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Hoosiers are right to be wary about Common Core

By: Neal McCluskey – April 30, 2013

Indiana has just shot into the spotlight of the education world, with the legislature voting over the weekend to hit the pause button on the Common Core national curriculum standards. But this action is just the loudest strike in a growing backlash against the Core, a revolt set off by the arrival of the federally backed standards in schools across the country. And people are right to be wary, especially since Core supporters have too often ridiculed dissenters instead of engaging in honest debate.

While 45 states have adopted the Common Core, don't mistake that for enthusiastic, nationwide support. States were essentially coerced into adopting by the President's Race to the Top program, which tied federal dough to signing on. Even if policymakers in recession-hobbled states would have preferred open debate, there was no time. Blink, and the money would be gone. Which isn't to say there wasn't opposition — there certainly was among policy wonks — but most people hadn't heard of the standards at adoption time, and their effects wouldn't be felt for several years.

Today, the effects are here, and so is the opposition. Indiana is arguably the highest-profile rebel, with its new legislation set to halt implementation of the core so Hoosiers can, at the very least, learn about what they're getting into. Nationally, the Republican National Committee has officially condemned the standards, while several states are in the process of potentially withdrawing from the core. Finally, Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, has requested that a Senate subcommittee handling education end federal meddling in standards and assessment.

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

In Indiana, Democrats for Education Reform State Director Larry Grau wrote a blog post and blast email that said, "it's growing late and some of us have spent the night canoodling with far-right opponents of the Common Core State Standards. If that sounds like you, it's time you ask yourself this question: 'Am I going to hate myself for this in the morning?'" Of course the post included not one argument against the standards — just smears.

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, potential flaws in its content, or other logic and evidence-based concerns have all somehow been illegitimate.

Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush — a leading Common Core spokesperson — 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 the Common Core, such as the claim that it requires schools to ditch Emerson in favor of reading EPA regulations. Such assertions should be refuted 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 logic and evidence arrayed against their plan, and to slime instead of honestly debate their equally well-intentioned opponents. Let’s hope that’s not because they think an honest debate is one they’d lose.

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.