



Why Conservative Christian Homeschoolers Are Fighting Standards That Don't Apply To Them

By Josh Israel
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Opposition to the educational standards known as Common Core has come from an array of Tea Party groups, conservative think-tanks, Glenn Beck, and the Koch Brothers' Americans for Prosperity — and a few voices on the left as well. But one of the most active sources of opposition has been an unlikely group: a Christian conservative organization that works to defend the rights of homeschooling parents.

Homeschoolers are not actually covered by the educational standards. Still, the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) has spent tens of thousands of dollars in opposition to the Core State Standards Initiative, including federal lobbying, a microsite, and even a fully produced 39-minute documentary. According to a press release, "HSLDA has been opposing Common Core since 2009 and, as public concern over the standards grew, HSLDA Chairman Michael Farris decided that creating a film about the standards would be the best way to make information about Common Core widely available." While HSLDA has tried to present these public school standards as an "immediate threat" to homeschooling families, critics from inside and outside of the homeschool movement wonder if it is part of a pattern of fear-mongering by an organization eager to maintain its membership base.

'Jerry Falwell's Lieutenant'

In 2009, the governors and state education commissioners from 48 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands joined together to establish a set of standards for K-12 English-language arts and math education. But while that Common Core was initially embraced by governors of both parties, growing opposition from conservatives has pushed some Republican governors and legislators to drop the benchmarks.

Among its most fervent opponents are the Home School Legal Defense Association and its founder Michael Farris. An attorney and ordained Baptist minister, Farris joined with J. Michael Smith in 1983 to establish an organization to provide advocacy and legal

representation for parents who chose to educate their children at home. Farris was a already veteran of the Christian Right movement, having worked against the Equal Rights Amendment under anti-feminist legend Phyllis Schlafly in the 1970s, as head of the legal department at Concerned Women for America, and as a state director for Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority in the early 1980s. Today, HSLDA estimates its current membership as about 82,000 families. The organization, based in Purcellville, VA, reported in 2013 that its annual budget is more than \$10 million.

A self-described "Christian organization," HSLDA came to prominence as a growing number of conservative Christians, fed up with secular public schools, decided to educate their children in their own preferred way. Farris, in a video on the organization's site explains, "Homeschooling has given us a way to obey God's command to teach our children to love God as we go through the day... the only way to make that practical, to implement the command about teaching kids to love God, in the way that he prescribed, that I've figured out, is homeschooling." Milton Gaither, a homeschooling historian and an associate professor of education at Messiah College, told ThinkProgress that as homeschooling became "an increasingly popular option for conservative Christians" in the 1980s, HSLDA created mailing lists, magazines, and an organizational structure to organize them. "HSLDA was able to corner the market," Gaither said, "and by 1990 they were running the show and were pretty much the face of homeschooling." In 1993, HSLDA reached a major milestone: homeschooling was legal in all 50 states.

Some homeschooling advocates were not thrilled that the movement's most visible organization was and remains a religious one. Mark Hegener, publisher of Home Education Magazine, told ThinkProgress that Farris' "approach is a narrow religious agenda, and homeschooling is just his shtick." While the movement had been initially diverse and inclusive in its early days in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Hegener thinks HSLDA made homeschoolers seem like a homogeneous community of Bible "thumpers." While he acknowledges the Christian homeschoolers represented by Farris and his organization have a right to be exclusive, Hegener does not believe they have a "right to be exclusive and speak for everybody." Still, he said, while more inclusive homeschoolers attempted to band together to create a counterweight, the more individualist homeschooling families were not interested in a "top-down" centralized national organization and efforts were largely unsuccessful.

As head of HSDLA, Farris became a national spokesman for the homeschooling movement and one of the country's most vocal critics of public schools. A 1993 Washington Post profile noted that, in his 1990 book *Home Schooling and the Law*, Farris argued that "Christian beliefs have been thoroughly eradicated from public schools," and those schools are a "multi-billion-dollar inculcation machine" to push "secular humanism and new age religions." It also quoted Farris as describing public schools as "godless" promoters of "evolution, hedonism and one-world government."

While Farris was making a name for himself in the homeschooling world, he was also dipping his toes into politics. Relying on his prominence within the burgeoning Christian Right movement, Farris won the 1993 Republican nomination to be Lieutenant Governor of Virginia. Ron Faucheux of Campaigns & Elections called the

general election contest “one of the nastiest campaigns ever waged for a statewide office.” His campaign energized religious conservatives and received the strong support of Christian Coalition founder and televangelist Pat Robertson. But his ideology and previous statements proved problematic. His Democratic opponent attacked him as “Jerry Falwell’s lieutenant,” called him “rigid and extreme” and highlighted Farris’ previous work in trying to get books he believed promoted “Secular Humanism” removed from public schools. Quotes, like one from his 1992 book opining that “wives have a duty to be a loving and submissive aid to their husbands,” proved controversial, even for many within his own party. Though Farris repudiated some of his earlier writings, saying that did “not accurately represent” his views, even the state’s Republican U.S. Senator John Warner refused to back him and Farris lost by nearly 9 points (as the Republican nominee for governor won by a more than 17-point landslide).

After the loss, Farris changed his sights from politics to higher education. In 1999, he broke ground on Patrick Henry College, a place for homeschooled students and others to prepare for political leadership. The college, also located in Purcellville, VA, was designed to be a Christian college to train students to work “for Christ and for Liberty.” Students at Patrick Henry must agree to a strict religious covenant, must promise to refrain from alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, to attend religious services regularly, and to abstain from premarital sex and dating (which Farris has called “serial infidelity.”) Farris has frequently expressed his dream that alumni will go on to win Academy Awards and the White House.

While the school is not legally affiliated with the homeschooling association, HSLDA helped found Patrick Henry College, continues to help fund it, and shares the same land. Working an estimated 50 hours a week between his dual roles as chancellor of Patrick Henry College and chairman of HSLDA, Farris receives an annual compensation package of nearly \$400,000 as he continues to work toward advancing his mission: combining God and the classroom under one roof.

‘Trampling the Constitution and education freedom’

Though opponents have tried to convince parents that the Common Core is a massive federal plot to usurp state and local control of education with a national curriculum — some even labeling it “Obamacore” — it is not actually even a federal program, nor a curriculum.

National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) devised the set of standards, which lay out what public school students should be expected to know and understand by the time they graduate high school. All 50 states already had state standards in place, and the plan included “an explicit agreement that no state would lower its standards.” The goals were devised in 2009 by a panel of education experts, including representatives from standardized testing providers like ACT and College Board. Through their membership in the NGA, the elected governors of nearly every state agreed to set these goals, though they did not “define how the standards should be taught or which materials should be

used to support students.” These goals, generally speaking, apply only to public school students.

Education reform advocates, including the Center for American Progress, the American Federation of Teachers, and the National Education Association have embraced the Common Core standards, while encouraging an implementation that provides adequate support to the teachers and schools who will be tasked with helping students meet its goals. (The Center for American Progress has received grant funding for its work on Common Core implementation.)

While no state is required to participate in the Common Core standards, the Department of Education has offered some carrots to encourage adoption of high state standards, in general. These included grants via the Race to the Top portion of the 2009 stimulus law and waivers allowing states to opt-out of some No Child Left Behind requirements if they have switched to college and career ready standards. But adopting Common Core was not a requirement for either.

One of the Common Core’s strongest supporters has been a conservative educational think-tank called the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Michael Brickman, the organization’s national policy director, told ThinkProgress that while the federal government was not involved in crafting the standards, the federal incentives “painted a false impression that the federal government was behind” Common Core and led to opposition by groups like HSLDA. “I don’t think we’d be having this conversation if the federal government hadn’t incentivized states to adopt these standards — a very small portion of an optional grant program.”

This claim of a federal takeover is one of a series of objections Michael Farris and his Home School Legal Defense Association have cited in their massive anti-Common Core campaign. In 2013, on his *Home School Heartbeat* two-minute daily radio program, Farris did a series of segments with Estrada, outlining their opposition to the Common Core. In one segment, Estrada said, “We are seeing nothing less than the federal government pressuring states to adopt the Common Core and change their curriculum.” Farris responded that this was “one more example of the federal government trampling the Constitution and educational freedom.”

The most expensive part of the group’s campaign against Common Core was its 2014 documentary, *Building the Machine*. Farris described the film as “presented in a way that shows both sides arguing their case — but when you watch it, the opposition to the Common Core is so much more sensible than those that are promoting it, there’s no doubt left behind.” It would convince, Farris predicted, “people that are in the middle that this is a dangerous program.” (Farris told Tea Party activists in the same speech that Common Core is “the worst of the lot” of federal education programs, is an “evil idea,” and that his broader goal is “chopping off head of the snake entirely” by amending the constitution to ensure the federal government will no longer be able to use the “general welfare” clause of the constitution to interfere with education.)

The movie features an array of attacks on Common Core. A Cato Institute scholar suggests that it was not the “will” of people because they don’t vote for governors based on what they will do at the National Governors Association. Two members of the Common Core’s validation committee who did not back the final standards express their disappointment with what their former colleagues adopted. A journalism teacher objects to having standards and testing at all as a formula for a society where everyone is “mushed out to be the same.” A researcher from the Heartland Institute makes the odd claim that “we have no track record and the track record we have points against Common Core.” Farris himself appears to decry “systemization, and centralization, and data collection.” The Fordham Institute put out a point-by-point refutation of what it called “spurious accusations” in the documentary.

Almost no mention of homeschoolers is made in the film.

Protecting homeschoolers from birth control and same-sex marriage

One common attack on HSLDA has been that its work often extends to topics that are not directly connected to the rights of homeschoolers. So far this year, its federal lobbyists have worked to stop ratification of treaties, including U.N. Conventions on the Rights of the Child, the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as passage of a bill to prevent corporations from denying birth control coverage in their healthcare benefits. HSLDA’s Estrada told ThinkProgress that the organization is concerned that the treaties include language protecting the “best interest of the child,” which could directly impact parents who disagree with the United Nation’s interpretation of that standard, and that the bill would undermine free speech and religious liberty.

In the 2006, the group even lobbied for a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage. A statement on the group’s website explained that because “Same-sex marriage attacks the traditions of the family in western civilization,” it thus constitutes an “attack on parental rights.” Estrada said that the group no longer lobbies on this issue and that he did not know why it had done so then.

Ryan Stollar, executive director of Homeschool Alumni Reaching Out (a group of former homeschoolers who work within the movement to protect the rights of current homeschool kids), told ThinkProgress that he believes the issues the leaders of HSLDA “have chosen and continue to choose to focus on are not necessarily that issues that are in the best interest of the homeschooling movement,” and may be “actively jeopardizing” it. He cites “right-wing extremism,” positing that “making opposition to same-sex marriage a homeschooling issue is shooting [themselves] in the foot” in their attempt to represent the broader movement. “It alienates so many people,” he said, and the group’s thus-far successful work to block the disability treaty, for example, is “not connected” to homeschooling and “atrocious.”

Robert Kunzman, an expert on homeschooling and professor at the Indiana University Bloomington, told ThinkProgress, “To the extent that they believe it to be a threat, you

can't fault them for deciding that's where to put their energies. But some of the issues they're taking on are pretty far afield from homeschooling." Among these questionably-related issues, he observed, is the Common Core.

'Selling peace of mind to members'

HSLDA is not a typical advocacy organization. Rather than simply collecting donations, it offers members an informal insurance policy for \$120 annually, serving as a legal team for parents who homeschool their kids and might face any interference from the government. HSLDA says that while it "cannot guarantee representation in every case," it comes "to the aid of our members and many nonmembers whenever possible."

HSLDA is "selling peace of mind to members," Rachel Coleman, a homeschooling alum who leads the Coalition for Responsible Home Education, observed. But, she told ThinkProgress, "to convince people that they should be members, [HSLDA must] convince those parents that there is a reason for that. It's helpful to them to present every little thing as a threat to homeschooling."

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Over the years, this "fear-mongering" charge has been one of the most frequent knocks on HSLDA. Gaither of Messiah College said the organization uses a "constant, steady stream of alarmist rhetoric of 'what the federal government is doing is a threat,' with Farris spreading "constant fear that the federal government is getting bigger and bigger, more and more secular, [and is] destroying the creation of our forefathers."

Kunzman concurred, telling ThinkProgress that he has frequently heard people in homeschool community criticize HSLDA as a group that "only survives financially by continuing to manufacture crises. That's how they fundraise. Threats to homeschool freedom get the base riled up, so people contributing believe they need legal protection and political advocacy." This victimization narrative has proven beneficial to the organization in good times and bad, he suggested: "If they win something, it's great promotion of their services. If they lose, it's 'the threat is real and you'd better support us.'"

HSLDA dismissed these criticisms. Will Estrada, the organization's director of federal relations, told ThinkProgress in a telephone interview that the group hears from some who think they "blow things up" out of proportion and others who think their tactics are not reactive enough. "Some of these people are a little too naïve. We see on a daily basis attempts to restrict homeschool freedom," he said, noting that while the group does its best to share "the truth from our legal experience of 30 years, you can't make everyone happy."

Gaither also observed that while "Jesus in the Gospel says you can't serve God and money," some critics believe the organization's leadership wants to be pure, but also to be well paid. Estrada also rejected any suggestion that Farris and the eight other HSLDA employees making upwards of \$110,000 annually are unduly profiting from an

organization that calls itself a Christian organization. “[Michael] Farris hasn’t had a vacation in years,” said Estrada, and “a lot of these people could be making way more than they are making” if they went to a K Street law firm.

Will the Common Core impact homeschooling?

An article in HSLDA’s quarterly *Home School Court Report* magazine entitled “Common Core testing affects homeschoolers this year,” warns that a small number of Tennessee homeschoolers who affiliate with local school districts instead of church schools could be forced to take a test based on the Common Core Standards. The same article also notes that even those families “have a good legal argument to avoid it.”

For a full explanation of why HSLDA opted to get involved in Common Core, one must turn to the group’s anti-Common Core website. It spells out three major arguments as to how the Common Core represents a threat to homeschooling: data tracking, college admission standards, and standardized testing.

HSLDA says that “perhaps the most immediate threat to homeschool and private school students is the expansion of statewide longitudinal databases,” citing an Oklahoma official who proposed including homeschoolers in the data collection process. “In light of the growing revelations that the government is engaging in massive invasion of privacy in spheres other than education,” the group warns, “it is utterly impossible to believe that these databases will not be mined and misused to serve the ulterior purposes of a centralized government intent on growing its own power.”

Estrada told ThinkProgress that while he is not aware of any evidence that data-collection harms homeschooled children or impedes parents, he said he sees no reason that the federal government, states, or businesses need “all this information on kids.” “Whether data held by outside entities will make it so kids can’t homeschool isn’t really the question,” he suggested, “The question is why do they have it and should they have it.”

The other major concern is that if states have common standards for the public schools, standardized tests like SAT, ACT, and GED will be aligned to the Common Core and homeschooling parents who opt not to use Common Core curricula will see their kids do poorly and not get into college. Warning that kids taking these examinations might “soon encounter progressive ideologies including social engineering and alternative lifestyles,” HSLDA claims on its website, homeschool students who “are not adherents to the Common Core” could “find themselves at a significant disadvantage come test time.” Additionally, it claims that colleges and universities are “being pressured to adapt their standards for college readiness to the Common Core standards.”

Students taking the redesigned SAT, ACT, or the Iowa Tests could soon encounter progressive ideologies including social engineering and alternative lifestyles.

ThinkProgress contacted ACT Inc. (the non-profit company behind the ACT test), GED Testing Service (the public-private partnership behind the GED test), and College Board

(the non-profit behind the SAT and AP tests) to see whether such a re-alignment was imminent. Ed Colby, director of public relations for ACT Inc. explained that in fact the opposite was true: “The ACT is already aligned with the Common Core standards,” he said, because the company “helped develop those standards” and was “at the table” when they were designed. CT Turner, senior director of public affairs for GED Testing Service said that it updates its tests based on “what people need to succeed,” not Common Core — and that its recent realignment “started happening before the Common Core standards came.” Carly Lindauer, senior director of external communications at College Board, said that the newly redesigned SAT “measures the skills and knowledge that evidence shows are essential for college and career success” and “is not aligned to any single set of standards.”

ThinkProgress also spoke with a psychometrician with expertise in how these standardized tests and the admissions processes work: Wisconsin Center for Education Research associate scientist H. Gary Cook. He noted that “a lot of what’s on [existing standardized tests already] are in these standards, as ACT said.” Moreover, he noted, the tests are a tool mainly for colleges and universities to determine who will likely succeed in their first year. While the “indirect customers” for these tests are “the people who take them,” the “primary customer of ACT and SAT are universities,” he explained, “If these didn’t work, universities wouldn’t use them.” As such, he said, he does not “see ACT or SAT” being coerced to adapt their core assessments to fit Common Core.

Estrada conceded that this concern has not proven an issue so far and said that HSLDA is in the process of updating that part of the site. “We’re watching very closely, it’s something we’re concerned about. But at this point it doesn’t look like the effect is going to be where we thought two to three years ago.” He suggested that this may be, in part, that with states like Texas not adopting Common Core, it became harder to create a nationalized curriculum. Either way, he said, homeschoolers continue to do well on the tests: “I love being proven wrong by homeschoolers when they’ve done so well and their education is so good, they come back and ace these tests even though they’ve never really been prepared for them.”

In his book *Write These Laws On Your Children*, homeschooling expert Robert Kunzman quoted Farris expressing concern that standardized testing is not going to be a fair measurement because content validity can’t be attained for so many different homeschooling experiences: “The problem is that all of this is entirely subjective. There is no such thing as an objective standard. A test is fair, according to due process standards, only if it measure the content of what you’ve been taught... you’d have to write an individualized, content-valid standardized test for every child that’s being homeschooled in America. You just can’t do that.” But despite his stated concern that homeschoolers might be disadvantaged by standardized tests, the school he founded and leads, Patrick Henry College, requires applicants to submit an SAT or ACT score. ThinkProgress was unable to talk with Farris nor another Patrick Henry College spokesman about his concerns about standardized testing and the college’s admissions policies.

Luis A. Huerta, an associate professor and coordinator of the education and policy program at Columbia University's Teachers College, told ThinkProgress that he thinks HSLDA and homeschoolers have some reason to be cautious of Common Core. "If [Common Core affects] external metrics that are the gateway to college, this potential hurts the content of instruction they engage in as private homeschoolers," he explained, adding, "I think they're against this because it has the potential to change a lot of things." At the same time, he said, this campaign could be yet another wedge issue that will boost HSLDA membership: "If they publicize potential ills, might this be the force that brings [lapsed members] back home to HSLDA?"

Messiah University's Gaither observed that while he does see a lot of concern about Common Core homeschool online chat rooms, it is most often from people who do not seem to understand what the standards are. For HSLDA, he suspects, Common Core is another attempt to scare parents into thinking it's a threat "so people will give money," at a time when membership growth has slowed (its official membership total was about 3,000 families higher at the time of Kunzman's 2009 book).

Parents and teachers are saying 'We're tired of all of these top-down mandates. To heck with it, we're gonna homeschool.'

Whether this is part of the intent of the effort or not, HSLDA's Estrada noted one other apparent impact of the campaign against Common Core: more homeschoolers. "I talk to families on an almost daily basis who are frustrated, not so much with Common Core, but who see it as the last straw. Parents and teachers are saying 'We're tired of all of these top-down mandates. To heck with it, we're gonna homeschool.'" While he doesn't know if it will be massive, "anecdotally, we see a lot of it." He said they have not made a "concerted campaign" to recruit people based on their fear of having their kids in public schools aligned to the standards, but noted, "I've said, once or twice, on panels, 'If you're concerned about the Common Core, now's a great time to homeschool!'"

Still, so far, Estrada admitted, Common Core has not actually affected homeschoolers. "But homeschoolers have seen what happens [when there are] centralized, standardized policies in place that affect all kids in education. We were founded in 1983 when most states criminalized homeschooling." The Home School Legal Defense Association, he said, is fighting it now "before people say 'all 50 states have Common Core. Why are those homeschool kids not getting the same education?'"