

Expert's take: Is the fed forcing Common Core on the states?

By: Teresa Mull

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Liberals, conservatives, Democrats, and Republicans are divided on the issue of centralized, standardized education. Gov. Jeb Bush is making a push in favor of Common Core, leading voters to believe it doesn't stem from the federal government. Neal McCluskey, associate director of Cato's Center for Educational Freedom, sets us straight:

Jeb Bush is downplaying the fact that Common Core has its roots in the federal government. How is he wrong about this?

I wouldn't say that it has its 'roots' in the federal government. He's correct in saying that Common Core was created by an operation put together by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).

Here, though, is where he is wrong, or at least misleading: What he has indicated many times, or suggested, is that, if there was federal involvement, it came from the Obama administration and was unwanted, that this was supposed to be state-led and voluntary, and for the most part, he's saying it is. That is a completely inaccurate characterization of what happened.

First of all, the Common Core was not intended to be state-led and voluntary. While the NGA and CCSSO put it together, you can go to a 2008 report called "Benchmarking for Success," which proposed that there be internationally benchmarked standards common to a number of states, preferably *all* states. And it said very clearly that the job of the federal government in this regard was to incentivize adoption of the internationally benchmarked standards by all states, and to do this through 1.) funding – to provide funding for states to adopt and implement these national standards, and 2.) through regulatory relief – in other words, if you adopt these standards, you can be relieved of, at that time, unspecified federal regulations for accountability and things like that.

This was not just the Obama administration on its own deciding that it would use Race to the Top to encourage or to coerce states into adopting the Common Core. This was something the Common Core creators called for. Absolutely there was huge federal coercion behind states adopting the Common Core. It would be fair to say, we don't know, that probably some states

would have adopted Common Core without it, but the fact of the matter is that it was there, it was there from the beginning, and it was always intended to be there.

To say continually, and it's not just Gov. Bush, there are lots of Common Core supporters [who] continually try to make the public think that this is state-led and voluntary because the Obama administration on its own decided to use Race to the Top, and then waivers from No Child Left Behind to get states to adopt it, simply isn't true. It is something that the CCSSO and the NGA called for from before there was an Obama administration. It's absolutely essential that people be very clear about that. This isn't Obama working unilaterally; this is something that Common Core creators wanted.

People need to understand, and Governor Bush needs to be very clear, if we're going to have an honest debate about this, what happened, and the order in which it happened. The first thing was, before there was ever an Obama administration, creators of the Common Core said the federal government needs to incentivize adoption with funding and regulatory relief. Then you have to be very clear that the Race to the Top is the funding incentive before the Common Core standards had even been published, and most states applied for Race to the Top money and said they would use Common Core. And then, only two years later, they use waivers out of No Child Left Behind basically to rope in almost every other state saying, if you want out of this job that makes no sense, you're about to hit a wall with it, you have to use Common Core. You have one other option, and a few states used it, most already said they'd use Race to the Top, so they knew full-well how states were going to get this regulatory relief that they were so desperate to have.

Is this something Gov. Bush is doing intentionally, or is it a part of his agenda to sell Common Core to people who are leery of such a broad educational program that comes from the federal government?

A lot of this is word parsing, and I don't know what his motives are, but from the words he uses, I suspect there is word parsing here. It would be wrong to say that Common Core *comes* from the federal government, the right way to characterize is that it comes from the NGA and the CCSSO, but a very powerful force behind getting states to adopt it was the federal government and the CCSSO and the NGA called for the exact sort of federal coercion we got before there was an Obama administration.

What the Gov. Bush says, and what lots of other Common Core supporters often say is that, 'well opponents to Common Core are just lying when they tell you this is a federal program.' And then they'll say, 'This isn't a federal program, it didn't come from the federal government, and if the federal government had anything to do with it, it was the Obama administration.' They're right to say it wasn't a federal program, but they're absolutely wrong to suggest the federal government wasn't instrumental in getting lots of states to adopt it. The message they seem to want to get out is, 'this is all from the states, it's totally voluntary, and if there's any way it's not totally voluntary, it's because the Obama administration went off the rails and decided to push this.' And so I suspect, although I don't know people's motivations, it's hard to conclude from the rhetoric that is used, that this isn't an intentional effort to downplay the role of the federal government, often with, it seems, a second intention, of portraying Common Core opponents as misinformed, or worse, intentionally lying to people about the federal role. And

that implication about the opponents to Common Core is especially disturbing when it's so clear that the Common Core, pro-Core people, are often most likely willfully leaving out very basic, very crucial facts, that aren't even disputable if you're willing to talk about them.

What is the status of and next step for Common Core?

If you'd have asked me a year and a half ago, I would have said almost every state's about to adopt the Common Core and it's about to be implemented. Now, that is very much in doubt in many states. Indiana last month officially dropped it. Oklahoma appears to be on the verge of doing that. More broadly you have lots of states saying they are not going to use the tests that the federal government selected and paid for to go with the national standards, and that's another thing we don't hear mentioned from Common Core supporters. And that's a way of getting out of Common Core.

What has to happen for this to work, if you believe that centralized, national standards will work, is you've got to have the same standards, same tests, same ramifications, and the fact that lots of states are dropping those federally funded tests means you won't have that comparability.

So when you add that to states that have just backed out of completely, the Common Core, it's very clear that there's a retrenchment, lots of states are backing out of what Common Core supporters I think thought they were agreeing to do. The backlash is probably just at its beginning because it's not 'til next year that you start to have these tests implemented, and you'll start to see the scores likely drop as you've seen in New York and Kentucky, two states that did this ahead of everybody else.

New York has been a gigantic battleground since their results came out showing big drops in what was called kids who were proficient – about a third fewer are called proficient under the new tests than were under the old tests. And if you see that kind of drop in other states, you could very well see the Common Core disintegrate.

What you have seen is pro-Common Core groups have started out an ad blitz, taking out ads on Fox News on Sunday and things like that, trying to convince conservatives that they really want Common Core and these national standards. This has clearly become a much bigger, much higher visibility political battle than it was a year ago, and certainly than it was two years ago, because the Common Core finally hit schools and districts for implementation about a year and a half ago, suddenly everyone became aware of these things that most states adopted totally under the radar in an extreme rush in order to try to get Race to the Top money.

I think you're going to see a long, continuing battle over the Common Core across the country.