

## NEAL McCLUSKEY

[ARCHIVE](#) | [E-MAIL](#) | [LOGIN](#)

MAY 23, 2011 4:00 A.M.

### The Battle for Education Freedom

Who will control your children's minds?

Under the guise of voluntary measures, and obscured by nebulous terminology, the nationalization of what your children will learn has been proceeding apace. And Congress is working right now on reauthorizing No Child Left Behind, through which federal domination will be cemented. But an organized opposition has formed, and it's time for conservatives to decide: Are you going to let the federal government dictate what your children learn, or will you fight?

The strategy of nationalizers has been one of stealth. Yes, you might have heard about the effort of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to create "Common Core" standards, and to get the standards adopted by as many states as possible. You've probably also heard that the standards were "state driven" and adoption "voluntary." But that's only what the nationalizers have wanted you to hear.

What they've tried to hide is that they would require states to adopt national standards to get federal funds — money Washington took from state taxpayers to begin with — and that they would make performance on federal tests key to keeping the money coming. In other words, adopting national standards and tests would be no more voluntary than meeting a kidnapper's demands: "Voluntarily" do as you're told and your constituents can get back what was taken from them.

Why the deception? Because the last time national-standards forces attacked, they did it in the open — the Feds directly commissioned standards — and they were shot to pieces. In the mid-1990s, starting with the release of U.S. history standards, outrage burned throughout the land, with conservatives especially disgusted by what Washington was offering.

Standards advocates have learned their lesson, and kept the current campaign as quiet as possible. But make no mistake: For all their claims about "voluntary" state policies, the commanding heights are in Washington, D.C., and the nationalizers know it.

Leaders of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute — a putatively conservative education think tank — revealed as much in response to a manifesto released last week opposing the national-curriculum drive. In asserting that neither they nor their allies want a "nationalized curriculum," the Institute's president,

Chester Finn, and its executive vice president, Michael Petrilli, revealed either that such a curriculum is exactly what they want, or that they somehow don't realize that it's what they'll get.

“So let us be clear,” they wrote. “While the assessments linked to the Common Core State Standards will be mandatory (for schools and districts in states that *choose* to use them), the use of any common curricular material will be purely voluntary.”

In this one statement are all the components of the stealth attack. First, the bit about states' choosing national standards: It's not real choice, but that pay-the-ransom choice. And the federal government has already used it, requiring that states adopt national standards to compete fully in the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top program. And the Obama administration doesn't plan to stop there. In its “blueprint” for reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind Act, it proposes making common standards the backbone of the law, putting billions of dollars on the line for states every year.

Surely the Fordham Institute opposes that?

Maybe not. In its reauthorization “Briefing Book,” the Institute said that states should either have to adopt the Common Core standards to receive federal funds, or have some vaguely described federal-state-hybrid panel declare a state's existing standards “just as rigorous as the Common Core.” And those assessments that Finn and Petrilli say will be “mandatory” for states that “choose” national standards? They are being created by two consortia selected by the feds and funded with \$330 million in federal funds.

So let's see: Washington uses taxpayer dollars to strong-arm states into adopting national standards and tests, and rewards or punishes schools and districts based on their test performance. That doesn't leave much room for state choice, does it?

Now, as Congress considers reauthorizing NCLB, is the time for conservatives to take a stand. And there is an organized opposition to rally around, embodied in the 100-plus signatories of the manifesto mentioned earlier, a list that includes former George W. Bush education official (and manifesto organizer) Williamson Evers, former California governor Pete Wilson, former Michigan congressman Pete Hoekstra, and Americans for Tax Reform president Grover Norquist.

Conservatives, it is time to speak out. The invasion is almost complete.

— *Neal McCluskey is associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and author of the report [Behind the Curtain: Assessing the Case for National Curriculum Standards](#).*