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GENE HEALY

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Healy: Parents deserve louder voice in country's education debate

By: **GENE HEALY**
Examiner Columnist
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While Washington, D.C., focuses on the federal power grab in health care, there's another ongoing drive for regimentation that hasn't received the scrutiny it deserves. A panel of educators assembled by 48 state governors and school superintendents just released a uniform set of math and reading standards for the nation's students.

If the Common Core State Standards Initiative were totally voluntary, there would be little to fear. But for too many education reformers, whatever is not forbidden is compulsory.

Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan has said that "if we accomplish one thing in the coming years, it should be to eliminate the extreme variation in standards across America."

Last year's stimulus package gave Duncan more than \$4 billion to hand out to states doing D.C.'s bidding. "No other education secretary has ever had that much cash at his disposal," the National Journal noted.

Louis Napoleon's education minister once bragged to a visitor that a glance at his watch would let him determine what literary passage every French student was studying at that moment.

In a recent New York Times op-ed, "One Classroom From Sea to Shining Sea," Susan Jacoby decries the "crazy quilt" of educational approaches that results from the American "tradition of state and local control."

But the drive for federal standards ignores the risks inherent in enforced uniformity. Under Bill Honig, superintendent of public instruction from 1983-93, California embraced "whole language" reading, which replaces a structured phonics approach with one that encourages children to guess at words they don't know and get creative with spelling.

Little wonder, then, that reading scores plummeted during Honig's tenure.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry has resisted the drive for national standards, keeping his state out of both the Common Core Initiative and the competition for Duncan's federal "Race to the Top" dollars.

However, Texas' recent battle over textbooks shows that even on the state level, fastening a government-imposed curriculum on people of disparate backgrounds

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causes bitter divisions. Two weeks ago, the GOP-dominated Texas Board of Education made national news by revising the social studies curriculum in accordance with red-state values — over the protests of liberal and centrist parents.

From my libertarian perspective, the revisions seem a decidedly mixed bag: introducing kids to Hayek and Friedman (good), while downplaying Jefferson and Darwin (bad).

As my colleague Neal McClusky points out in "Why We Fight: How Public Schools Cause Social Conflict," "Throughout American history, public schooling has produced political disputes, animosity, and even bloodshed."

Given the one-size-fits-all nature of government-run schooling, those fights are inevitable unless and until we move toward a decentralized system "in which individual parents are empowered to select schools that share their moral values and educational goals for their children."

"Education standards must be determined by Texas, not Washington," a Perry news release proclaimed. And that's a start. But how about letting parents decide?

Examiner columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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