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## Honey, when did the Feds take over the kids' school?

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There's a revolution happening, and you probably don't even know it. While you've been worrying about wars, spills and bailouts, Washington has been taking over your schools.

Already, more than 30 states, including Michigan, have capitulated to national mathematics and language arts standards, and several more are likely to do so. And amazingly, almost no one's heard about it. But that's exactly what standardizers, who know national standards' fatal flaws, want.

The immediate impetus for this has been the "Race to the Top," a federal competition for \$4.35 billion in federal funds. Adopting standards created by something called the Common Core State Standards Initiative is crucial for states to compete.

Much more credit, though, goes to the No Child Left Behind Act, the reviled 2002 law that requires states to implement standards and tests, and progress toward full math and reading "proficiency" by 2014.

NCLB made seemingly tough "accountability" demands so that politicians could look uncompromising on bad schools. So the same politicians could appear to pay homage to local control, however, it left states to write their own standards, tests, and definitions of proficiency. The result predictably, has been low, but highly variable, state definitions of proficiency. It's much easier to set low bars than push kids over high ones.

To remedy this, standardizers want to force states to use uniform, high standards. In the context of NCLB it makes some sense, and has likely muted criticism of the standards drive.

Unfortunately, there is another, much more disturbing reason that national standards have been flying under the radar: Stealth is essential for its proponents to succeed.

The last national standards push was in the 1990s, and it disintegrated almost the moment proposed federal standards were released. Everyone, it seemed, was paying attention, and every diverse American found something in the very detailed standards to hate.

Avoiding a similar fate explains why the CCSSI furnished only mathematics and language arts standards, and why the latter identify almost no specific works students must read. Math is relatively uncontroversial, as is English -- if you don't prescribe any actual readings.

The big problems are that focusing on just two subjects threatens to narrow the curriculum, while dodging essential reading threatens to hollow it out. Do more, though, and Americans might have something of substance to grab onto.

The second key to keeping things hush-hush has been to deceive the public about what -- and who -- is driving the standards. Contrary to proponents' incessant refrain, standardization has been neither "state led" nor "voluntary," and it's the heavy hand of the super-unpopular federal government that's shoving everything

along.

While creation of the Common Core was spearheaded by associations of governors and state education chiefs, those groups do not represent individual states. Meanwhile, the National Conference of State Legislatures opposes national standards.

Of course, many state school boards have adopted the standards, but they might just be happily passing the standards buck. Much more importantly, thanks to Race to the Top and Obama administration plans to connect national standards to even bigger piles of money, adoption is no more "voluntary" than adhering to NCLB or the minimum drinking age. If states want federal dollars, which were taken from their citizens to begin with, they must do as they're told.

Finally, to keep the public from grasping what's happening, standardizers have rushed adoption of the Common Core standards. They were released on June 2, and Race to the Top required adoption just two months later.

The truth about national standards explains the need to evade serious scrutiny. Despite claims about needing national standards to compete in the world economy, or all countries that outperform us having national standards, the research reveals that, all else equal, countries with national standards do no better than those without. It also reveals that the freer the education system, the better.

It's not hard to understand why. Government schooling is almost always controlled by the people it employs because they are the most motivated to be involved in education politics. And like most people, they would prefer as little outside accountability as possible. Conversely, more freedom means more competition, and that means real accountability -- answering to customers -- as well as constant innovation.

So why are national curriculum standards the biggest federal takeover you've never heard of? Because they need silence to survive. And here's another big secret: Unless we do something now, national tests are coming next.

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