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Slippery slope of school standards

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It was the last teaching day of the school year and I was rushing through my lecture, "After the Civil War." I had to get to the Election of 1876 before the bell rang or my students would miss what they needed to understand why Reconstruction collapsed. I made a Hobson's choice. I would skip over the administration of Ulysses Grant in order to get to Rutherford Hayes.

As a result, my eighth-grade students heard nothing about the Credit Mobilier scandal, the Panic of 1873 or Grant's efforts to advance Native American and African American rights, all important events of the era.

That's the sort of choice teachers make every day in a social studies classroom. With only 180 days in a school year, it's not possible to cover everything with the level of detail students need to absorb and retain. And that's what makes the controversy over social studies standards in Texas amusing and alarming.

Last week, the Texas Board of Education voted for changes in the state curriculum guidelines that determine what social studies teachers teach from elementary grades through high school. Most of the changes were suggested by conservative board members who said they were trying to restore balance after years of liberal bias. The guidelines, to take effect in 2011-12, will affect the content of textbooks and standardized tests.

It's amusing because it's almost impossible to micromanage instruction at the level of detail dictated by the Texas standards. For example, Texas eighth-graders will be expected to study Confederate President Jefferson Davis's inaugural address alongside Abraham Lincoln's inaugural speeches. High schoolers are to learn about the causes and leaders of the conservative resurgence of the 1980s and 1990s including Phyllis Schlafly and the Moral Majority. It's alarming because Texas, with 4.7 million students, is an influential state when it comes to the textbook market. "Decisions that are made in Texas have a ripple effect across the country," Phillip VanFossen, head of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Purdue University, told the Christian Science Monitor. Large publishers might rewrite their texts to reflect Texas's new standards.

What should worry people more, however, is that the Texas controversy will add momentum to the effort to create common academic standards to be used in all 50 states. Although the initiative is described as voluntary, is backed by 48 governors (including Mitch Daniels) and involves only math and language arts for now, it's a slippery slope that could lead to the "federalization" of curriculum. In fact, President Obama has said he won't award federal Race to the Top dollars to states who don't buy into the common standards project.

The last thing we want is a lockstep national curriculum with all students learning the exact same material at the exact same time. It would stifle creativity at the state and local level and invite political bias beyond anything Texas has experienced.

If you don't think ideology enters into math and language arts standards like it does in social studies, think again. From the whole language versus phonics debate to the role of calculators in the elementary classroom, politics will find its way into every standards discussion.

Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, writes, "When each state is responsible for its own standards there is at least some pressure to keep benchmarks high; caring parents, or companies in search of a better educated work force, might gravitate toward high-standard states. And when states stand alone, their leaders can't adopt poor standards and use the fact that they are common as an excuse. Perhaps most important, in a diverse nation it's simply more logical to have multiple standards." Indiana is fortunate to have exemplary standards in social studies, language arts and math. They've received highest possible rankings from the Thomas B. Fordham educational research organization for comprehensiveness, clarity and lack of bias. We would have nothing to gain by entering into a compact to adopt standard curriculum guidelines. And we could have a whole lot to lose.

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