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Craig Westover: National school standards? Can't. So, ought not.

By Craig Westover

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I am completely convinced of two things: That the greatest advances in Western civilization have been lost somewhere between the third and fourth beer for want of a dry napkin; and that the more widely a public policy is heralded as something we ought to do, the less likely it is we actually can do it.

Case in point is the sobering announcement by Minnesota Education Commissioner Alice Seagren that Minnesota is joining the Common Core Standards Initiative, a state-led process to develop nationwide English-language arts and mathematics standards for K-12 education.

Led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Offices and subscribed to by 46 states and the District of Columbia, the Common Core Standards Initiative would create a framework of content and skills all children must master each year of K-12 education. The standards will be "research and evidence-based, internationally benchmarked, and aligned with college and work expectations," according to the coalition press release.

Let the heralding begin.

"Common standards will provide educators clarity and direction about what all children need to succeed in college and the workplace and allow states to more readily share best practices that dramatically improve teaching and learning," said

CCSSO President-Elect and Maine Education Commissioner Sue Gendron.

"Common standards ... have the potential to bring about a real and meaningful transformation of our education system to the benefit of all Americans," echoed NGA Vice Chair Vermont Gov. Jim Douglas.

Indeed, who could possibly be opposed? While there is a range of opposition from skeptical to fierce for nationally mandated standards out of Washington, there is broad support for "state-led, voluntary common standards," said CCSSO President and Arkansas Commissioner of Education Ken James. "This is an idea whose time has come."

"Only when we agree about what all high school graduates need to be successful will we be able to tackle the most significant challenge ahead of us: transforming instruction for every child," Gendron said.

Therein lies the rub.

"Many people think national standards would be great," the Cato Institute's Neal McClusky said. "But though people may love the idea of national standards, when it comes to actually creating them, love quickly turns to anger."

After attending a meeting on "International Evidence about National Standards," McClusky observed, "If you can't get people who really believe that we need national standards to agree on even their basic shape, why would anyone think that they could get a majority of Americans to agree on a single standard?"

No matter how intuitively it appears we ought to spend money and resources to implement some "awesome" public policy — "ought to" implies that we actually "can."

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Noting that ethicists can imagine all kinds of schemes to remedy perceived social ills, St. Lawrence University economics professor Steven Horowitz writes, "We always have to ask whether it's humanly possible to do what the ethicists say we ought. To say we ought to do something we cannot do, in the sense that it won't achieve our end, is to engage in a pointless exercise."

Of course, it is quite possible to implement a set of rigorous standards as Minnesota has done. As Seagren trumpeted, less than humbly: "By participating in this effort, we will take an active role in helping other states create consistent academic standards that will be as rigorous as Minnesota's current standards."

Great. However, the actual objective is not creating standards, but improving student readiness for the serious business of living. High standards don't necessarily indicate that children are receiving a quality education. Perhaps that's why the Legislature waived Minnesota's math test graduation requirement as too difficult for too many students. Education is an individual experience; the path to proficiency is an individual choice, not a national echo.

"People support national standards simply because they are easier to conceptualize than multiple standards," McClusky said. "And they think they — not people they dislike — will get to write the new, inescapable standards for all."

Far better for America's kids if the great idea to implement common standards had come up somewhere between the third and fourth beer. On sober reflection, the idea will cost a lot of money, waste a lot of time and resources, reach consensus somewhere just south of mediocrity, and in the end prove to be an "ought" that simply cannot achieve its objective.

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