

# The Washington Times

## Restarting the Common Core debate

### Facts must replace invective in discussing the best educational methods

By Michael J. Petrilli & Neal P. McCluskey  
September 1, 2014

Over the past couple of years, a raucous debate has emerged over the Common Core, content standards in English and mathematics adopted by states nationwide. The debate has been marked by acrimony rather than analysis, but there is hope that both sides want a reset. We — one Core advocate, one opponent — want to assist by laying out the facts on which we think everyone should agree.

What are some signs of detente? Core architect David Coleman recently decried characterizations of Core opponents “as crazies or people who don’t tell the truth,” while strategists at firebrand Glenn Beck’s “We Will Not Conform” event called for ditching invective like “ObamaCore” or “communist plot.”

Now, the facts.

First, there is no evidence that most Core opponents or advocates are ill-intentioned. There’s no compelling reason to believe, for instance, that Bill Gates is funding Core advocacy for any reason other than that he thinks it is beneficial, or that opponents are motivated by anything other than concern that the standards are inadequate, or amount to dangerous national standardization.

Next, the Core was not created by Washington, but groups that saw crummy state standards and tests and agreed on the need to improve their quality. In particular, these organizations wanted to ensure that “proficient” meant the same thing in Mississippi as Massachusetts, and sought to reduce the huge proportion of people arriving at college or workplaces without the skills to succeed. Responding to this, the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers started discussing whether common, higher standards could be forged in the basic subjects of reading and math. With support from the Gates Foundation, they launched the effort that eventually became the Core. All this occurred, importantly, before Barack Obama was elected president.

However, federal involvement played an important role in the Core. Federal policy, beginning in 1994, pushed states to develop standards and tests in the first place, and

No Child Left Behind, enacted in 2002, doubled down on these mandates, requiring states to disaggregate test results for numerous groups and sanction low-performing schools.

More directly, in 2010, the Obama administration held the first “Race to the Top” competition. To maximize their chances of winning part of \$4 billion, states had to sign on to college- and career-ready standards adopted by “a majority of states,” a definition met only by the Core. The administration also supplied \$350 million to develop Core-aligned tests.

Two years later, the administration announced that states could get waivers from key parts of No Child Left Behind. To qualify, they had to either adopt the Core, or have their standards certified as “college- and career-ready” by a state college system.

Core adoption was technically voluntary: States could refuse to seek Race to the Top money or waivers, and a few did. The allure of hundreds of millions of dollars and No Child Left Behind relief, though, were certainly powerful. Some Core advocates wanted federal incentives. The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers called for them in their 2008 report “Benchmarking for Success,” and some supporters reportedly worked with the administration in formulating Race to the Top.

Another major concern is whether the Core prescribes, or is agnostic about, curriculum.

Any set standard puts a box around curriculum, and the crafters of the Core explicitly called for a number of “instructional shifts” in the classroom. In addition, what is on Core-aligned tests may, de facto, fill in some curriculum. This, though, is different from saying only one curriculum will do. Much of the frustration experienced by educators and parents appears to stem from poorly designed textbooks, not the standards themselves. With very limited exceptions, the Core does not prescribe specific readings.

What about data collection, teacher evaluation and other issues often thought synonymous with the Core? These are connected through Race to the Top and No Child Left Behind waivers, but the Core itself is just standards.

These are the facts. Hopefully, all can agree on them and focus on the issues with which we really need to grapple: Is there good reason to think common, rigorous state standards will improve outcomes? Does the Common Core fit that bill? What roles should Washington, states, districts and parents have in deciding what standards guide classroom instruction? We have different answers to these questions, but agree on at least one thing: We must stop fighting over basic facts, and respectfully tackle these crucial questions.

*Michael J. Petrilli is the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and Neal P. McCluskey is the associate director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.*

