

## Can the Common Core Coalition Keeps Its Finlandophiles in Check?

By Rick Hess on April 5, 2011 9:45 AM | [1 Comment](#) | [Recommend](#)

It's a good thing that David Coleman and Gene Wilhoit are gentlemen, because otherwise they'd be sorely tempted right about now to crack open some Rahm Emanuel-esque whoop-ass on their putative friends and allies in the Common Core effort. 10

In a virtuoso display, a coalition of states led by folks at the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers crafted a set of Common Standards in the course of 2009 and 2010 that turned out better than I'd expected. The standards were a pleasant surprise in terms of quality, reflected a sensible humility, sidestepped ideological clashes over mandated readings, and lived up to the mantra of "fewer, clearer, higher." The result was more-or-less what had been promised--a voluntary, common set of broad standards that could facilitate common assessments. At the same time, proponents kept promising that participating states were not signing up for any particular curricula and the effort would be a state-based collaboration and not a national endeavor. Participating states were told they were not making any grand commitments--but were carefully boarding a slow-moving train and could choose to ride or disembark as they saw fit.

The result was a broad but shallow coalition that gave the Common Core enormous momentum and led more than 40 states to adopt it (aided, in no small part, by ED pressing states to sign up for the Common Core as part of Race to the Top). This mile-wide, inch-deep coalition consisted of both national curriculum true-believers consumed by Finland envy, and a much larger population of centrist Democrats and Republicans who think common standards and assessments can promote transparency and enable innovation--but who are hesitant to sign up for anything more.

Well, we're in the early stages of watching that coalition potentially unravel. It hasn't yet, and it may not, but there's now at least a fifty-fifty chance that the Common Core effort will dissolve into an ideological clash--with many similarities to the ludicrous early '90s debate over national standards--within the next two years. And the irony is that the result will be less the consequence of fervent opposition than of overreaching by enthusiasts.

A couple developments worth watching.

A few weeks back, the "We-love-Finland" crowd had their day, when the AI Shanker Institute (the AFT's think tank) issued a manifesto calling for something that felt a whole lot like a common national curriculum (or something that seems functionally indistinguishable, by the time one parsed all the recommendations). In one short document, the Shankerites managed to do much to undermine the loose confederation that had supported the Common Core. The next day, one leader of the Common Core effort could only mutter to me, "What the hell were they thinking?" The Shanker document featured 75 signatories. There were dozens of professors, curricular gurus, and consultants, but hardly anyone from the other constituencies that compose the Common Core coalition.

Striking was the absence of signatories from the charter school community, the new education sector, the worlds of merit pay and accountability, the Bush administration, or from among any of the serious "conservatives" who embrace the Common Core project but remain leery of big government. Rather, the Shanker Institute signatories included a slew of left-leaning academics and consultants, dotted with my pal Checker Finn and a few long-retired Republican governors. It's not clear whether the Shanker Institute couldn't get anyone else to sign or didn't even think to try. Either way, it points to the looming and crucial divide between the Finlandophiles and the bulk of the less diehard Common Core coalition.

In a particularly telling example of how this will likely play out, staunch Core Knowledge proponent Robert Pondiscio attacked new sector icon Tom Vander Ark as "anti-literacy" for voicing concerns that unwieldy common assessments, much less a de facto national curriculum, could dictate scope, sequence, and pacing of instruction in ways that stifle online learning. Vander Ark **had observed**, "A 'common curriculum' (whatever that means) is the wrong idea when we're about ready to develop 'school of one'-not just a 6th grade math program, but fully customized engaging learning sequences for every student." Pondiscio **blasted back**, "If you are opposed [to] teaching a common body of shared knowledge to all children, you are opposed to teaching children to read. You are in favor of illiteracy, either by choice or indifference." The clash between Pondiscio, a disciple of Don Hirsch's "cultural literacy," and Vander Ark, a champion of tech-enabled curricular customization, highlights precisely a key fault line in the Common Core coalition.

In DC, key Hill Republicans, like House K-12 Subcommittee Chairman Duncan Hunter and Senate HELP Committee member Rand Paul, haven't yet had an opportunity to really focus in on the degree to which the Common Core effort has been pushed and funded by the U.S. Department of Education. I suspect that this issue will arise this year or next, and that it will fuel some substantial tensions between Hill Republicans and administration supporters of Common Core. None of this is aided by whispers around DC that what's really needed is to collapse the two testing consortia into one, a development which would hold the promise of a de facto national test to accompany the AFT's de facto national curriculum.

In a take that has been marginal but is likely to gain increasing traction as the Finlandophiles keep pushing, Cato's Neal McCluskey **thundered**, "The [Shanker Institute] petitioners assure us, 'use of the kinds of curriculum guidelines that we advocate in the core academic subjects would be purely voluntary.' Oh please, please--stop lying to us! Here's the only absolutely clear thing that we've learned so far from the national standards push: Leading national standardizers do *not* want adoption of their plans to be truly voluntary...Whatever Washington connects to federal money becomes *de facto* mandatory, and they most certainly want their guidelines riveted to federal bucks."

The Common Core's fiercest critics are, with good cause, complaining of a bait-and-switch. They have a point. The key going forward is what happens within the charter and ed tech communities, among Republican chiefs and governors who supported the Common Core, and with "school reformers" who embraced state-driven common standards as a smart step to promote more meaningful reporting and accountability. These are folks who may have been fine with more common standards and metrics but who never imagined they were thereby signing onto national curricular frameworks, national content, and a 21st century "one best system."

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