



Times Writers Group: Common Core raises questions, concerns

The more parents learn about Common Core standards, the more reasons there may be to delay their launch

By Phyllis VanBuren

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I was pleased Rocori Superintendent Scott Staska wrote about Common Core in his May column because a Gallup poll from April reported 61 percent of public school parents know little or nothing of the program. I was surprised that his comments were so favorable.

The more I researched Common Core standards, the more confused I became about them and the role of federal government in education.

Confusion

As I started my searches to better understand a concept that I support (high academic standards and improved learning), I was shocked to find discrepancy and secrecy.

I assumed nonprofit research institutes (Brookings, Cato, Pioneer) would provide accurate and impartial data. I was wrong. I found research to defend and to dismantle Common Core.

I learned only language arts and math standards have been developed. On Facebook, I noted some professional friends were recommending conference sessions on the Common Core in art, music, physical education and social studies. "Confusion" more than "openness and transparency" describes understanding Common Core, even among teachers.

Common Core is the work of the National Governors Association, the Council for State School Officers (professional organizations; not elected representatives) and nonprofit Achieve Inc. All work was funded with more than \$200 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The process

There are no official documents revealing who wrote the standards nor minutes of the closed meetings.

Educational policy analyst Diane Ravitch explained her view of Common Core's creation in a Jan. 11 speech. "The development process was led behind closed doors by a small organization called Student Achievement Partners, headed by David Coleman. The writing group of 27 contained few educators but a significant number of representatives of the testing industry."

Of the 26 members of the Validation Committee, at least two refused to sign the documents because they did not find the promised academic rigor.

Federal role

A federal curriculum is prohibited by law, specifically, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the General Education Provisions Act of 1970 and creation of the Department of Education in 1979.

Neal McCluskey of the Cato Institute explained the Common Core is not curriculum, but testing drives the curriculum — a de facto federal curriculum. Additionally, college-entrance exams are being aligned with Common Core. That means private and home schools will need to prepare students to meet ACT and SAT tests.

Forty-three states and the District of Columbia have accepted all or part of Common Core. (Minnesota rejected the math standard.) Many did so because of President Obama's promise of \$250 million to each participating state from his Race to the Top program plus a waiver from No Child Left Behind.

Does that not amount to a federal curriculum?

The future

The pressure of these tests is not only hurting students, it is affecting teachers and even publishers of materials with content socially and politically appropriate to prepare for the tests. And, of course, districts have to pay for implementing these tests by 2017-18.

So many questions about Common Core are spurring suggestions of a two-year delay, even by teacher unions. That would be prudent, but many states adopted them last year and many more are this year.

Ravitch reported that states that have administered the tests already have had abysmal results. Only 31 percent passed the Common Core tests in New York. She fears more students will drop out due to low test scores.

Many parents and educators have even more questions. Maybe some clear answers are needed.

This is the opinion of Phyllis VanBuren, a professor of Spanish, German and foreign language education who values family, friends, faith, honesty, liberty and integrity. Her column is published the fourth Thursday of the month.

