



You aren't a total kook if you oppose Common Core

Neal McCluskey November 4, 2013

Just about anyone who opposes the Common Core national curriculum standards, under serious reexamination in Florida right now, is either a kook or a goof. That, at least, is the impression an impartial observer would get from listening to Core supporters.

But the reality is quite the opposite: education thinkers from across the political spectrum are taking on – and apart – the Core.

In the face of powerful and growing grassroots concern, there is a major effort underway to paint Core opposition as grounded in "misinformation" and plain old craziness. For instance, former governor Jeb Bush, arguably the Core's greatest champion, has repeatedly questioned the motives and knowledge of Core opponents. Recently, he accused them of employing conspiracy theories, and several months ago he berated the Republican National Committee for voting to condemn the Core "based on no information."

Mr. Bush is not alone. In a recent oped, Michael J. Petrilli and Michael Brickman of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute characterized Core opponents as a "small but vocal minority of conservatives" coupled with a bit of "the far left." In other words: scary fringe types.

Like in every group, there are some Core opponents who say outlandish things, but that is the exception, not the rule. Much more important is the diverse group opposing the Core who are the exact opposite of the "kook" stereotype: education experts.

The Common Core is opposed by scholars at leading think tanks on the right and the left, including the Heritage Foundation, the Hoover Institution, the Brookings Institution and the Cato Institute. My research has shown that there is essentially no meaningful evidence that national standards lead to superior educational outcomes.

Hoover Institution Senior Fellow Eric Hanushek, an education economist and supporter of standards-based education reform, has reached a similar conclusion, recently writing: "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 left-leaning Brookings Institution. In 2012, Loveless demonstrated that moving to

national standards would have little, if any, positive effect because the performance of states has very little connection to the rigor or quality of their standards, and there is much greater achievement variation within states than among them.

In fact, Loveless has been one of the clearest voices saying the 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, education historian Diane Ravitch has also taken on the Core, noting that it is untested, was assembled behind closed doors, and was essentially foisted on schools by the federal Race to the Top contest. That it also seems intended to produce huge increases in test failures – as occurred when New York employed Core-aligned tests without Core-aligned curricula – seemed to push Ravitch over the edge.

"I hope...that the Common Core standards are great and wonderful," Ravitch wrote on her blog when she first came out against the standards, but added: "I wish they were voluntary, not mandatory. I wish we knew more about how they will affect our most vulnerable students. But since I do not know the answer to any of the questions that trouble me, I cannot support the Common Core standards."

There is an extremely well-informed opposition to the Core, and dismissing opponents as loony does Florida's children no service. Indeed, as the Sunshine State struggles with how to move forward, ignoring crucial analysis and research puts them in serious danger.