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## the corner

Thursday, March 18, 2010

**Run Away from 'Common' Education Standards** [Neal McCluskey]

A couple of days ago, Fordham Institute president Chester Finn [declared on NRO](#) that conservatives should embrace new, national education standards from the Common Core State Standards Initiative. What he didn't say is that those standards will be federal, and that's a recipe for failure.

Finn began his piece by arguing, simply, that conservatives should embrace the new (but still draft) standards because, well, they're pretty good. That's a debatable conclusion, but it's also ultimately irrelevant.

What Finn wrote next gets into why the quality of the standards is irrelevant. Finn took pains to explain that the common standards are anything but connected to Washington.

"They emerged not from the [federal government](#) but a voluntary coming together of (most) states," he wrote. Moreover, "states' decision whether or not to adopt them will remain voluntary."

Why would Finn make voluntarism and freedom from the feds' major selling points?

Because conservatives know that federally imposed standards would be subject to federal politics, and that means control by the teachers' unions, administrators' associations, and other interest groups that have outsized political [power](#) in education. Conservatives also know that what's best for those groups is not high standards but low or no standards, and that that is a major reason federal laws like No Child Left Behind have been abject failures.

Finn, though, doth protest too much: For states, adopting the standards will be about as voluntary as paying ransom to a kidnapper.

Even before a single standard had seen the light of day, the Obama administration was informing states that to compete for part of the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top [fund](#) — a fund stocked with money *involuntarily* taken from state taxpayers — states had better sign onto CCSSI. And Race to the Top is just the beginning. Having states adopt common — oh, let's just call them "federal" — standards is central to the administration's Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization proposal.

At this point, the reason conservatives should be sprinting away from national

standards, not embracing them, should be clear. Adopting them will give the federal [government](#) yet more power over American education, while the standards themselves will almost certainly end up toothless.

That said, there are a couple other, very important reasons to reject national standards.

First, as I lay out in a [new report on the subject](#), there is very little good, comparative research on national standards, but what there is offers no compelling reason to believe that they lead to superior educational outcomes. That's probably why Finn never mentioned "evidence" or "research" in his sales pitch. But would you buy a pill — especially one designed to take over your entire body — without research demonstrating at least some positive effect?

Then there's reality: All kids are different. They mature at different rates, have different interests, and face different obstacles. In light of this, it simply makes no sense to try to force them all to learn the same thing at the same pace. It's something that most conservatives — who recognize the primacy of the individual — fully understand, yet Finn asserts that it's liberals who oppose a single standard for all.

If that's so, then why aren't more liberals supporting widespread school choice — the key to ending special-interest control of education and enabling unique kids to find schools specializing in their needs — the way conservatives are? Oh, right: Because it's typically liberals who love big, one-size-fits-all government solutions to problems fundamentally rooted in a lack of freedom.

The CCSSI standards might look great on paper. But federally extorted standardization? That's something conservatives should never embrace.

— 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."

03/18 01:00 PM [Share](#)

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