

Orlando Sentinel

The Front Burner: Initiative's backers would put Washington in charge

Neal McCluskey
Oct 4, 2013

With districts nationwide being forced to implement Common Core State Standards, the outcry from parents, and sounds of states backtracking, are becoming deafening. In the loudest bang yet, Gov. Rick Scott has directed the state Board of Education to withdraw from one of two Core testing groups and identify "risks of federal intrusion." Fear that implementation of the Core constitutes a Washington takeover of education is what's driving concern across the country.

Core supporters, including former Gov. Jeb Bush, insist such concerns are baseless. The standards, their mantra goes, are "state-led and voluntary," and anyone who says otherwise is "misinformed." But Washington has been the Core's key driver, which is exactly what supporters have wanted.

The closest to state-led the Core has been is in coming from the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers. They aren't legislatures, but at least they include state-level officials. But that doesn't mean Core supporters want states in charge. Many have long argued that states won't hold themselves accountable, which is why they've been quietly begging for federal force.

The first plea came in the 2008 report "Benchmarking for Success," which called on Washington to employ "tiered incentives" to push states toward national standards and assessments. Proposed prods included "increased flexibility ... in meeting federal educational requirements" and connecting standards to federal dough.

One year later, the Common Core State Standards Initiative was created, and its website repeated the entreaty. It has since been scrubbed, and now implies that Washington had no role in the Core because it did not directly develop it or outright mandate adoption.

Pictures: Child stars then and now

But Washington didn't outright mandate that states follow the despised No Child Left Behind Act either. It only said if states wanted back some of the tax dollars their citizens had to fork over, they must "voluntarily" do as they're told.

Which brings us to the Race to the Top program, a \$4.35-billion contest funded by the 2009 "stimulus," and No Child Left Behind waivers — just the kind of coercion supporters had asked for.

Race to the Top required recession-blasted states to adopt the Core to compete for dough, and even forced them to promise to adopt the standards before the final versions were published. Waivers locked compliance in, especially for states that didn't win Race money. To get one, states either had to adopt the Core or have their standards certified as "college- and career-ready" by their largest public university system. Most states went with the standards they'd already promised to use.

Washington also employed Race to the Top to fund national groups creating Core tests, one of which Scott wants to leave: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, which has already been abandoned by five other states.

So why won't Core backers admit this is a largely federal effort?

First, federal control is hugely unpopular. Parents want schools responsive to them, not Washington bureaucrats.

Next, federal control will make things worse, Core supporters' hopes notwithstanding. Washington works for special interests more than anyone else, meaning teachers unions and administrators associations — the exact people supporters hope to hold accountable.

Of course, special-interest power exists in states and districts, but under federal control, dissatisfied parents and businesses couldn't even exert force by moving. And "laboratories of democracy" — states able to try new things without bringing everyone down if they fail — would be shuttered.

Core supporters won't admit it, but they want Washington in charge. Thankfully, the public is figuring that out.