

## Common Core is not what its supporters claim it is

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You know the joke "We're from Washington and we're here to help?" Of course the "we" in that line are not going to help, but push you aside and mess things up. That's basically what you got in a recent op-ed from Chester Finn and Michael Petrilli of the D.C.-based Thomas B. Fordham Institute, who warned, ironically, that "outside groups" have been lying to Granite Staters about national curriculum standards. The Common Core, Finn and Petrilli argued, is truly state-controlled and wonderful.

Except it isn't, and we (one from D.C., the other from right here in New Hampshire) want to set the record straight.

Let's start with Finn and Petrilli's argument that Granite Staters should embrace Common Core in part because the state "has already invested time and money to implement the new standards." Basically, Washington successfully coerced New Hampshire into sinking money into Common Core, so we had better stick with it.

But much more will need to be spent at the district level — purchasing aligned books, making computer upgrades — to implement this thing. And what's that about federal coercion? Didn't Finn and Petrilli write that, while the Obama administration may have been overzealous in "promoting" Common Core, "the standards were developed by the states, and implementation is unquestionably a state effort?"

They did write that, but it's a huge mischaracterization of what actually happened. Common Core was created by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, associations that neither represent states nor the people of New Hampshire. Legislators represent you, and the NGA doesn't speak for states just because governors are elected. NGA decisions have no binding ramifications for states, and it's doubtful anyone has ever voted for a gubernatorial candidate based on what they thought he or she would do in the NGA. Governors simply have very little incentive to care what the NGA does.

Next, the Obama administration didn't just "promote" the standards, it coerced their adoption with real ramifications. At the nadir of the "Great Recession," it told states that to fully compete in the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top program they had to promise to adopt Common Core. That is exactly what most did, before the final standards were even published. Adoption was cemented by making it one of only two ways states could meet requirements for waivers from the No Child Left Behind Act.

But the Obama administration didn't go lone-wolf on this — national standards supporters wanted it. In the 2008 report "Benchmarking for Success," the NGA and CCSSO wrote that Washington should offer "incentives" for states to adopt common, internationally benchmarked standards, and later reiterated that on the Common Core website.

How about Finn and Petrilli's assertion that the "Core demands accountability, high standards, and testing?"

The standards may or may not be high (subject-matter experts disagree) but Common Core offers no accountability or testing. Those come through federal laws to which the program is connected. Those laws also call for augmented data collection and other troubling things you've probably heard about, but not from Common Core itself.

Next, there's their argument that Common Core doesn't dictate a specific curriculum, therefore it doesn't curb choice. That's like saying that government requiring you to ride a bike, but letting you pick the color and a banana seat, doesn't constrain your transportation options. Similarly, they suggested that because lots of people are scrambling to produce Core-aligned materials, it's fostering innovation. That's basically proclaiming that with all car and airplane manufacturers suddenly making bikes, travel innovation will explode.

Finally, Finn and Petrilli implied that absent national standards, "our economic and political rivals" will eat "our lunch." In fact, research indicates that nationally set standards have no meaningful effect on outcomes. Once you control for wealth and other major factors, what seems to drive achievement, at least as measured by test scores, is national culture, not what level of government sets standards. And there is a large body of research that finds that the more free-market like an education system is, the better.

So what's the moral of this story? When people from Washington arrive telling you Common Core is great, do what comes naturally: assume they are wrong.