

Beware of Obama Core

Robert Nemeth – October 28th, 2012

While economic, social and foreign policy issues have dominated the long and arduous presidential campaign, virtually no public attention has been paid to President Obama's behind-the-scenes effort to transform the system of public education. That is an unfortunate oversight because Obama Core is just as consequential for the country's future as Obama Care.

The plan, quietly but steadfastly promoted by the White House, is to bring local education under federal control. That is to be accomplished through enforcing a national curriculum, bypassing parents, state and local school boards, and dictating what students will and will not learn. Because federal laws explicitly prohibit the central government from directing, funding or controlling any state and local education standard, the White House uses surrogates — commissions and foundations — as well as immense financial pressure to coerce the states to go along with the change.

The vehicle for transition is the so-called Common Core of State Standards, which is to replace existing curriculums and are locked in by tests called "assessments." States that accept Common Core benefit from \$4.35 billion in federal stimulus spending. The money is to be used to finance the "Race to the Top," a government program that is shaping up as the costliest and least productive experiment since the LBJ-era Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. It is the successor of "No Child Left Behind," another government intervention with a catchy name. The U.S. Department of Education is paying others to do what it is forbidden from doing. Another \$362 million in federal grants goes to two national consortia that are developing methods to help states with the transition. Despite the claim that participation in Common Core is voluntary, the Cato Institute has concluded that "adoption will almost certainly be involuntary," and it's only the first step. Obama Core advocates are planning to impose federal standards on charter schools and private institutions that accept public money as well.

The program doesn't come cheap. The Boston-based Pioneer Institute estimated that fully implementing Common Core, over seven years, could cost \$16 billion. In their rush to gobble up the federal manna, many of the 46 states that embraced Common Core provisions before they were even completed did so without public debate or legislative approval. Most relied for data on such private interests as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that has spent more than \$100 million to develop and promote national

standards. (It's worth noting that the new system is expected to benefit testing and software companies that aim to create a homogeneous market for their products.)

Common Core is the backbone of an education agenda that seeks to narrow the "achievement gap" between groups of students by lowering standards, doing away with meaningful achievement tests such as MCAS, and ultimately reallocating investment in schools. President Obama's Education Department, under the leadership of Secretary Arne Duncan, another product of Chicago politics, has established an Equity and Excellence Commission, charged with "finding ways to restructure school finance systems to achieve equity distribution of education resources and further student achievement and attainment." Translation: Take resources from the suburbs and give them to urban school districts.

Even though only the math and English literature standards have been released thus far, their shortcomings are glaring. The math standards have been characterized as "fuzzy math" that offer very little arithmetic or standard algorithms and fail to teach students the best ways to get the right answers.

The English and literature standards are even worse, because they de-emphasize classical literature in favor of nonfiction and informational reading. Even though analyzing great literature gives students all the critical thinking they need, Common Core promotes reading nontraditional authors from Africa and the Far East rather than Western classics. The new standards make it possible for students to graduate from public higher education without ever reading Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton, Chaucer, Byron or Shakespeare, not to mention Bronte, Emerson, Thoreau or other literary giants.

Nowhere is the problem more evident than in Massachusetts, where the Education Reform Act of 1993 produced remarkable improvement. High standards, mandatory testing and the commitment of huge sums of money propelled the Bay State to national prominence in teaching and learning. With its one-size-fits-all, politically motivated agenda, Obama Core threatens to sacrifice 20 years of progress.

Massachusetts, the birthplace of many great writers and poets, has been known as the cradle of American literature. The 1993 reform law was carefully crafted to nurture that tradition through the schools. Obama Core gives the humanities short shrift in favor of "soft skills" such as global awareness, media savvy and cultural competence.

The schools play a central role in our democratic society. They enlighten and shape young people's minds and character. If President Obama wants to "fundamentally transform American society," as he promised before his 2008 election, nothing can be more effective for that purpose than nationalizing the country's system of education.

He is halfway there. There are many reasons why the president should not get a second term. Saving our schools from Obama Core is near the top of the list.