

All Common Core critics aren't extreme

By: Neal McCluskey - November 11, 2013

If you're an ardent fan or staunch opponent of the Common Core national curriculum standards, chances are you attended or closely followed the recent statewide hearings in Wisconsin. If you're an impartial observer reading reports in the politicized aftermath, you might get the impression that all Common Core opponents are either kooks or kook-hired guns. But the reality is the opposite. In fact, education experts from across the political spectrum are taking on — and apart — Common Core.

Unfortunately, the headlines at the end of the hearings had nothing to do with whether Common Core was good for Wisconsin's children; instead, they were about who covered the expenses of anti-Common Core experts brought in to give their analyses. That could be because some elected Wisconsin officials are spending their time politicizing the debate instead of engaging in honest discussion. Last month, a letter signed by four Democratic state legislators denounced Common Core opponents by associating them with "fringe" groups and "conspiracy theories."

Such marginalization is not confined to the Badger State. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, arguably Common Core's greatest champion, also has accused its opponents of employing conspiracy theories. And, in a recent op-ed, Michael J. Petrilli and Michael Brickman of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute characterized Common Core opponents as a "small but vocal minority of conservatives" coupled with a bit of "the far left." Read: scary fringe types. It's worth noting that Petrilli testified in favor of Common Core during the state's hearings.

Of course, some Common Core opponents do say outlandish things, and in Wisconsin's case, it doesn't help that the John Birch Society defrayed the costs of anti-Common Core experts brought to testify. But such sideshows pale in comparison to the highly diverse group of Common Core opponents whom advocates absolutely don't want to talk about: education experts.

It may come as a surprise to some that Common Core is opposed by scholars at several leading think tanks on both the right and left, including the Heritage Foundation, the Hoover Institution, the Brookings Institution and my own Cato Institute. My research has shown there is essentially no meaningful evidence that national standards lead to superior educational outcomes.

Hoover Institution senior fellow Eric Hanushek, a well-known education economist and supporter of standards-based reform, has reached a similar conclusion about likely Common Core impotence. He recently wrote: "We currently have very different standards across states, and experience from the states provides little support for the argument that simply declaring more clearly what we want children to learn will have much impact."

Hanushek's conclusion dovetails nicely with Common Core opposition from Tom Loveless, a scholar at the center-left Brookings Institution. In 2012, Loveless demonstrated that moving to national standards would have little, if any, positive effect because the performance of states has had very little connection to the rigor or quality of their standards. There is also much greater achievement variation within states than among them.

In fact, Loveless has been one of the clearest voices saying Common Core is not a panacea for America's education woes, writing: "Don't let the ferocity of the oncoming debate fool you. The empirical evidence suggests that the Common Core will have little effect on American students' achievement. The nation will have to look elsewhere for ways to improve its schools."

Moving to arguably the far left, prolific education historian Diane Ravitch also has taken on Common Core, noting that it is untested, was assembled behind closed doors and was essentially foisted on schools by the federal Race to the Top funding contest.

There is an extremely well-informed opposition to Common Core, and dismissing all Common Core opponents as loony does Wisconsin children no service.