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# National education standards: one small step forward, one giant leap back

By: [Phil Brand](#)

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National standards for K-12 education, in their latest iteration, are gaining traction with the somewhat misleadingly called “Common Core State Standards Initiative.” All the education analysts, experts and bloggers are [weighing in](#) on the *educational* merits and demerits of national standards. But the more troubling part of this new Initiative isn’t educational, but civic.

The Initiative is misleadingly called because states already set education standards; the new Initiative, while “state-led,” is a push for states all to adopt the same national standard (See the standard at the Initiative’s [website](#)). Adopting the new standard is “voluntary” for states, but that doesn’t mean the federal government isn’t prompting them with financial carrots and sticks. Consider the much talked about Race To The Top Initiative: The \$4.35 billion fund was created with stimulus package money and will be awarded to states which adopt education policies the Obama administration deems worthy. States, of course, had to sign on to the Common Core State Standards Initiative to be eligible for Race To The Top money. Even the Initiative webpage acknowledges, “The federal government will have the opportunity to support states as they begin adopting the standards.” On top of that, writes Neil McCluskey of the Cato Institute, more federal strings will likely be attached to \$14.5 billion in Elementary and Secondary Education Act money.

The civic problem with the Initiative is that public education is—constitutionally, historically and appropriately—the quintessential state and local government responsibility. Citizens have made education decisions in accordance with local circumstances, and as a result education has been a function of community. This is to the good. If, [writes](#) Russell Kirk, “the functions of community are transferred to distant political direction—why, real government by the consent of the governed gives way to a standardizing process hostile to freedom and human dignity.” The “narrowing uniformity and deadening egalitarianism” of radical centralization, Kirk continues, is not a praiseworthy substitute for the messy process of local governance and the freedom and variety which it engenders. Concerning national education standards, George will has recently [written](#), “If we must continue the mistake of increasing federal supervision of primary and secondary education,” at least we should do it right and adopt them. Better, simply, not to advance the mistake.

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