

Here is the conservative defense of Common Core

Posted By [Robby Soave and Rachel Stoltzfoos](#) On 03/12/2014

Conservatives remain deeply skeptical of the Common Core education standards. But one right-of-center think tank is working to change that—and its policy director says higher education standards are something conservative grassroots should demand, not oppose.

Michael Brickman, national policy director at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, outlined his reasons for supporting the controversial education reforms in an exclusive interview with The Daily Caller.

Academic standards are part and parcel with conservative education reform, he said.

“[The Fordham Institute] is led by Chester Finn, who’s a former Reagan administration official and has been fighting for these things for a long time, fighting for school choice since before it was cool,” Brickman told The DC. “But we see one part of that effort to improve education as needing higher standards.”

Prior to Common Core, education standards in the 50 states were a mess, said Brickman. In some states, such as Wisconsin, the standards were so lacking that students could achieve proficiency in certain subjects on a test even if their scores were worse than 70 percent of their peers nationwide.

“So with the Common Core its not just about raising the bar on these standards, it’s about raising the bar with the assessments to make sure we’re measuring high-quality learning, making sure that the students are graduating high school not just with a diploma but with the skills and knowledge they need to be productive, self-sufficient later in life,” he said.

The standards outline types of thinking and skills that students should master by certain grade levels. They also call for vigorous high-stakes testing to ensure that kids are actually learning the skills.

Common Core was developed by the National Governors Association, and has received backing from moderate Republican governors such as New Jersey’s Chris Christie, Louisiana’s Bobby Jindal and Florida’s Jeb Bush.

But the Obama administration has attached its seal of approval to the standards as well—lending credence to conservative fears that the standards will undermine local control over education and

promote federal interference. Indeed, Obama's Education Department has encouraged the states to adopt the standards by making federal grants contingent upon alignment with Common Core.

Brickman said the president should let the standards succeed or fail on their own merits, and should not coerce states into adopting them.

"Yeah, we wish that [Obama] would stay out of it in general," he said. "We don't think that states should be offered incentives for adopting the Common Core or any set of standards."

But that doesn't mean the standards aren't worth adopting, he said.

"There are absolutely legitimate, uh, examples of federal overreach from the Obama administration," he said. "But I don't think Common Core is one of them because... It was something that was led by the governors and the state education chiefs."

To an extent, the debate over Common Core has distracted from worse examples of federal overreach on education, said Brickman, citing the Department of Justice's intervention into Jindal's school vouchers program. The DOJ's advice to schools to cease punishing students if the punishments have a "disparate impact" on minority students is another.

While federal interference in state education policies is a real fear, the Common Core is not incompatible with states' rights and local control over education. Conservatives should continue to press for greater accountability among local education authorities, he said.

"If parents or others have a problem with those local decisions being made they need to not give those local decision makers a free pass," he said. "They need to talk to the local decision makers and stop blaming Common Core."

There is good reason for supporters of Common Core to worry: State legislators around the country have been halting implementation, thanks to the anti-Common Core outcry coming from people on the left, right and center. Tea Party groups and many teachers unions have been united in their opposition to the standards.

Though Fordham has come out strongly in support of Common Core, other free market and conservative think tanks—including the Cato Institute, American Enterprise Institute, and Heritage Foundation—have published articles from experts who warn that the standards are untested, expensive to implement and dangerous for limited government.

Still, much of the criticism is misplaced, said Brickman, who noted that grammatically incorrect homework assignments that have outraged many in the media are sometimes wrongly attributed to Common Core.

"You can kill the Common Core tomorrow and that's not going to fix indoctrination in the classroom or inappropriate materials being taught," he said. "I wish there was a simple solution and that it was as easy as killing a set of standards but the fact is, standards are the goal."

