

Dropout Nation

Common Core Foes' Credibility Gap

By RiShawn Biddle

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A common complaint among opponents of the implementation of Common Core such as American Enterprise Institute czar Rick Hess and Neal McCluskey of the Cato Institute is that those of us who support the reading and math standards are condescending to them. From where they sit, Common Core supporters merely fan the flames of opposition by ridiculing the positions of those opposed to the standards instead of engaging in honest conversations about the various technical and philosophical issues that are being raised.

Your editor wishes he could empathize or sympathize with them. But he cannot. This isn't because I don't think there aren't those whose opposition to Common Core are based on principled ideological, policymaking, or education practice grounds. You can disagree with intellectuals among movement conservatives who aren't concerned with education policy about the interpretations of conservative theory that drives their opposition to the very idea of common curricula. [Your editor has done so on more than enough occasions.] But it doesn't mean that they don't have a right to their views, even if the consequences of their thinking on the futures of children are objectionable. The reason is because those principled Common Core foes haven't helped their cause by associating with fellow-travelers who engage in conspiracy-theorizing and rank demagoguery.

It is hard to give Common Core foes any credence when they don't call out the likes of talk show host Glenn Beck, whose tirades against the standards (already bordering on the illogical) veered into Hofstadter-like paranoia over the past two weeks with his book and film special. When an intellectually demagogic figure such as once-respectable education historian Diane Ravitch (a Common Core foe) calls out Beck for engaging in "false and hysterical" rhetoric (a move that, by the way, is both ironic and admirable), then Common Core foes should take pause. You can't complain about your side being dismissed as verging on lunacy when the most-prominent of your fellow-travelers are, well, doing exactly that.

It's tough to give serious thought to the objections of Common Core foes when they fail to disassociate themselves from people such as Florida State Rep. Charles Van Zant, who proclaim that the standards will "attract every one of your children to become as homosexual as they possibly can", and similar ridiculousness from outfits such as the Phyllis Schafly's Eagle Forum. When you allow such blatantly incorrect (and bigoted) talking points to rein supreme in your movement, you can't then complain about being dismissed by the other side. Particularly for

conservative foes of Common Core, who, along with conservative reformers and movement conservatives, complain about caricatures of their side (and the conservative movement itself) as being a movement of bigots, it becomes critical to weed out the rabble in order to provide credible messaging.

It is difficult for Common Core foes to be given fair hearing when they argue that the standards are somehow a conspiracy against American democracy because approval came from state boards of education (33 of which are appointed by elected governors and the rest elected) and chief state school officers (who are often either appointed by those boards or elected in their own right) instead of from state legislators. Such arguments demonstrate a complete misunderstanding, deliberate and otherwise, about how political decision-making works in a democratic republic such as the United States, where legislators often defer policymaking to appointed boards (who are subjected to open meetings laws and other requirements as legislators are).

[By the way: For black reformers mindful of history, the rhetoric also comes off as the kind of statements once made by Jim Crow segregationists to denigrate *Brown v. Board of Education* and other rulings by judges properly interpreting the Constitution. And that, along with the opposition to expanding school choice among progressives opposed to Common Core and the general lack of concern for minority children in the work of Hess and others skeptical of the standards, rightfully causes us to think that they oppose Common Core because they want to continue denying comprehensive college-preparatory education to black and Latino children. Common Core foes may not like the characterization and may argue that it isn't so. But you are defined by both your words and actions. And if you don't demonstrate that you care, then don't be surprised that people think exactly that.]

Common Core foes can't demand serious consideration when their fellow-travelers claim that the standards are a conspiracy by the Obama Administration and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (along with textbook giant Pearson Plc.) to either indoctrinate children or generate what they call filthy lucre. When libertarian and conservative foes of the standards argue that Common Core is merely an idea of the Obama Administration, they fail to acknowledge the clear historical evidence that reform-minded governors and school leaders have been paving the way for Common Core since 2004 when Achieve Inc., launched the American Diploma Project. As for progressive traditionalists? The privatizing arguments they make fail to acknowledge the reality that the work of implementing Common Core is being done not by companies, but by nonprofits, as well as typifies the anti-intellectualism

Meanwhile Common Core foes are asking a little too much out of their opponents to give their arguments credence when their arguments about the quality of the standards themselves don't even pass the sniff test of sensible people. This was made clear last week in a conversation your editor had with pal Jeremy Lott of *Rare*, no fan of Common Core implementation, who said that he found little wrong or problematic with the reading standards. When a highly-educated writer and editor such as my pal Jeremy looks askance at claims such as those by Pioneer's Sandra Stotsky about the quality of Common Core (even when they are skeptical about how effective implementation can be), then foes of the standards should stop with such foolishness altogether.

Put simply, Common Core foes cannot complain about not being given serious consideration when they tolerate or soft-peddle less-than-serious rhetoric from their own side. Both in politics and the marketplace of ideas, your credibility is ultimately as dependent on the seriousness of your arguments as it is on how you advance them (and how they are countered by your opposition). This doesn't mean that Common Core foes won't win any victories; they already

have in Indiana and South Carolina. But it has less to do with the quality of their arguments than with the reality that there will always be politicians who cynically play to demagoguery out of career considerations. This was true during the civil rights battles of the last century, and, in fact, a reality of American life since the debates over enacting the Constitution. But as seen in Louisiana, where the arguments of Common Core foes have not won over gubernatorial frontrunner (and U.S. Senator) David Vitter, demagogic arguments will crowd out legitimate concerns and ultimately, hurt your cause with sensible people. It also gives Common Core supporters the arsenal they need to point out how opposition to the standards means damaging the futures of children.

But for those conservative reformers opposed to Common Core, the consequences of unserious rhetoric is especially problematic. The Pioneer Institute, for example, is waging what should be considered an admirable effort for ending the cap on the expansion of public charter schools that can help provide kids in Massachusetts with high-quality education. But it is hard for reformers who also back Common Core to give Pioneer any support for its cause. Why? Because Pioneer is the same outfit engaged in many of the most-egregious episodes of conspiracy-theorizing against the standards and those who support them. That it's president, Jim Stergios, was among the first to call for the head of Common Core supporter Tony Bennett to resign as Florida's chief state school officer after last year's fracas over his decision as Indiana superintendent to amend its A-to-F grading system also makes it hard for fellow reformers to give Pioneer anything more than token support.

As I pointed out in June, by opposing Common Core implementation, and particularly, by engaging in such demagogic and senseless rhetoric, opponents of the standards who are also in the reform movement end up weakening support for the solutions for which they advocate. You can't expect support from erstwhile allies after your rhetoric on an issue with which you disagree veers into demagoguery. When you also consider that some of the states kiboshing Common Core implementation are either the ones struggling the most to provide all kids with high-quality education, or, as in the case of South Carolina, have done little to expand choice and advance other reforms, reformers in the Common Core opposition end up betraying their own commitment to helping all kids succeed. What intellectually and morally honest reformer wants to allied with those who are both unprincipled in their alliances and unable to consider the consequences of their thinking?

This doesn't mean that there aren't Common Core foes with legitimate arguments against the standards. It also doesn't mean that supporters of Common Core don't have issues to address when it comes to successful implementation, or that they shouldn't address serious arguments seriously. But it strains credulity for principled Common Core foes to demand that supporters pay attention only to their serious arguments when they won't weed out the demagoguery of their allies.