



How Establishment Republicans Anchored States to Common Core

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Establishment Republican politicians have boasted the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) prohibits the U.S. secretary of education from coercing states into adopting the Common Core standards.

However, many who have studied the law say not only is that claim unfounded, but also that ESSA actually imposes Common Core on the entire country.

In December of 2015, Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN), chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, touted that he and Democrat Sen. Patty Murray (WA) had facilitated the “bipartisan” passage of the ESSA measure that would replace the George W. Bush-era No Child Left Behind (NCLB). President Barack Obama signed the bill into law almost immediately, referring to it as a “Christmas miracle.”

“We have reversed the trend toward a national school board, repealed the federal Common Core mandate, and enacted what the *Wall Street Journal* called ‘the largest devolution of federal control to states in a quarter century,’” Alexander said.

A statement on Sen. Richard Burr’s (R-NC) website following the signing of ESSA into law also said the measure had succeeded at “repealing the common core mandate.”

“This is a big deal,” Burr said about the new law. “It will bring an additional \$24 million per year in funding to poorest children in North Carolina and put a stop to the Common Core mandate.”

Republicans based their pronouncements on the portion of ESSA that states, “The federal government is prohibited from . . . Mandating, directing, controlling, coercing, or exercising any direction or supervision over academic standards that states develop or adopt, including Common Core State Standards.”

Parent activists and education scholars who have studied the law, however, assert ESSA neither repeals the Common Core mandate, nor prohibits the education secretary from coercing states into adopting the standards. In fact, those who have been battling against the Common Core in

the states say ESSA actually does the opposite: it keeps states anchored to the controversial education reform.

“Within the other 1,060 pages of ESSA lurk the provisions that will keep states in Common Core, or something that looks very much like Common Core,” American Principles Project (APP) education fellow Jane Robbins and Indiana parent activist Erin Tuttle wrote at The Pulse 2016. “The Secretary won’t have to mandate anything, because the other parts of the bill contain the requirements for ... ‘high standards,’” a phrase that has come to refer to Common Core.

For example, while NCLB never dictated any state alignment for academic standards, ESSA requires every state to submit its plan for standards for approval to the U.S. Department of Education.

Robbins and Tuttle assert:

That plan must be “coordinated” with 11 federal statutes, including the Soviet-style Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act passed a year ago; the Education Sciences Reform Act, which is all about collecting student data for research; the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act, which adds to the Head Start requirements on preschool standards; and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Authorization Act, which governs the NAEP test that will almost certainly be aligned to Common Core to hide the fact that Common Core-trained students perform poorly on NAEP. Requiring state plans and therefore state standards to coordinate with all these federal statutes means, as a practical matter, states will keep Common Core.

“ESSA, which replaces NCLB, does mandate alignment,” write Robbins and Tuttle, quoting the ESSA law and translating the Common Core rhetoric:

“Each State shall demonstrate that the challenging academic standards are aligned with entrance requirements for credit-bearing coursework in the system of public higher education in the State and relevant State career and technical education standards.” This is simply another way of saying states must have “college- and career-ready” standards. And as made clear by the U.S. Department of Education’s own materials, “college- and career-ready” means Common Core.

“High standards” and “accountability” are also among the primary “buzzwords” associated with Common Core. Upon her nomination to the position of U.S. education secretary, Betsy DeVos immediately posted to a new website about Common Core: “Certainly. I am not a supporter—period. I do support high standards, strong accountability, and local control.”

Establishment Republicans have learned not to use Common Core’s “toxic” name. As a result, many state legislatures have simply “rebranded” or renamed the Common Core standards with local flavor names. The standards themselves, however, remain relatively unchanged, save for a few tweaks.

APP’s education director Emmett McGroarty wrote at The Pulse 2016 following the approval of ESSA, “Anti-Common Core activists tried for months to warn Congress that the new federal education bill ... was a disaster that would cement, not overturn, the odious progressive-education philosophies of the Obama Administration.”

“Now comes confirmation that the activists were dead on — and that Republican leadership, including Sen. Lamar Alexander, Rep. John Kline, and House Speaker Paul Ryan, carried out a cynical scheme to betray their constituents and give the Administration everything it wanted,” McGroarty continued, citing a Politico Pro interview with former Education Secretary Arne Duncan:

Duncan expressed joyful incredulity at how wonderful ESSA turned out to be from the Administration’s point of view (meaning, how bad it is for children, families, and the Constitution). “I’m stunned,” he said, “at how much better it ended up than either [House or Senate] bill going into conference. I had a Democratic congressman say to me that it’s a miracle — he’s literally never seen anything like it.”

“[I]f you look at the substance of what is there ... embedded in the law are the values that we’ve promoted and proposed forever,” Duncan continued. “The core of our agenda from Day One, that’s all in there – early childhood, high standards [i.e., Common Core], not turning a blind eye when things are bad. For the first time in our nation’s history, that’s the letter of the law.”

Duncan’s former Assistant Secretary Peter Cunningham likewise observed that Sen. Alexander’s assertion that ESSA prohibits the education secretary from mandating the Common Core standards in the states is “shamefully misleading.”

“[T]he new law that the senator from Tennessee is so proud of, the Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], now mandates the very thing he rails against,” Cunningham wrote. “Under the new law, every state must adopt ‘college- and career-ready’ standards. Thus, the new law all but guarantees that Common Core State Standards—or a reasonable imitation under a different name—will likely remain in place in most states.”

Neal McCluskey, education director at Cato Institute, observed the vague language of ESSA was a serious concern for those who want to return education policy to the states, as provided in the Constitution.

“While the spirit and rhetoric surrounding the ESSA is about breaking down federal strictures ... the statute includes language vague enough that it could allow federal control by education secretary veto,” he wrote.

As with Obamacare, McGroarty says taking the time to understand exactly what’s in ESSA should “end the pathetic charade that Congress just restored states’ autonomy in education.”

“And as for Alexander, Kline, and Ryan — they have simply betrayed their constituents, especially the last few who actually believed any integrity remained in the Republican establishment,” he concludes.