. They are being imposed on the children of this nation despite the fact that no one has any idea how they will affect students, teachers, or schools. We are a nation of guinea pigs, almost all trying an unknown new program at the same time. Maybe the standards will be great. Maybe they will be a disaster. Maybe they will

improve achievement. Maybe they will widen the achievement gaps between haves and have-nots. Maybe they will cause the children who now struggle to give up altogether. Would the Federal Drug Administration approve the use of a drug with no trials, no concern for possible harm or unintended consequences? President Obama and Secretary Duncan often say that the Common Core standards were developed by the states and voluntarily adopted by them. This is not true. They were developed by an organization called Achieve and the National Governors Association, both of which were generously funded by the Gates Foundation. There was minimal public engagement in the development of the Common Core.

Even the Libertarian crowd is into bashing Common Core, here is a trailer for their movie BUILDING THE MACHINE produced by the Home School Legal Defense Association and featuring talking heads from think tanks like the Cato Institute! This issue is going to continue to affect the political discourse in the coming year in a way that will prove to be extremely interesting.

For instance, if you go on FaceBook, there is a wide collection of anti-Common Core groups, such as Stop Common Core in Rhode Island or the Massachusetts-based Common Core Forum. On one of these groups you might find a secular humanist Jewish mother from Cranston and on another an East Providence-based Libertarian. While one might be in favor of the community school model and another for homeschooling, it is a bipartisan grassroots resistance to Common Core that proves quite intriguing to me. When I sat down for an unrelated interview with someone fairly recently, he explained to me his son was feeling a bit down on himself because he was not keeping up to speed with the curriculum. I have heard stories like this from parents multiple times over the past few years. One parent even went as far as shelling out for a tutor for his son. There is something profoundly wrong with this system and, regardless of political affiliation, parents are getting up in arms about it.

It is worth emphasizing here that, across the political spectrum, it is understood Common Core curriculum has the potential to create a widespread two-tier system of learning that would effectively develop a class of managerial and laboring workers that would be less inclined to radicalism by having a curriculum lacking fluency in Dickens, Austen, Fanon, Malcolm X, Marx, or Melville. This is hauntingly reminiscent of the old South African apartheid system wherein the pedagogy of the townships intentionally trained blacks in a similar fashion.

So what is to be done?

The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, a teachers union-endorsed group that is advocating for the neighborhood-based community schools, is proposing a Community Walk-In nationwide on May 4, 2016 where parents, teachers, and students actively take control and engage their schools in a democratic process to assert public domain against the neoliberal education deform.

How such an effort would be made manifest in each community is still negotiable. But as Glen Ford pointed out in the most recent episode of Black Agenda Report, it would appear the fight back against Common Core is intersecting with movement against school privatization, leading to a combination of forces in the future that would prove to be quite a force to be challenged.