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Common core delay is an opportunity for real education reform: As I See It

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Gov. Tom Corbett's decision to delay implementation of controversial national education standards provides an opportunity to refocus efforts on expanding an education initiative with proven success: Pennsylvania's Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program.

Last week, Gov. Corbett ordered the delay of the state's Common Core Standards, which school districts had been set to start implementing in just under two months. Common Core is a federally-backed initiative intended to create uniform standards across states.

Chief among myriad concerns, Common Core incentivizes top-down conformity. Standardized tests compel schools to teach the same concepts on the same schedule, without regard to the interests or abilities of individual students. If the goal is to provide a quality education to each unique student, a one-size-fits-all approach is clearly not the right one.

In explaining the administration's decision, Department of Education spokesman Tim Eller emphasized that Corbett "remains committed to ensuring that all Pennsylvania public school students—regardless of zip code—have access to a quality education."

If so, the governor should redirect his efforts toward expanding the EITC program.

The EITC program grants 75 to 90 percent tax credits to corporations in return for donations to nonprofit scholarship organizations that fund assistance to low-income students.

Since its inception in 2001, more than 350,000 EITC scholarships have been awarded to students so they can attend the schools of their choice. There are currently more than 45,000 low-income students receiving EITC scholarships.

While there is no research demonstrating that national standards like the Common Core would improve student outcomes, there are numerous high-quality studies showing that parental choice and competition between independent and public schools improve academic performance, raise graduation rates, and increase college matriculation.

A recent literature review by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice reported that 11 of 12 random assignment studies—the gold standard of social science research—

found that school choice improves student outcomes. Only one found no visible, positive impact, and not one found negative results.

Moreover, studies of Florida's scholarship tax credit program found modest but statistically significant increases in the academic performance of both public school students and students who move to independent schools as a result of the increased choice and competition.

A wider review of hundreds of international studies using various methodologies revealed that the education systems that produce better outcomes are not those that are more centralized but rather those that are closer to a free market. The review found that by a ratio of 15-1, market-like delivery of education outperformed government monopoly.

By allowing parents to choose what's in the best interest of their children, educational choice programs foster competition, innovation, and specialization. Unfortunately, Pennsylvania's EITC program is severely limited.

The program currently caps the amount of available tax credits far below the level of demand. For example, over the last twelve years, the Children's Scholarship Fund Philadelphia has had more than 115,000 applicants for the 10,500 scholarships that it has been able to grant. In total, the EITC program is able to serve only about 2.5 percent of students statewide.

A few years ago, Florida lawmakers addressed the same issue by raising the cap on their scholarship tax credit program and instituting an automatic growth provision. Whenever contributions to the program exceed 90 percent of the credit cap, the cap increases by 25 percent in the following year. The scholarship tax credit programs in Arizona and New Hampshire have similar growth provisions to allow their programs to meet demand.

This proposal may sound expensive, but it can actually produce considerable savings. In 2011, a Commonwealth Foundation study found that the EITC program saves Pennsylvania about \$512 million each year. That's because the vast majority of low-income scholarship recipients, whose families earn less than \$30,000 on average, would be attending public schools in the absence of the program.

The average EITC scholarship is a small fraction of the more than \$14,000 in total per pupil expenditures for Pennsylvania's public school students.

There are very few programs that can simultaneously save money and measurably improve lives. The EITC program is one of them. For those policymakers who desire an education system that best meets the needs of individual children, the evidence is clear. Instead of heading down the path of greater standardization, Pennsylvania should continue to empower parents and liberate educators through school choice.

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