



Politics muddles Common Core conversation

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It is hard to look at the sudden attacks on Common Core and see anything but political opportunism at its worst.

Common Core is a set of state standards for public education adopted by Mississippi in 2010. They will be implemented fully by 2014.

Much discussion has been had over the effectiveness Common Core will have on public education. Liberal organizations such as the Brookings Institute, libertarian think tanks like the Cato Institute and conservative governors such as South Carolina's Nikki Haley have questioned Common Core.

In the case of Brookings and Cato, substantive arguments have been made and legitimate questions have been asked of the Common Core standards. Some of the same concerns raised by these and other groups we share.

Will students be taught critical thinking skills? Will an emphasis on non-fiction reading rob students of the challenges and enjoyment offered by classic and modern literature? Does Common Core provide enough flexibility that it can be adapted to cultural differences found not only across the country but within individual states? Will rote memorization replace deeper understanding?

No definitive answers can be provided for any of these questions, but they provide a guide by which we should evaluate and ultimately judge the success of Common Core over the next several years.

However, not all criticism of Common Core is legitimate. Some is downright political, nonsensical and, ultimately, distracting.

For instance, saying that Common Core is simply the federal government forcing its will on the states, as Haley and others argue, is just another tired refrain in the same ol' song. It seems that a small portion of conservative leaders would sooner abolish the U.S. Department of Education than support anything that comes out of it. However, few substantive arguments can be made for such, especially in Mississippi when you consider the amount of federal funds we receive for our public schools.

In Mississippi, we are witnessing the most inept attempt at challenging Common Core that has been witnessed in the nation. Last week, a small group of Republican senators issued a news

release that essentially said Common Core was a racist and prejudicial set of standards because it sets lower achievement levels for minority students than for white students.

The problem with such a ridiculous charge is that it is patently false. Common Core does not set achievement levels. Common Core merely outlines the standards that should be followed in reaching whatever achievement levels are set. The achievement levels are a requirement of No Child Left Behind, which mandates that students of all races should be at equal achievement levels by 2014.

Mississippi was one of several states that sought and received an extension because it was clear we were not on track to meet the goal by 2014. The stepped achievement levels set by the Mississippi Department of Education were approved by the federal government with the stipulation that the state adopt college readiness standards. Common Core is what Mississippi, along with most other states, chose to adopt.

Even after the fallacy of the small group of Republican state senators was explained, members have refused to acknowledge their statements were wrong. Instead, they say Common Core and the differing achievement goals for different races are intertwined and, therefore, Common Core is at fault. That is such an asinine argument that it does not deserve further explanation.

The differing achievement goals exist only as a road map to reaching equality among all racial subgroups. If looked at from that point, which is factual, one could say Common Core is designed specifically to raise the lower achievement levels of some racial subgroups to the higher achievement levels of other racial subgroups.

At the end of the day, the testing models first prescribed under No Child Left Behind have proved to be a failure for public education. No Child Left Behind was enacted at the urging of a Republican president, enhanced by Republican- and Democrat-led Congresses and supported by the current Democratic administration.

Yet, the problems with it are clear, and no one has wanted to step up and make changes. This, in part, is what Common Core is. It's an attempt at the state level to adopt standards that will help put all students on equal footing and improve college and career readiness.

The world is shrinking, and national education needs have become more aligned across the 50 states. Common Core seeks to provide standards that help students meet those needs. And while we share several legitimate and intellectually valid concerns, the political sideshow is nonsense we can all do without.