



Federal drive, money warming local groups to national school standards

By [Katie Redding](#) 9/23/09 9:05 AM

Colorado Commissioner of Education Dwight D. Jones issued a [statement \(pdf\)](#) yesterday in support of a new set of math and language arts standards recently proposed for adoption by all states.

Jones said that Colorado's new state standards, up for adoption in December, are very much the same as [those released Monday](#) by Common Core Standards Initiative, a joint project of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

"Both efforts will yield students who are fully prepared to compete at a rigorous, international level," said Jones, using the [positive rhetoric Coloradans have come to expect from state officials](#) whenever Race to the Top money is involved.

(One of the selection criteria for the Race to the Top—Education Secretary Arne Duncan's \$4.3 billion education reform contest among the states—is support for the development of common standards and assessments by the Common Core Standards Initiative.)

Meanwhile, in the [New York Times' Room for Debate](#) section this week, several experts weighed in with first impressions of the proposed national standards, in a precursor to the debate that will likely erupt between now and the October 21 comment deadline—and again, if and when states actually begin adopting them:

Sandra Stotsky, [professor](#) of education reform at the University of Arkansas, looked at the language arts standards and found them absurd, since they require language arts teachers to teach texts from mathematics or history—disciplines in which they presumably have no training:

Didn't the draft writers realize that English teachers are not prepared to teach students how to read technical or discipline-based material in other areas? Only history or government teachers are apt to be sufficiently familiar with the philosophical and historical influences on our basic political

documents to be able to teach their students how to read them.

English teachers, not assessment experts, teacher educators, or technology salesmen, must be allowed to shape intellectual standards for content that makes sense for the English curriculum.

On the other hand, Robert S. Siegler, the Teresa Heinz professor of cognitive psychology at Carnegie Mellon University and the Tisch Distinguished Visiting Professor at Teachers College at Columbia University, suggested that just having a common math standard will improve students' math comprehension.

At present, variations in curricula from school district to school district mean that children whose families move a few blocks or a few miles away flounder in some subjects where they lack prerequisites that were not covered in their old districts, and are bored in other subjects where the instruction repeats what the students already learned.

Neal P. McCluskey, the associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, wholeheartedly disagreed, arguing that if we allow schools to adopt different curriculum, parents will make the best choices about which schools their children should attend, effectively closing schools with bad curriculum.

Children have myriad needs, abilities, and desires, and it's absurd to demand that they all learn the same thing at the same pace. That's why the key to all kids realizing their full potential isn't standardization, but freedom.

Let parents choose among competing, autonomous institutions, and watch real accountability, specialization, and innovation reign.

But whether or not the standards are adopted may ultimately have less to do with how good they are and more to do with the political climate. National standards have long been a tough row to hoe, due to a long U.S. education tradition of local control.

But if Commissioner Jones's response to the new Common Core Standards is any indication, Race to the Top incentive money may be just the deal-sweetener needed.

Stay tuned.