

MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

ARCHIVE | [LOGIN](#)

MAY 27, 2011 12:00 A.M.

Toward Less Fed in Your Ed

The threat of a federal intrusion is real, but has little to do with a “national curriculum.”

For the last couple of years — ever since the nation’s governors and state superintendents started working on common academic standards in reading and math — conservative education analysts have engaged in a spirited but polite debate about the wisdom of this development. The last month has seen the discourse turn nastier, with charges and countercharges, name-calling, and quasi-apocalyptic warnings about federal bureaucrats wanting to “control your children’s minds.” Particularly at issue in this latest round of recriminations is Uncle Sam’s role in all of this. Are we witnessing a federal takeover of our schools? A push for a federally controlled national curriculum for all public schools?

Some of these concerns are not entirely unfounded. The Obama administration and other supporters of the move to “common” national standards (my organization among them) have made some unforced errors that have helped to fuel the trepidation. But for conservatives worried about federal interference in our schools, this debate is mostly a sideshow. What should really keep them up at night are the myriad proposals for reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind Act that would push Washington’s hand ever deeper into the day-to-day operations of America’s schools — proposals that are coming from both sides of the political aisle.

Before diving into the No Child Left Behind debate, let’s address some key concerns about a “national curriculum” with a review of the facts.

The effort to get states to agree to common standards started well before the 2008 election, with the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association leading the charge, supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. A year later, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and his team created a Race to the Top application (thanks to funds earmarked for the competition by Congress) that would incentivize the adoption of their preferred reforms, including common standards. Suddenly, what started out as a state-led (and privately supported) effort had become tinged with federal involvement.

Team Obama went even further, setting aside \$350 million to fund the development of tests linked to the common standards. Now the feds had gotten into the “national testing” business, too.

Perhaps the most fateful decision came in the fall of 2010, when, faced with the prospect of leftover stimulus funds, Arne Duncan decided to hand out, to the two groups of states charged with creating the common tests, millions of extra dollars to develop teacher-friendly materials to be used to help students reach the new standards. Now it appeared that the U.S. Department of Education might be trying to control “curriculum” itself — something it is expressly prohibited from doing.

All of this left many conservatives — in think tanks but also on Capitol Hill — with a sour taste. And it didn’t help when the Shanker Institute — named after the legendary teachers’-union leader — released a manifesto that some read as calling for a single national curriculum.

So is this a federal plot to control Johnny’s thoughts? No, not really. Consider this: States learned last fall whether they had won the federal Race to the Top competition; two-thirds of the 44 Common Core adopters did not. Those states are free to bail out of the common-standards effort at any time, but they haven’t. Why not? Perhaps it’s because their leaders (including rock-solid governors like Chris Christie, Mitch Daniels, and Scott Walker) actually believe the standards are quite good, and see the value in being able to make comparisons across state lines.

Critics like Cato’s Neal McCluskey, who says that the “nationalizers” are like “kidnappers” demanding ransom, charge that the Obama administration and others want to link federal funding to state adoption of the common standards and tests. Nobody is proposing that, nor would Congress ever go along. Nor does anyone seriously think the U.S. Department of Education would succeed in forcing a single curriculum on the nation’s 100,000 public schools.

What many groups *are* proposing, however — external to this raucous and distracting “national curriculum” debate — is to get the federal government intimately involved in other crucial aspects of our schools. That’s where McCluskey and his colleagues ought to be directing their ire.

The influential liberal organization The Education Trust, for example, wants to require that school districts redistribute their most effective teachers in order to give poor kids an equitable shot at good instructors. That sounds laudable on its face but would embroil the feds in virtually every school board’s decisions regarding teacher pay, placement, and transfers.

Or take a look at what former secretary of education Margaret Spellings is proposing in her role as education adviser to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. She wants to cement in place all of the No Child Left Behind Act’s onerous one-size-fits-all regulations for another decade, and then some, with greater intrusion into high schools and federal mandates around teacher evaluations.

There’s a better way. We at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute call it “reform realism,” and it’s an approach to federal policymaking based on a few commonsense principles. First, the federal government should be much tighter about what states expect students to know and be able to do, and much looser about how states (and districts and schools) get there. If states don’t want to participate in the common

standards, that's fine, but they do need to demonstrate that they are aiming high enough. (Most states to date have aimed way too low.) Second, federal policy should focus on transparency instead of "accountability." Empower states and local communities by releasing mounds of information about how schools are performing and how much they are spending. And then step away. And third, if the feds can't help but promote a particular reform idea, they should do it through carrots (via competitive grant programs, like Race to the Top) rather than sticks (via new mandates).

In other words, we want a much smaller federal role in education — albeit one that ensures that the benchmarks we use to measure our schools are rigorous and trustworthy.

We might never see eye to eye with all conservatives about national standards and tests. But we should be able to agree about reining in Washington's involvement in other aspects of education. How about we drop the infighting and spend some of our energy working together on that?

— *Michael J. Petrilli is executive vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which recently released an [ESEA Briefing Book](#).*