

Common Core needs more debate

By: Neal McCluskey, Associate Director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom

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Parents in Michigan, like those across the country, want their children to have the tools they need to excel in school and beyond. The Common Core national curriculum standards were sold as the way to give students those tools. But with the standards now being implemented, a growing number of Michiganians — as evidenced by the recent House vote to withhold state funds from Common Core — are having buyer's remorse. Republican Gov. Rick Snyder's support for the Core notwithstanding, they're right to be wary, especially since Core supporters have too often ridiculed dissenters instead of engaging in honest debate.

Supporters of the Core tout the fact that 45 states have adopted the standards, but don't mistake that for enthusiastic support. Before the standards had even been published, states were coerced into adopting them by President Obama's Race to the Top program, which tied federal dough to signing on. Even if policymakers in recession-hobbled states like Michigan would have preferred open debate, there was no time. Blink and the money would be gone; which is why most people hadn't even heard of the standards at adoption time.

Now the standards are being implemented, and people are asking "what the heck is this?" Many don't like the answer: untested, uniform curriculum standards pushed on everyone by Washington, and they are acting. The Michigan House acted. The Republican National Committee officially condemned the standards. Several states are in the process of potentially withdrawing from the Core. And nine U.S. senators have requested that a Senate subcommittee handling education end all federal meddling in standards and assessment.

What have Common Core supporters done in response to this groundswell of concern? Rather than address Common Core worries and evidence such as it is empirically unsupported, moves the country closer to a federal monopoly, and treats children like identical cogs, supporters have often dodged constructive debate.

Snyder, while at a Detroit event with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, dismissed concerns as politics-as-usual, saying: "Too many people in our country ... are looking to fight someone for the sake of fighting." Apparently, it is purely political to oppose clear and heavy-handed federal intrusion in what is constitutionally - and logically - a state and local matter.

In response to the RNC's resolution, Michael Petrilli, executive vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, complained that the move "will bestow a degree of

legitimacy upon the anti-standards coalition." As if the people who have been decrying the absence of research support for national standards and many potential flaws in its content have all somehow been illegitimate.

Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush — a leading Common Core spokesman — elected to dismiss the RNC as ignorant for resisting the Core. "I don't really care if the RNC, based on no information, is going to oppose this because of some emotional pitch," he said. This despite the RNC resolution offering several valid reasons for opposing the Core, including the indisputable fact of federal coercion.

To be sure, there are some specious arguments being made against Common Core, such as the claim that it requires schools to ditch Emerson in favor of reading EPA regulations. Such assertions should be disputed by people on both sides. But those are hardly the only concerns of Core opponents, and many standards supporters are guilty of no lesser deception when they insist, for instance, that the Common Core is "state-led" and "voluntary."

The vast majority of Common Core supporters, no doubt, are motivated by what they think is best for the country and its children. Unfortunately, many also seem happy to ignore the powerful logic and evidence arrayed against their plan, and to dismiss instead of honestly debate their equally well-intentioned opponents.

As Common Core continues to be implemented the chorus of opposition is likely to grow, and it is critical that supporters and opponents alike keep sight of their truly common goal: improving American education. Dodging honest discussion is no way to get there. Snyder should take the concerns of Michigan's legislators and parents seriously, and welcome a hard look at the standards.

*Neal McCluskey is associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and author of the report *Behind the Curtain: Assessing the Case for National Curriculum Standards*.*