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Let's Drop Common Core And Let All Families Truly Choose Their Schools

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For years after Common Core was adopted into the Oklahoma state law books, a group of us saw the writing on the wall and tried to derail the process. It was clear to us after much study that most arguments for Common Core were not grounded in reality, but more a cotton candy confection of wishes that would eventually disintegrate and send the whole notion, like so many previous education trends, into the dustbin of history.

Although Common Core was repealed from state law in 2014, the new “Oklahoma” math standards adopted in 2015 are surprisingly Common Core-like. Unsurprisingly, like many Common Core states in the nation, national math scores for both Oklahoma fourth and eighth graders fell again for 2017.

For years we've been warned by various education policy experts that Common Core would not produce the results its acolytes promised, yet Common Core converts have persisted, outlasting many weary parents who have finally thrown up their hands in exhaustion.

“Common Core, School Choice and Rethinking Standards-Based Reform,” a new, thorough Pioneer Institute paper, did a great job explaining the failures of Common Core math and Common Core in general. I sought out the co-authors, Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and Theodor Rebarber, CEO of AccountabilityWorks, to help explain their work.

What Does Common Core Actually Do?

The authors don't lay the fault of falling test scores solely at the feet of Common Core, but they do immediately point out several important contradictions in CC math that could lead anyone to wonder at its effectiveness, including:

Although proponents promised Common Core would make U.S. students more internationally competitive by “benchmarking” the standards to those of higher-performing countries, CC actually delays mastery of several mathematical procedures—like multiplication and long division—for years after students from leading countries like Singapore have mastered them.

Consistent with progressive teaching beliefs, CC doesn't so much teach kids how to solve problems as to think about how to solve them. The authors report that higher-performing countries such as Singapore, Finland, and Japan instead devote approximately 75 percent of their math standards to having students work math problems, while CC devotes only 38 percent to practice, and the rest having kids explain how to work the problem.

Although constantly told CC is just a set of standards that do not "drive" instruction, CC-aligned tests give higher points for explaining how best to perform the math problem and fewer points for solving the problem correctly, essentially causing teachers to teach the method gaining the most points. This has another side effect of converting math tests into English tests.

Also referenced in the paper are comments by Jason Zimba, a lead author of the CC math standards, stating that CC math was "not for future STEM majors" or "selective colleges." To sum up, in the words of Rebarber, "Common Core math turned out to be a bait and switch."

So what does Common Core actually do? Apparently, it largely reinforces ineffective progressive teaching philosophy.

Why Standards-Based Education and Testing Must Go

Throughout the paper, Rebarber and McCluskey make it clear: the best way of educating students is not one grounded in a single set of standards and aligned tests. Centralized mandates to this effect from both the federal government and states have had the effect of neutering school choice programs by imposing one kind of education on all schools, thereby actually reducing families' education choices.

"What we oppose is government curriculum central planning, which is currently imposed on states by congressional mandate that requires every state to enforce a single detailed set of curriculum standards on every local school system, vocational school and charter school in the state," said Rebarber.

McCluskey argues that the contentious debate over the Common Core standards shows that no single set of standards will make everyone happy, and the fact that Americans are entitled to liberty and equality under the law should translate to the ability to choose how they use their own tax money dedicated to education.

"We also need different approaches to be able to be fully tried, on an even playing field to see what works best in general and for unique subsets of kids," he added. How else to do that but to allow states to create their own educational efforts and see what does and doesn't work?

Both authors agree that one of the best ways to prevent Common Core-like centralized curriculum and standards is to lobby the Trump administration to eliminate the standards and testing mandates in the Every Student Succeeds Act (the successor to No Child Left Behind) to allow states decide for themselves if they want a centralized set of standards.

"Before then," Rebarber states, "we recommend that the Trump administration publicize that it will approve waivers, which are permitted under the law, to allow states that wish to return such educational decisions back to the local level to do so."

According to Rebarber, because policy decision-makers are elected leaders at the state level, parents and voters must become informed about the issues and “drive the debate as organized, knowledgeable advocates” to see change.

Championing Choice Means Dumping Common Core

Although teacher’s unions and public school bureaucrats consistently attack vouchers, tax credits, and charter schools under the heading of “school choice,” many families are confused by the terms and even more confused as to why anyone in an education vocation would fight something that would allow parents to decide how their child is educated.

“We understand vouchers to refer to public funding being made available to pay for tuition at private schools,” Rebarber replied when I asked him to highlight some “school choice” definitions. “Tax credits or deductions involve reducing the tax on private individuals that use their own, private funds to pay for tuition at private schools.”

So, if a family accepts a voucher, they’re taking part of the money the state government allots for their child’s education and using it for private tuition and sometimes other education-related expenses, depending upon the program.

Some states (like New Hampshire) instead or in addition give a tax credit to businesses or individuals who donate to a non-profit organization that then gives out scholarships to families to use for a broad array of education expenses. Although the government provides a tax-based incentive for the donation, the donations themselves are purely private funds.

It may seem nit-picky, but parents need to understand these fundamental differences.

The Right Kind of Choice for Families

Like most homeschoolers, I’m very careful about government interference in our education choices and, though we don’t have a tax-credit plan in Oklahoma yet, am not convinced our family would take part if we did. Some homeschoolers fear letting every family choose what to do with their child’s state education dollars will lead to government encroachment into their educational choices. Rebarber can’t crush those fears.

“Unfortunately, we document in the paper that nearly two-thirds of state voucher programs in general education encroach on private curricular autonomy by imposing a particular, state-mandated curriculum standards-based test, which pushes schools into adopting the detailed curriculum content, sequence and pedagogy on which the test is based,” he said.

Then what’s the “school choice” answer here? According to Rebarber, “Our main recommendation is to focus on tax credits and to oppose proposals that require participants to administer a single, curriculum standards-based test.”

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Because tax-credit systems do not use public money, they aren’t as easily subject to bureaucrat control of what children learn. Thus, so long as they are “properly designed to protect private and

home school autonomy” tax credits are “extremely important in protecting the fundamental, constitutional right of parents to [direct] the education of their own children,” Rebarber says.

McCluskey points out that even without school choice programs, homeschoolers already “face regulatory threats even when they have no connection to government whatsoever. Any time something bad happens to a child who was homeschooled, calls go out for more government supervision.”

He believes homeschooling families “would be better off with the chance to get credits or deductions for their expenses, and any who worry about regulation need not claim them” and hopes homeschoolers “wouldn’t fight proposed tax credits or deductions, at least at the state level, so other who need or want to defray costs could.”

Ultimately, so few families actually want to homeschool that by opposing different choices homeschoolers may actually be reducing a coalition that could come to their aid during calls for government regulation of education choices, including theirs. Opposing choices also reduces the number of fellow citizens who support their right to homeschool because they’ve learned through better schooling about the development and benefits of Americans’ freedom-based style of government.

In the end, McCluskey says, “What is clear is the Core has had no demonstrable positive impact on [national test scores] or our standing on international exams, which reinforces the conviction that there was no justification for subverting federalism to push it on the entire country. The rallying cry should be for educational freedom so that parents have a real, immediate say in what their children are taught.”