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National Common Curriculum: Necessary, Misguided or Coercive?

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A bipartisan collection of educators, businessmen and labor leaders announced their support for a common curriculum for America's public schools on Monday, reports [The New York Times](#). Their [statement](#) called to build upon the current shared English and mathematics standards, which about 40 states adopted last year, by adding further guidelines for what schools and educators should teach in each grade.

The signers, who included the current President of the American Teachers Federation and Assistant Secretaries of Education under Presidents Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, explained that they were not suggesting rigid regulations for performance, textbooks, lesson plans and pedagogy, but rather “a coherent, sequential set of guidelines in the core academic disciplines, specifying the content knowledge and skills that all students are expected to learn.” Proponents claim the plan would put U.S. schools more in line with educational models used by many European and Asian countries, thereby preparing students for competing in a global market.

Despite the proposition's bipartisan support -- or perhaps because of it -- the common curriculum has received criticism from both liberals and conservatives.

In an editorial on the progressive blog [The Huffington Post](#), educational consultant Tom Vander Ark claims the common curriculum plan reinforces an antiquated model of learning. Instead, he claims the real path to reinvigorating American education is embrace “customized playlists.” Vander Ark predicts that technological advancements in the form of recommendation engines, social media and data warehouses will replace the current sequential curriculum with personal digital learning platforms, or

“fully customized engaging learning sequences for every student.” He surmises that a common curriculum is simply ignoring what the future of education will actually look like.

From the other side of the political spectrum, [The Cato Institute](#), a Libertarian think-tank, published a damning piece by the associate director of their Center for Educational Freedom, Neal McCluskey, accusing the common curriculum’s proponents of duplicity. McCluskey objects to claims that the common curriculum would be voluntary. He argues that tying federal investment to implementation of the plan -- which is indeed a recommendation from Monday’s statement by common curriculum proponents -- would make it inherently mandatory. McCluskey argues that schools would have to adopt the shared standards or risk losing funding, forcing their hands in the decision rather than allowing them to accept or reject it naturally.

Calls for common academic standards in the United States have been made for decades, but have been rebuffed by America’s traditional “local” approach to public education. With backers and detractors lining up once more, and the nation’s schools [lagging on international rankings](#), it’s evident that reform is necessary and hopefully coming. But what shape that reform will take is still in fiery contention.

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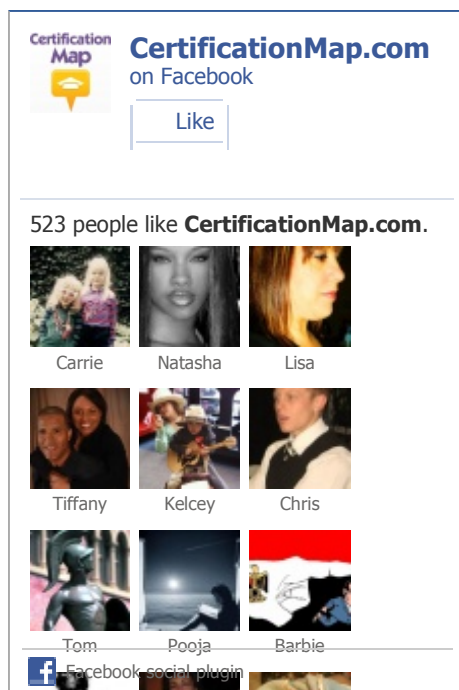
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