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Critics join common cause to block latest school reform

By: Deborah Simmons – April 28, 2013

Education Secretary Arne Duncan would be a very wise man if he started paying close attention to the sticks being poked in the eyes of the Obama administration regarding those one-size-fits-all Common Core State Standards.

Not all states and localities bought into his "absolute game changer" claim — and for absolutely good reasons, including a "very large, very permanent federal footprint." Common Core was and is being sold as a set of academic standards that would improve teaching and learning and better prepare young people for college and careers.

Supported by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, Common Core was adopted in dozens of states, territories and the District. The buy-in came courtesy of new federal money and many of the jurisdictions have already begun implementation.

While Virginia rightly opted out early on, preferring its own rigorous standards and testing policies, Maryland officials looked at the potential tax dollars and started rubbing their hands. The state is planning to begin implementing the Common Core standards in K-12 classrooms this fall and begin testing students the following school year.

D.C. school officials, ahead of both their neighbors, began gnawing on the carrots so soon they started implementing Common Core during the 2011-12 year in grade schools and transitioned all grades this school year. They, too, are slated to launch assessments during the 2014-15 school year.

But after taking a closer look, parents can be found calling the Obama administration's carrot-dangling approach to national standards "un-American" and a "very large, very permanent federal footprint," as two opponents in Idaho characterized them in a school meeting last week, and grass-roots organizations and lawmakers in Florida, Indiana, Utah, Michigan, Illinois, Arizona, Kansas, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Georgia and South Carolina, among others, are mounting opposition.

Organizations positioned to push back Common Core include the Home School Legal Defense Association, American Association of Christian Schools, Cato Institute and Campaign for Liberty and Heartland Institute.

Late Friday night, the Indiana General Assembly passed legislation to backtrack Common Core. This after the state education board adopted the standards three years ago and began implementing the new standards on kindergartners in 2011, first-graders in 2012 and has set plans to bring in second-graders this year.

Obviously moving way too fast, Indiana school officials want to expand to all grade levels in 2014 and begin testing students the same year.

Small wonder Hoosier lawmakers voted to slow the state's roll.

One of opponents' chief arguments is that by accepting the feds' carrots (money) their sovereignty will become a pawn in a game of federal control, even though Mr. Duncan constantly argues that Common Core participation is voluntary.

But one of the spotlights of truth shines brighter. Again, here is what an Idaho opponent, Susan Frickey, said: "Look hard at the intended and unintended consequences of this path, particularly the very large, very permanent federal footprint evidenced in compliance with these standards and what they would mean to our local education and state sovereignty in Idaho."

Translation: Bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., are stomping on states' rights and our children's futures and school choice and parental concern and well you get the picture. Also, the Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education — whose members include oft-quoted scholars Linda Darling-Hammond, Frederick Hess and Diane Ravitch — questions in a recent report whether the new tests will provide "what is ultimately needed for either accountability or classroom instructional improvement purposes."

Mr. Duncan, having been a schools chief himself, should know by now that there are no absolutes when it comes to federal education mandates.

With parents raising their voices at school meetings, in towns large and small, and in state capitals, Mr. Duncan seemingly needs to hit the pause button on the Obama administration's agenda and even momentarily listen to a new choir.

Besides, standing 6 feet 5 inches tall, Mr. Duncan knows that one size never fits all.