

Three Thoughts on Education This Week: The Wrongheaded Thinking of Jay Greene and Anthony Cody

May 16, 2011 [No Comments](#) by RiShawn Biddle



Standards doesn't mean the end of innovation. If anything, it is often the start.

Standards Lead to Innovation: One wouldn't think that a paragon of the school reform movement such as Jay P. Greene of the George W. Bush Center would share anything in common with Anthony Cody, the Oakland teacher and *Education Week* columnist who is among the most-favored among education traditionalists. But strange bedfellows always about when it comes to curriculum and standards — and, in the case of the idea of whether there should be national standards and curriculum to match, one on which many conservative (and almost all libertarian) reformers find common ground with many defenders of traditional public education.

As you know, last week, Greene and 100 other conservative and libertarian reformers (including Robert Enlow of the Foundation for Educational Choice and Lance Izumi of the Pacific Research Institute) issued their own “counter-manifesto” against efforts to have every state enact the Common Core Standards in English and Math (already approved for use in 43 states so far) and ultimately, create a common curriculum. Taking a blast at their Democrat and conservative colleagues (including Katie Haycock of the Education Trust and Thomas B. Fordham Institute President Chester Finn), who, along with education traditionalists such as the American Federation of Teachers-funded Albert Shanker Institute, have [called for a national curriculum](#) along the lines of Common Core, Greene and others proclaim that a “one-size-fits-all, centrally controlled curriculum” is unworkable and that it will put an end to local control over education. On his own, Greene goes even further and [declares](#) that the efforts by the U.S. Department of Education to push acceptance of Common Core standards (and ultimately, of a national curricula) is in violation of federal law.

Cody himself hasn't signed the manifesto. But this past Monday, he joined common cause with Greene and company, [declaring](#) that the push for national curriculum and Common Core standards (along with the U.S. Department of Education's tacit support for the moves) is “put us on the road to transforming our system into the epitome of centralization.” From where he sits, national curriculum and standards are little more than a way for his particular bogeymen — textbook publishers and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation — to weaken the autonomy of teachers. Similar sentiments are echoed by Cody's counterparts in opposing school reform, most-notably [Larry Cuban](#) and [David Cohen](#).

From where your editor sits, I'm conflicted. I'm no big fan of the concept of a national curricula because I think it would not allow for innovation in either standards or curricula. So I understand the fear shared by the Greene and Cody crowd (along with libertarian reformers such as Cato's Neal McCluskey and Andrew Coulson). More importantly, national curricula will get bogged down in areas such as history — in which politics can overcome what should generally be a simple exercise in giving children a full sense of what has happened in the world and in America over time. At the same time, a national curricula would be far better than what currently exists today in the main. While there are some real innovative curriculum development efforts being done by teachers and others

on the margins, the reality is that much of the work out there actually damns kids — especially poor and minority kids — with low expectations.

But national curricula standards are a different thing entirely. And this is where Greene, Cody and their respective parties get it all wrong.

Greene and Cody act as if standardization is a bad thing. It isn't. If anything, standardization done properly can actually allow for more innovation in curricula development because there are now commonly agreed-upon content areas around which a variety of curriculum developers can rally. This is true in nearly all aspects of technology and life. For example, it was the tacit acceptance of the Microsoft DOS/Window standards (fostered by the move by IBM and the Microsoft to license the operating system to other computer-makers) that helped advance the development of the technologies that have helped boost productivity and improve quality of life; free from having to develop their own operating systems, computer makers could now compete on price affordability and wide arrange of features that have benefited consumers. It even forced Apple Computer to change aspects of its own proprietary operating system to meet the expectations set by Microsoft and adapted by the market, making it a competitive alternative. From the adoption of Hypertext Markup Language (which spurred the development of the Internet) to the wide use of the Android operating system (which has helped lead to a boom in smartphones and tablet-style computers), standardization has proven to be a boon, not an obstacle, to innovation.

What Greene and Cody (along with more-libertarian types such as Neal McCluskey and Andrew Coulson) seem to defend is the continuation of a status quo practice that no longer works. Allowing teachers, principals and districts to continue developing their own curricula without any North Star — the longstanding practice in education — has never really worked. But it didn't matter because education wasn't a factor in economic and social achievement. But we now live in an age in which what a child knows is even more critical to their economic and social success than ever. While there are some innovations in curricula that are happening, there is a clear need for rigorous, demanding, college preparatory standards that will help foster the creation of the kind of rigorous curricula our children need for their future success.

This is what Common Core does. It sets a high floor for what kids should learn, no matter if they attend school in Carmel, Ind., or Camden, N.J.— while giving those who want to innovate curricula the flexibility to do so within a reasonable set of guidelines. Given that the math curriculum standards in all but 11 states fall short of Common Core's rigor — and only two states offer 8th-grade math standards that match those of the top-performing nations in math according to the 2009 PISA exam — Common Core is a good first step towards the development of more-rigorous and innovative content.

Meanwhile Greene, Cody and company are implicitly (and in the case of Greene and his counter-manifesto signatories, explicitly) defending a model of education — local control by traditional school districts — that hasn't worked in improving student achievement. Save for rare examples such as the work done in New York City, Chicago, and D.C.,

local control more often acts as an impediment to reform initiatives than a breeding ground. As seen in the gains in student achievement made by states such as Florida, successful school reforms have been driven not by districts, but by standards and accountability advocates and other reformers who have worked in statehouses to push for the passage of reforms. This is a reality pointed out by Greene's own [co-writers on his eponymous blog](#) and by No Child Left Behind Act mastermind Sandy Kress in a piece he wrote earlier this year for the [Harvard Journal on Legislation](#). Even those efforts weren't driven by state leaders alone; they were aided school reformers working together across state borders.

Considering that much of what the Greene and Cody crowds advocate for — including school choice and stronger role of teachers in education — actually runs counter to the concept of local control, their tacit support of this obsolete form of educational governance seems rather silly.

As an admirer of Greene's work, I'm not happy to call him out on this faulty thinking, and the same is true for Enlow and his other counterparts who signed the counter-manifesto (Cody, though admirable in actually showing how teachers should participate in education discussions and be players in some elements of reform, is a [different story](#)). But both parties opposing national standards need to realize that American public education needs more than just keep on keeping on in systemic academic failure.

The Power of Gubernatorial Persuasion: It is amazing what happens when a governor puts his political capital behind school reform — especially when he or she has other political ambitions at stake. This can be seen in Indiana, where Gov. Mitch Daniels (who may run for the Republican presidential nomination) teamed up with the Hoosier State's Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tony Bennett, to pass a series of reforms to overhaul teacher training, expand school choice, and provide full-day kindergarten to all students.

Another example can be seen in New York State, where Gov. Andrew Cuomo — who may end up actually fulfilling the national aspirations his father Mario squandered two decades ago — has pushed for making the state's rubric for teacher evaluations more-rigorous. This came out of necessity. Earlier this year, he faced pressure from school reformers who supported his campaign — along with push from New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg — to abolish the state law requiring layoffs to be based on reverse-seniority, which leads to teachers with less-seniority losing jobs in spite of their performance in improving student achievement. At the same time, Cuomo had to be mindful of the American Federation of Teachers' influential Empire State unit, which opposes any move to weaken seniority-based privileges (in spite of the views of their own younger members). And given the lack of rigorous evaluations based on student achievement, Cuomo couldn't push for abolishing the last hired-first fired law without some form of political cover.

So Cuomo chose a different path: He focused on the state law passed last year that allowed for the use of student test score data in teacher evaluations. While it was a small

step towards advancing the use of private sector-style performance management in education, it wasn't enough. Just a fifth of a teacher's evaluation was to be based on student performance on the state's standardized tests — which match up to the Empire State's curriculum standards and allow for the evaluation of teacher quality throughout the state — while another fifth was to be based on local benchmark tests of varying quality that don't match up to standards. In short, evaluations were still largely subjective, making them of little use for anyone.

So Cuomo, along with other reformers, pushed the state's board of regents to craft new rules that would allow for districts to use state test data in place of local assessments on student performance, essentially making the evaluations more-rigorous. It also allows for Cuomo to eventually accede to pressure from Bloomberg and other reformers to end last in-first out, while at the same time, weakening the ability of the AFT to continue justifying its opposition to such a move. And in the process, Cuomo comes off as a Solomonic decision-maker and a school reformer at the same time, placating reformers and more-moderate players among the status quo who realize the proverbial handwriting is on the wall.

All that said, Cuomo's move isn't perfect. Districts still have to get the approval of their AFT and NEA locals to begin using the state's new evaluation regime, giving teachers unions too much authority over that which should be the province of management alone. The fact that Cuomo has no direct oversight over education policy and has to use persuasion to get reforms in place is also problematic. New York State needs to amend its constitution and place education under the governor's control. But Cuomo's effort, along with that of Daniels, offers an important lesson to [governors](#) working in byzantine school governance structures — one from which they should fully learn and embrace.

Local Control as Obstacle to School Reform, Peach State Edition: Today's Georgia Supreme Court [ruling](#) invalidating the creation of a state commission charged with authorizing charter schools offers an important lesson for reformers: They will need to actually embrace full reform of educational governance and finance — even amending state constitutions — in order to make their efforts a reality.

On its face, the battle in Georgia was over which level of government was in charge of actually authorizing and overseeing schools. Considering that the state constitution already allows for the state to operate its own special schools (and gives it oversight over education), it wouldn't be a stretch to interpret that it also allows it to authorize charters. But 4-3 majority on the state high court interpreted this differently. And it's an interpretation that's difficult to argue against.

But the state constitution was never the real concern of the districts that launched this suit. It was all about the money. The state law that allowed for Georgia officials to authorize charters also allowed for the state to devote a portion of local property tax dollars to those schools, essentially taking dollars out of the coffers of traditional districts. Again, considering that the families sending their kids to charters are paying those taxes, it would make sense. But districts are not willing to part with the tax dollars they collect for

any reason; it's why so few of them were actually authorizing charters in the first place. And they weren't going to stand for the state doing the same.

All of this gets to the heart of why school choice and other reforms are so hard to make a reality: The stalemate over the move from local property tax-based funding of education to full funding by states. Nationally, states account for 48 percent of all school dollars, the plurality of all funding; in Georgia, it is 45 percent, with local tax dollars and the federal government providing the rest. If Georgia took over the funding of education and ended the use of local tax dollars for that purpose, its officials could push for reforms with little real opposition from districts. But because property taxes still account for a large share of funding, districts can justify opposition to any reform. After all, it will be costly to at least some of their taxpayers (even if others actually support and demand reform).

School reformers will have to take on the challenge of addressing school finance, along with other aspects of educational and state governance, in order to spur reform. Little will happen easily so long as districts can continue to use property taxes as excuses for continuing the status quo.

Also: Read my latest *American Spectator* [print profile](#) of AFT President Randi Weingarten and her struggle to play both sides of the school reform battle — and preserve the union's influence on education policy.