Common Core Standards For Public Schools: A Bad Idea

by Phyllis Schlafly September 17, 2010

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The No Child Left Behind Act, which allowed states to set their own public school standards for "proficiency," is opposed and considered a failure by all factions in the education world. Therefore, we obviously should force all kids in every state to be held to uniform national standards of proficiency. Right?

No; wrong. But that bad idea is being aggressively promoted by the Obama Administration. The mailed fist in the velvet glove is the extraordinary river of taxpayers' money used to force compliance.

Having taken over major parts of the banking industry, the mortgage industry, the auto industry, the college student-loan industry, and the health-care industry, the Obama Administration is now taking over the $600 billion public-school industry with taxpayers' money from the Stimulus package. The White House concedes that "stimulus" is a negative word and avoids its use because it obviously didn't stimulate jobs, but Stimulus dollars will stimulate the takeover of our children's minds under Common Core Standards, the moniker for forcing national curriculum standards on all public schools.

Imposing common-core national standards sounds so alluring to those who look to the Obama Administration to solve all our problems. We would get rid of our messy, different 50-state variations of standards, and make our kids smarter by incentivizing them to aspire to a higher bar of achievement, make them all college-ready, enable them to rank higher on international tests, and enable them to better compete in the new global economy.

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Au contraire. For starters, the imposition of national standards isn't constitutional. Nothing in the U.S. Constitution authorizes the federal government to exercise any control over education, and this limitation is reinforced by a longstanding federal law that forbids the federal government "to mandate, direct, or control ... school's curriculum, program of instruction, or allocation of state or local resources."

But the Obama Administration isn't known for checking out its authority with the Constitution or the law. And control of public school curriculum is a very desirable prize for those who seek to control the future.

Even Jimmy Carter's Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Joseph Califano admitted in 1977, "national control of curriculum is a form of national control of ideas." The bait is use of our money, lots of it.

The Obama Administration plans to do an end-run around the Constitution and the federal law by tying the Common Core Standards to the granting or denying of federal appropriations, both the $4.35 billion Race To The Top money and even Title I funding. That effectively makes the Common Core Standards compulsory because state politicians are not likely to turn down billions of dollars.

So far, at least 36 states plus the District of Columbia have adopted Common Core Standards. Only Texas and Virginia have indicated reluctance to adopt.

Much of the argument for Common Core Standards is that our decentralized, 50-state control of curriculum is so unlike educational systems in most other countries, but so what! Americans honor our exceptionalism and our federalism, and we don't want to be "fundamentally transformed" into European-style socialism.

Conclusions offered by the research into systems used in other countries are thin, unpersuasive and largely irrelevant to the United States. The countries cited have a long tradition of central government control plus a largely homogeneous culture, whereas the United States has a diverse population and strong traditions of parental authority, limited government, and state (not federal) control of education.

There is absolutely no assurance that parents or the public will approve the content of the proposed Common Core Standards. Many so-called education "experts" openly advocate imposing curriculum standards on content that parents find offensive, such as non-phonics in reading instruction and left-wing and feminist propaganda in social studies, and on methodology such as deliberately not teaching facts or basic arithmetic skills in order to emphasize creativity.

The better way to go is toward what is known as school choice, i.e., allowing parents to choose the school they want for their children, a.k.a. the free market in education. Private choice would sort out the curricula that do the job of making kids smart.

Children will never be adequately educated under a system run by bureaucrats handing out money and the teachers unions (the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers) spending the money in the classroom. The NEA and the AFT also have extraordinary millions of dollars extracted from their members to lobby for policies they want to have enacted by Congress, state legislatures and school boards and also to elect their favored political candidates.