



Jeb's Common Core quagmire: How the monied candidate is trying to evade a mess

Bush collects credit for sticking to his guns on an issue that angers the GOP base. In fact he's wildly obfuscating

By Joan Walsh

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Jeb Bush made his big jump from lavish closed-door meetings with wealthy donors into what dull punditry has labeled “retail politics” in Iowa this past weekend. He got both credit and criticism for sticking to his guns on issues that might alienate the conservative GOP base: his support for federal Common Core education standards and immigration reform that includes some kind of pathway to citizenship for those here illegally.

It seemed as though Bush was testing his theory that a successful GOP presidential candidate had to be willing to “lose the primary to win the general” – in Iowa, known for favoring right wingers like Mike Huckabee and Rick Santorum, of all places.

But as usual, mainstream media gave Bush high marks for good intentions and ignored the contradictions of his actual remarks, particularly when it came to Common Core. He was pretty consistent on immigration. “Immigrants that are here need to have a path to legal status,” Bush said. “Nobody I know has a plan to deal with illegal immigration other than to just say they’re going to be rounded up and taken away.” On cue, a Drudge headline screamed “Jeb pushes amnesty,” and Alex Jones’s Infowars.com agreed. “Jeb Bush pushes amnesty: GOP candidate no different from Obama.”

But Bush was much squishier on the Common Core controversy, even if the media didn’t seem to notice. A headline on a widely published Associated Press story read “Jeb Bush refuses to back down on Common Core,” though what Bush actually told activists was more complicated.

An Iowa Republican who supports the federal education standards thanked Bush for his backing at a Des Moines fundraiser. “I applaud you for your support of Common Core,” Mary Ann Miller said, urging him to “keep on that topic.”

“I’m not going to back down on that,” Bush told Miller, though he never used the term “Common Core.” Then he added the non-sequitur: “What I can tell you is the federal government shouldn’t be involved in this.”

What does that even mean? Common Core is a federal government initiative to get states to raise educational standards; that's the gist of the right's complaint against it. (The left hates its relentless emphasis on testing, which has driven actual learning out of many classrooms.)

To understand what Bush is up to, it helps to read his widely ignored op-ed in last Friday's Washington Post, "Let states take the lead in education." Here Bush attempts to recast Common Core as an effort to merely back existing state initiatives to raise education standards.

The federal government's role in elementary and secondary education should be limited: It should work to create transparency so that parents can see how their local schools measure up; it should support policies that have a proven record; and it should make sure states can't ignore students who need extra help. That's it.

"That's it." Bush's rhetorical dodge obscures the fact that the role he's laid out for the federal government is enormous, if schools don't create transparency and if states "ignore students who need extra help" – and many do. And while his op-ed praises "state driven" Common Core standards, he insists no state should be forced to adopt Common Core. That's a pretty huge concession to the measure's opponents, as only 40 states have adopted the standards and some of them are being pushed to opt-out.

But it doesn't seem to have mollified Common Core opponents. Neal McClusky of Cato's Center for Educational Freedom blasted Bush's op-ed to Breitbart News. "Perhaps because of all the heat he is taking over the federally-driven Common Core, Gov. Bush sounds like he wants state, local, and parental control of education," McClusky noted. He went on:

But looking at the role he lays out for Washington shows how unfettered he would actually have the feds be. Saying, among other things, that Washington should support "policies that have a proven record" opens the door to limitless meddling and control. All someone in Washington has to say is they think their favorite policy has a record they think is proven and – voila! – Washington can force all schools to obey it. And where, by the way, does the Constitution authorize such federal policymaking? Nowhere.

To muddy things further, a pro-Common Core group, the Collaborative for Student Success, has begun airing ads in Iowa, the New York Times reports. Partly funded by the Gates Foundation, the effort seeks to explain to Iowa voters why Common Core is a good thing. But that might not be a good thing for Bush.

"The pro-Common Core ads that began running in Iowa this week don't help Bush, I think they hurt," said Craig Robinson, who writes at TheIowaRepublican.com. "I think Bush can minimize the issue by focusing on his record as governor, which is very conservative."

Why much of the media is ignoring Bush's twists and turns on Common Core isn't clear yet. But maybe they'll eventually notice if conservative primary voters aren't fooled.