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Here Come the Federal Education Standards

But the advocates are in denial.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), a joint project of the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) — no bureaucracy there, folks — recently unveiled proposed national education standards that are all the rage in Washington.

But don't you dare call them federal.

“This initiative is, and has been since its inception, a state-led, voluntary effort,” CCSSO executive director Gene Wilhoit told Congress in December.

The new standards (for the uninitiated) lay out specific, grade-by-grade language-arts and mathematics content. More important, to hear NGA and CCSSO officials tell it, the standards are the product of completely uncoerced state cooperation.

That is at best a half-truth.

Washington certainly hasn't been holding a gun to states' heads. It does, however, have its hand firmly in taxpayers' wallets. Budgetary blackmail has enabled Washington to impose everything from No Child Left Behind to uniform speed limits: The feds tax state citizens and then tell state politicians that if they want some of the money, they must “voluntarily” obey federal rules.

Here's how the process has worked with national standards. Tucked into the gargantuan federal “stimulus” was the “Race to the Top” fund, a \$4.35 billion pool of money controlled by the U.S. secretary of education. To compete for RTTT dollars, states had first to endorse the CCSSI, and now have to agree to adopt its standards by August 2.

Unfortunately, RTTT is likely just the start of federal strong-arming. While reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act — the financial heart of federal education policy — isn't likely to occur this year, in March the Obama administration published a “blueprint” for renovating the law. Central to the plan: national standards.

Despite Obama-administration policies pushing national standards, many standards advocates insist they don't want Washington connecting federal funds to the adoption of the standards. Dane Linn, education director of the National Governors Association, said of RTTT's national-standards provisions: “We'd prefer no strings were attached.”

Maybe that is what Linn would prefer. It's definitely not, however, what either his group or the CCSSO has been calling for. For instance, in December 2008 a joint NGA-CCSSO publication, “Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring Students Receive a World-Class Education,” called for the federal government to “offer funds to help underwrite the cost” of establishing common state standards.

That wasn't an aberration. The CCSSI website kept the plea for federal dough, and it still says that the federal role in establishing national standards is, among other things, to provide “tiered incentives,” including “offering financial support,” to get states to adopt and implement the standards.

So let's be honest: National standardizers want coercive federal power backing their “voluntary” effort. Which prompts the crucial question: Why not just be upfront about that?

For starters, because with federal power comes federal control, and few Americans want that. We cherish local authority over our communities' schools, and correctly do not trust Washington to do much of anything right.

Then there's the fact that centralized, government-controlled education almost always ends up dominated by politically powerful teachers and bureaucrats — people whose livelihoods depend upon the status quo. And they, like most of us, would much prefer not having their feet held to scorching fires. The result: standards that either are weak to begin with, or end up that way.

As the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a leading national-standards crusader, explained in a 2006 report, state standards are often very poor because they have been “turned over to K–12 interest

groups.” This reality has put national-standards advocates like Fordham in a logically impossible situation: They know states won’t adopt or maintain high standards unless the feds force them to, but they also know that the same political forces that have crippled state efforts would doom federal control.

Unfortunately, rather than acknowledge what the evidence makes clear — that centralized government power is a root cause of poor performance, not a solution — it seems national standardizers have elected to stuff reality into their subconscious and plunge ahead. Which might explain how they can say with a straight face that federal coercion plays no part in their plans.

They might not be dissembling. They might just be in denial.

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