



A 'Common' Debate: Common Core Curriculum Standards Are Promising But Dangerous

Summary

The Common Core standards are better than those in Michigan currently and could raise the bar for schools and students, but lawmakers should proceed with caution. There's little evidence that standards lead to better outcomes for students; the federal government may usurp control of the standards; and federal money may get tied up later on that makes change difficult to impossible.

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By Michael Van Beek

The debate over the Common Core curriculum standards is dividing traditional allies and uniting regular adversaries. Opposition and support come from both sides of the political spectrum. Not surprisingly, arguments from both sides tend to exaggerate the effect the Common Core will have on students, schools and society. Even though there are plausible arguments for adopting the Common Core, policymakers should proceed with extreme caution.

Unfortunately, a fair amount of the opposition to the Common Core is off-base. Some believe adopting Common Core empowers the federal government to indoctrinate students. But the Common Core is only reading and math standards (so far), which were developed by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers. More importantly, they are standards (not a curriculum) that outline what students need to master. How students learn these concepts will still be left to local schools and districts.

Further, as of now, the standards appear to be an improvement over the ones Michigan currently uses. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education reform think tank, argues that the reading standards are significantly better than Michigan's (and the math standards are slightly better, too.) The Common Core could raise the bar for schools and students, and this state needs that.

There are other potential benefits to adopting the Common Core. With clear expectations and measurable outcomes, more schools may get serious about teaching students important reading and math skills. In addition, the Common Core provides colleges of education the chance to improve how they train teachers by outlining the specific demands of the job. Finally, the standards will make it easier for teachers around the nation to share resources and best practices.

Despite these advantages, there's little evidence that implementing more standards will lead to better outcomes for students all by itself. Examining the effect state standards have had in the past at boosting learning, the Brookings Institute found that "the Common Core will have little to no effect on student achievement." There are more important factors impacting whether students actually learn than just standards. For instance, good standards are not much use if there aren't high-quality teachers helping students meet those standards.

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The Common Core curriculum standards have potential for improvement over Michigan's current standards, but must be treated with caution. To read more articles debating the topic, visit www.mackinac.org/v2013-16.

There are many other reasons to be skeptical of the Common Core’s ability to improve public education. Although collaboratively developed by state politicians, there is a very real threat the federal government will usurp control of these standards. The Obama administration’s decision to entice states to adopt these standards in order to qualify for the “Race to the Top” federal grant was a step in this direction.

If the federal government gains control of these standards, it’s unlikely they will remain rigorous. They will become highly politicized, and wealthy special interest groups (notably, teachers unions and public school officials) will lobby to have these standards reduced or watered down.

None of this would harm Michigan if the state could maintain its ability to back away from the standards at any time. But if the federal government again ties resources to the use of these standards, and if Michigan is heavily “invested,” opting out may become politically and practically difficult, if not impossible.

High standards should be used to hold tax-funded schools accountable for delivering educational opportunities to students. This is a worthy goal. But it’s more easily achieved by creating a marketplace of educational services where those who know and care the most about the best interests of children — parents — are the ultimate arbiters of quality. This decentralized and apolitical accountability beats any top-down dictate from the state.

The reality is though that until all parents have the ability to hold schools accountable by saying “no thank you” and voting with their feet, we’ll have to rely on some form of state-mandated accountability standards. The Common Core are better than Michigan’s status quo on this count, but also dangerous. Ideally, Michigan would implement better standards without risking the certain dangers associated with federal control of these standards.

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