



Maureen Downey: Abandoning the script

By [Maureen Downey](#)

9:30 a.m. Monday, May 16, 2011

Across the state, teachers are doing something they say they haven't been able to do all year — teach without a script.

Now that the high-stakes tests are over, teachers contend that the pressure and the shackles are off; they can deviate from soul-crushing, teach-by-number proscriptions that make it hard for them to infuse any creativity, spontaneity or joy into their classrooms.

As one teacher said: “Finally, I am free to teach without feeling pressured to ‘stay on target.’ Not only do I still have curriculum to cover [because I refuse to simply rush through it to say I got it done before CRCT], but I now also have the freedom to do a few engaging units which are not covered in the Georgia Performance Standards — thus not considered worth class time — but which my students seem to love.

“I love learning,” added the teacher, “and for this short period of about a month, I get to indulge my love of learning and teaching and have fun doing it without the pressure of ‘Does it meet the GPS?’ and ‘Is it tested on the CRCT?’ ”

In a few years, Georgia teachers will be asking new questions about their classroom lessons: Do they meet the Common Core State Standards and will they be covered by whatever new tests are developed to test those standards?

A state-led initiative in which Georgia was a major player, the Common Core eventually will replace the Georgia Performance Standards and set a purportedly higher and more relevant bar for what American students should know and be able to do.

But an academic food fight of sorts is under way among education leaders and researchers over whether the Common Core will further devolve teachers into drones and students into factory widgets.

In a conservative “manifesto” released last week, 100 conservative education, business and political leaders argued against a national curriculum and national test.

The manifesto said: “Because we are deeply committed to improving this country’s schools and increasing all students’ academic achievement, we cannot support this effort to undermine control of public school curriculum and instruction at the local and state level — the historic locus for effective innovation and reform in education — and transfer control to an elephantine, inside-the-Beltway bureaucracy.”

The manifesto came in response to an earlier collective statement from the Albert Shanker Institute, a bipartisan education group.

Signed by 75 prominent educators, including Atlanta Superintendent Beverly Hall, the statement endorsed the Common Core Standards and urged a “rich, common curriculum content, along with resources to support successfully teaching all students to mastery.”

The conservative manifesto sparked quick response from Shanker signees, including Checker Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

“A lot of my friends may need remedial reading — hopefully, with a solid curriculum — themselves because the ‘national curriculum’ bogeyman they decry isn’t even close to what the Shanker Institute has proposed nor what I would support,” Finn said.

“Supplying teachers — and schools, districts, states — with high-quality voluntary materials with which to organize and deliver a standards-aligned program of instruction to their pupils would be a huge gain for American education, and is needed now more than ever as the standards themselves become more rigorous.”

But Neal McCluskey, associate director of Cato’s Center for Educational Freedom, said Finn and other Common Core supporters who insist they want voluntary national standards and curriculums ought to prove it.

“At the same time Checker and the gang have insisted on standards adoption being voluntary, they have asked the federal government to supply unspecified amounts of money to push their goals,” he said. “If they really want this to be truly voluntary — meaning uncoerced by Washington — then why don’t they loudly and publicly renounce any federal funding and involvement?”

As the bridge between standards and assessments, curriculum is critical, said Stanford education professor Linda Darling-Hammond. “Standards will not teach themselves. There is this sort of notion that once we get these standards and get some tests, we will have magical formula to raise achievement. That is simply not true.”

But curriculum should not be seen as a straitjacket to restrain creative teaching but as guidepost to deepen it, said Darling-Hammond.

She cited Japan where teachers impart a handful of big ideas each year, compared to their U.S. counterparts who zip through 35 chapters. “We are still teaching fractions in ninth grade because a lot of students haven’t learned it in third or fourth grade,” Darling-Hammond said. “We have to help teachers think about how learning adds up over time rather than planning from one Monday to next in a way that is much more scattershot.”

Find this article at:

 [Print this page](#)  [Close](#)

<http://www.ajc.com/opinion/maureen-downey-abandoning-the-947373.html>