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## **Too shiny an apple On education, state should beware feds bearing gifts**

With Massachusetts and a dozen other states scrambling to regain their footing for the second round of the “Race to the Top” for federal education dollars, we couldn’t help but take note of a recent passage in John Derbyshire’s new book “We Are Doomed: Reclaiming Conservative Pessimism.”

“Education is a vast sea of lies, waste, corruption, crackpot theorizing, and careerist logrolling,” he writes. “If, as H.G. Wells asserted, ‘human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe,’ we have lost the race, and had better brace ourselves for the catastrophe.”

We don’t fully share Mr. Derbyshire’s pessimism, but his description of education — educational bureaucracy, specifically — rings sadly true. The past century is littered with a thousand pedagogical fads and theories that did little to advance true learning, but all of which cost American taxpayers a great deal of money in consultants, conferences, long-forgotten reports, and millions of hours spent in meetings.

The fact that phonics suffices to teach most children to read didn’t stop a generation from foundering on whole language and its variations thereof. Memorizing multiplication tables is hard to beat, but didn’t stop the onslaught of the “new math” and its progeny. And history and social studies courses have too often shunted aside the Constitution, dates and facts, and devolved into a cacophony of false notes in minor keys, the product of revisionist thinking more focused on America’s imperfections than her overall success.

Happily, by 1993 Massachusetts figured out faddism was just that, and embarked upon reform that included new spending where needed, embraced charter schools, and insisted upon tough curriculum frameworks and high-stakes testing to match.

Massachusetts has achieved its success relative to much of the nation *without* national education standards. The self-reliance famously touted by Ralph Waldo Emerson turns out to be a virtue in the classroom, too. The state has, in fact, incorporated new thinking, new people and new perspectives into its schools and curricula, but in its own way, under the watchful eyes of school boards and public watchdogs in 351 cities and towns.

In all this, it is fair and necessary to ask: Who needs Washington, D.C., and its Department of Education?

A February analysis by Neal McCluskey of the Cato Institute warned that centralized control of education and an over-reliance on academia may well be at odds with “... the ethos of the colonist, frontiersman, and entrepreneur ... central to the American narrative.”

Moreover, a recent Pioneer Institute paper, “Fair to Middling,” casts a dour eye on the drive toward national standards, wondering at one point “whether final decisions not to aim for the best in this country and elsewhere have already been made.”

We hope that this state — and others — retain independence in charting their respective educational courses. Massachusetts education officials must make clear there will be no retreat from high standards for the sake of federal funds. The current political climate suggests that once we begin playing Washington’s game, Washington is not likely to stop at mere suggestions and helpful advice.

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