

Editorial

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AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice
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National Curriculum Standards: Let's Think It Over

As of July 1, 2009 chief state school officers from 49 states and territories indicated they will volunteer their states' education systems to take part in what might be one of the largest social and political experiments in the recent history of the United States. They will nationalize public school curriculum through the adoption of a universal set of core standards, and eventually, a national standardized testing program.

The idea of national curriculum standards and nationalized testing for education violates core principles of our democracy and does not take into account the empirical literature that exposes the idea as educationally bankrupt. It is not our intent to chastise those who jumped aboard the national standards bandwagon. We ask only that they and you, the education leaders of America's schools, examine this idea through historical and empirical lenses before going any further.

Reasons and Rationale

The reasons given by proponents for the need to nationalize curriculum standards, and eventually testing schemes, is an empirically unsupported fear that America will not be able to compete in the global marketplace. There

seems to be a re-emergence of some type of American inferiority complex, reminiscent of the days following Sputnik and *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Fear and political ideology are once again driving attacks on public education in this country. There are those who appear ready and willing, perhaps unknowingly, to support the erosion of local control, and thus democracy, in exchange for the illusion of future economic security and increased political power. Is this warranted or even necessary?

U.S. History I

Let us address some basic historical democratic principles that suggest restricting local control by nationalizing education standards and testing is a threat to the democracy because it will expand the control and influence of the federal government over this important local issue. During the formation of the new nation there was a political battle between Federalists and Anti-Federalists. They argued over states' rights and local control versus the desire for a powerful federal government. Anti-Federalists understood the potential negative consequences to the citizenry if an abusive federal

government was able to exercise too much power and control over local issues.

In fact, the American colonists had almost a 150 year history of local control. From the earliest experiences at an outpost in Jamestown, the colonists had to develop local governments and social hierarchies to anchor their fledgling society. Although they were subjects of Britain, they conceived a form of government based on local control and thirteen autonomous colonies. They created their own legislative assemblies and town governments in each colony, managed their own trade within and among colonies, and individual colonies even set up trading agreements with other countries.

The colonists had to develop political and social systems based on local control because prior to 1763 Britain had a more or less hands off policy known as *salutary neglect*. For lack of better terms, Britain left the colonists “on their own.” Over the course of 150 years prior to the revolution, the colonists built the foundation for American Democracy squarely upon local control and what we now call states’ rights. It is important for us to remember that the American Revolution itself was in part driven by the erosion of local control through coercive and repressive policies by Britain after 1763.

After the American Revolution, a debate ensued among the political elite on what type of government was the best for the new country. Some like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin believed that state and local governments were best because they were smaller and could allow more participation from citizens through local control. They saw local control as a mechanism to lessen the likelihood that the federal government and the states would abuse power over its citizens. Others believed that a strong central

government was the direction America should take. Eventually, the men from both sides formed two political parties, the Federalists and Anti-Federalists.

The Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton, an Anglophile, James Madison, and John Jay, admired centralized British institutions, such as banking. As a result, they believed that the new country needed a central government to become a powerful nation like Britain (Hamilton, Madison, Jay, and Rossiter, 1987).

Anti-Federalists saw that British tyranny was a result of centralized power and were concerned that similar things could happen to the fledgling country should the central government gain too much control. Thus our democracy was structured to strike a balance between federal control and states’ rights and local control in an effort to keep an eye on federal incursions into local issues, but allow the federal government the authority to right wrongs at the local level through appropriate legislative channels. The balance is exemplified in the 10th Amendment to our Constitution.

Examples of Abuse of Power and States Rights

It did not take long for the fears of the Anti-Federalists to come true. As the Anti-Federalists predicted years prior, the Federalists started to abuse their power under the John Adams presidency. As Americans started to prepare for a war with France, there was an expanding amount of dissent. Adams used the centralized power of the federal government to arrest journalists and others who disagreed with his policies towards France. Adams argued that he was protecting his nation by forgoing state laws and local control and arrested dissenters. Angered by Adams, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison wrote the Kentucky and

Virginia Resolutions that declared that the Constitution was an agreement between sovereign states and if the federal government abused its power states had a right to respond. Citizens responded by supporting local control and electing Jefferson, the Democrat, in 1800.

States rights were also a central issue during the slavery debate of the mid-1800's. The federal Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 made it illegal for a citizen in a northern state not to assist with the capture of fugitive slaves. Northerners felt that the federal government had abused its power when it passed the Fugitive Slave Law. As a result, legislatures in northern states stepped in to blunt the centralized power of the federal government and passed Personal Liberty Laws that protected northerners from the Fugitive Slave Law.

Future of Public Education

States rights vs. federalism started as a political/economic debate during the formation of the nation, but one can see this debate in American education now. This time it is the states that are ready to nationalize education standards.

You might ask how this is an erosion of local control if the states voluntarily participate. Consider that the willingness to shun a vital part of our democracy is driven by massive amounts of federal money being pumped into state coffers through the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan's Race to the Top initiative.

The money brings strings attached to empirically fraudulent requirements such as linking teacher performance ratings and pay to student standardized test scores and creating more charter schools. Furthermore, national standards will bring a national standardized test

that has to be used to monitor compliance with the requirements.

The influence of a mandated federal standardized test will reach into the local classroom and control local decision making from the federal level. Local control will become but an illusion relegated to discussions in university political science classes. Unfortunately, state education leaders and governors seem willing to drink from the poisoned trough to cover budget gaps in the short-term, but water down democracy in the long run.

The problem is once we shift the balance of control for education to the federal government, which it ostensibly will occur in this case due to the regulations and strings attached to receiving the money, the local citizens lose the only remaining voice they had to help determine some aspects of the curriculum and their children's education. Instead of curriculum changes coming from the bottom up through the voice of the people, those changes become increasingly driven by national political ideology, such as social conservatism and neo-liberalism and not by empirical research.

Everyone remember No Child Left Behind? That is social conservatism, neo-liberalism, and free market profiteering out of control in education. Why would we want to give more control of public education to corporations and the federal government when the federal government only provides about 7% of the funding? State and local funding for public education accounts for about 93% of the money. Should we not want to keep our voice as strong as possible?

Thomas Jefferson was clear on the need for local control. He stated that it is the local government that knows the needs of its people

the best, it is most responsive to its citizens, and most able to deal with democratic issues democratically. He stated, even at that time, that the country was too large to have a central bureaucracy managing local affairs. Local control is the voice of the citizenry. It is part of our culture and who we are as a people. It is what defines us as fiercely independent and ruggedly individual and creative.

To deny we need local control in education in order to strengthen our education system is to deny our history as a country. A quote prior to the American Revolution, sometimes attributed to Benjamin Franklin, prophetically warns those who prefer a false sense of security over freedom: “They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety” (Franklin, 1818).

Economic Competitiveness

If an historical argument built on the preservation of democracy and local control is not strong enough, we provide a brief review of the economic competitiveness argument so often used as the main reason for adopting national standards. Those who make this argument reference frequently a piece of disinformation followed by a fraud masquerading as research. The disinformation centers on Sputnik and the idea that our education system failed us. The fraud is the now thoroughly debunked report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) that so many “reformers” use as “proof” that public education still needs an overhaul.

The disinformation is easily uncovered. If you look in the National Archives you will find the memo of the meeting Eisenhower held on October 8, 1957 with his top aides immediately following the launch of Sputnik. They discussed the federal report that

confirmed that the U.S. military’s Redstone rocket was actually capable of launching a satellite into orbit several months before the Soviets. Eisenhower’s Secretary of Defense Quarles stated, and Eisenhower agreed, that the Soviets actually did the U.S. a favor by opening up space because U.S. officials feared that a U.S. first launch of a satellite via the military’s Redstone rocket could set off a confrontation with the Soviets.

The fraud is equally easy to expose. The Reagan Administration released *A Nation at Risk* 26 years after Sputnik. The writers of the report used Sputnik as an example of American educational weakness. The report played on baseless fears that America was at risk of once again losing its competitiveness to a foreign country. That fraud was summarily exposed and set straight 10 years later by the empirical study *Perspectives in Education in America* (Carson, Huelskamp, and Woodall, 1993).

The current argument used by today’s proponents of nationalizing education is double-barreled and goes something like this: (a) American children need to score at or near the top on international tests of academic achievement in order for the U.S. to remain economically competitive, and (b) a national curriculum will cause that to happen.

Evidence to Support Economic Competitiveness?

First, there is little if any methodologically sound empirical evidence that supports the idea that a national curriculum for America is needed for us to remain economically competitive (Zhao, 2009). Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, there is no methodologically sound empirical evidence that supports a cause and effect or even a strong relationship between any of the G8 or G14 countries’ rankings on international tests of academic skills and knowledge and those

countries' economic vitality and competitiveness.

There is empirical evidence, easily located, to discredit that fallacy. Studies from the last 11 years show that the relationship between rankings on international tests and the economic vitality of the top 17 economies in the world are either negative, or so weak, that they are not significant, and certainly do not demonstrate a cause and effect relationship (Baker, 2007; Bils & Klenow, 1998; Bracey, 2003, 2005; Krueger, 1999; Psacharopoulos, & Patrinos 2002; Ramirez, Luo, Schofer, & Meyer, 2006; Tienken, 2008). The strongest 17 economies in the world actually show a negative relationship between their ranking on international tests and economic strength (Tienken, 2008).

With the data so prevalent to the contrary, why do proponents continue to use the economic competitiveness argument? Is this a case of anti-intellectualism driving policy?

Unsubstantiated Rhetoric

Despite 50 years of political noise regarding our eminent demise at the hands of education systems like the Soviet Union, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, our economy has remained the strongest in the world (World Economic Forum, 2008). While the names have changed recently to China, India, and Singapore (again), we still rank #1 in economic competitiveness on the international Growth Competitiveness Index. America also has the largest number of students who scored at the top levels in Science on the latest PISA for 15 year-olds (OECD, 2009). The U.S. accounted for 25% of the world's top science achievers, almost doubling the next closest competitor, Japan with only 13%, tripling Germany and the UK who had only 8% of the world's top achievers. Korea had only 5% of the world's top science achievers and Hong Kong-China

had only 1% of the top achievers. You probably never heard of this good news, but the information can be found easily online (OECD, 2009).

Keep in mind the mean test score for U.S. students did not rank in the top spot or even top five on that PISA science exam, but we still accounted for the largest percentage of top achievers. What is this infatuation on the part of some education leaders and policy makers with nationalizing the curriculum to "do better" on international tests? Is it perhaps PISA envy? We are not sure, but it is not based on empirical evidence.

Protect Local Control and Democracy

Democracy and local control are not standardized, they are not efficient, and they are not easily managed. A democratic education system is not for the faint of heart. It requires constant tending and vigilance. Education can be a society's greatest democratic gift or a government's greatest undemocratic weapon. Consider the example of China's revolution that began the Mao era in 1949.

One of the first things the new communist government did was change the curriculum in all schools. No local control. No provincial input. The centralized government decided for the people what was best based on government's need to control the people. The Soviets did the same thing when they invaded countries during the 1950's through the 1980's as part of a program known as Russification. History has demonstrated time and time again that a key part of controlling a country's citizenry is through central control of the school curriculum.

National curriculum standards have the power to affect a country's political ideals.

While some supporters of national standards no doubt mean well and care about the country's future, we should all remember the words of Thomas Paine, "The greatest tyrannies are always perpetrated in the name of the noblest

causes." We believe we can do better in the United States than develop and implement policies for our children driven by disinformation, frauds, and anti-intellectualism. We invite your evidence-based commentary on this issue.

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