



Written by [Dr. Duke Pesta](#) on May 23, 2016

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Common Core: The Rise of Fed Ed

In late 2014, ObamaCare architect Jonathan Gruber offered up his refreshingly honest and shockingly venal explanation about how the ill-conceived healthcare program became law. The MIT economist, who previously made news by admitting that there are no subsidies in ObamaCare for federal insurance exchanges, went on to suggest that “the stupidity of the American voter” necessitated concealing from the public the true costs of the program. He praised governmental “lack of transparency” as “key” to passing the legislation. And yet for all its inherent obfuscation and deception — who can forget Nancy Pelosi’s declaration that the bill had to be passed before we could find out what was in it — ObamaCare was a model of transparency compared to the creation of Common Core.



Unlike the Affordable Care Act, Common Core was never featured on C-SPAN or in national media prior to its adoption. There were no hearings before Congress, no Supreme Court decisions or town hall meetings, and definitely no consultations with parents and local school boards, the primary stakeholders in our increasingly ineffective public schools.

The fact that something as transformative as Common Core could be conceived, funded, and implemented long before the overwhelming majority of politicians, educators, academics, and families had any idea about its origins, its creators, its financing, or even its ambitions (educational and otherwise), is sobering indeed. And it defies credulity to suggest — as the supporters of Common Core do at every turn — that the initiative was some multifaceted, organic movement driven by teachers and constructed by the states. No, the federal government is the only entity in American life capable of driving educational reform at this level, of bringing together the necessary financial resources, regulatory pressures, coercive policies, no-bid contracts, and crony-capitalist coordination required to wrench control of education from the states and centralize it in Washington, D.C.

The fact that a huge majority of states adopted Common Core “voluntarily” as a consequence of taking federal Race to the Top grant money — much of it doled out from “stimulus funds” gathered, we were told, to bail out the flagging economy — underscores the central role played by the feds in the farce that is the standards. Because of Race to the Top, many states accepted the standards before they were even completed, and no participating state had the ability to change or edit the standards after the fact. And if the standards are state and not federal in origin, why are states unable to walk away from them without facing threats of legal and financial penalties from the feds?

In effect, the states sold control of education to the federal government for a one-time infusion of



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taxpayer dollars amounting — in most cases — to between five and nine percent of the states' education budgets *for one year*. If it makes you feel any better, America, for once the feds did not grossly overpay for what they purchased. The impending costs to our children and grandchildren are staggering, however, in terms of lower educational achievement and opportunity, diminished preparation for college, reduced career readiness, less earning power, and reduced freedoms.

Although Common Core is many things depending on the lens through which you view it — a Trojan horse for data gathering, a sociological experiment, a huge expansion of the failed one-size-fits-all concept of education, an excuse for more useless standardized testing, an exercise in social justice at the expense of traditional education — none of these things are consonant with liberty, self-government, or even genuine educational success. Collectively, Common Core represents the final push to federalize public education in America: We have now entered the brave new world of FedEd.

FedEd: The Long Game Played to Perfection

Of course, the impulse behind Common Core is not new, nor is FedEd the consequence of recent developments (a list that includes Goals 2000 and No Child Left Behind, among earlier iterations). The push toward FedEd has intensified since the creation of the federal Department of Education in the late 1970s. Once public education fell under the umbrella of yet another unaccountable Beltway bureaucracy, it was just a matter of time until the feds bought, bribed, coerced, and threatened their way to greater and greater centralization and control. For over four decades, the process has proceeded apace, with standardized testing a key tool in the battle to strip away local control of schools. The bigger, more complex, and extensive the tests, the more impossible it is for states — let alone local school districts — to conform without massive federal help. And the more behemoth the exams, the less relevance they possess for the children who must take them. A vicious circle perpetuates a needless and cynical cycle of failure: The mandating of ever-broader tests designed to facilitate data gathering and centralization of control at the Department of Education (but which have no impact on actual student performance) forces states to depend more on federal dollars, leaving local districts and individual schools at the mercy of money-starved state governments and a federal bureaucracy happy to trade dollars for control.

So much has been written about the actual standards, their expense, novelty, lack of rigor, ideological spin, and untested methods, that I will focus on only those aspects of the scheme that reflect most directly on the rise of FedEd. There are two principal reasons to be worried about Common Core, and both have catastrophic consequences for the future education of America's children: First, the "standards" represent the most serious consolidation of federal power over educational freedom in our nation's history. Second, the federal government — in conjunction with textbook publishers, testing corporations, and independent corporate meddlers such as Bill Gates — is using this increased access and control to further politicize how America's children are being taught and evaluated. One thing is absolutely clear: The standards cannot be viewed in a vacuum; they are inseparable from the pedagogy, the curriculum, the textbooks, the worksheets, and, importantly, those tests that form the roots that sustain this noxious weed.

Proponents of the standards insist they are merely benchmarks, simple guideposts that teachers can follow (in an infinite variety of ways, they tell us) to improve student learning. But this is nonsense. The only way we have to measure the standards is the tests. As both Common Core architect David Coleman



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and Common Core financier-in-chief Bill Gates have asserted: When the standards are aligned to the tests, the *curriculum* will line up as well, and the teachers will have *no choice* but to teach to the tests. Given that the only real way to measure the effectiveness of Common Core is the exams, it is beyond obvious that whoever controls the tests controls what happens in the classroom. And despite six years and counting for the Common Core era, that alignment between tests and standards did not begin in earnest for most states until spring 2015. This long postponement of the tests was by design: The engineers of Common Core knew exactly how arbitrary, stressful, and transformative the tests would be, and therefore delayed them until the elaborate and expensive infrastructure was set firmly in place (and well-nigh impossible to remove).

Given this carefully orchestrated timeline, it is not surprising that some teachers and school administrators claim not to have experienced the worst aspects of the Common Core scheme: Because of the methodical implementation schedule, we are only now entering the phase when the real aims and ambitions of those who created Common Core begin to surface. And once again, this directly parallels the route taken by the planners of ObamaCare, who postponed the costliest and most egregious regulatory aspects of the healthcare law until 2016 — the final year of Obama's two-term presidency.

Initially, the standards were sold on the seemingly benign premise that students in every classroom in every state should be learning the same thing at the same time every day. Wouldn't it be nice if a child whose family moves from Arizona to Maine could walk into his new classroom and pick up exactly where he left off, without missing a beat? But the statistical actuality of such transfers is so staggeringly small that even hardcore advocates almost never make the argument anymore. But look past the utilitarian feint and consider the premise: An education system so hyper-regulated and cookie-cutter mass-produced could only be managed, monitored, and made compliant by a massive federal machine that must — by definition — eliminate any meaningful control of education at state and local levels. How can state and local school boards — let alone individual moms and dads — have any meaningful say in what goes on in the classroom under such a paradigm?

And does anyone actually believe that tens of millions of kids from radically different geographies; diverse cultural, ethnic, and economic demographics; and myriad family circumstances will be held to *higher* standards when the endgame is parity, not excellence (or even competency)? It does not require the convoluted processes of Common Core math to recognize that when the educational mandate for upwards of 60 million American schoolchildren is uniformity, not achievement, the new educational regimen will ultimately lower overall expectations, not enhance them, and inhibit if not repress high-achieving students. As with all such unworkably complex schemes for standardization, the ultimate result inevitably settles at the lowest common denominator, not the highest.

And what parent can take seriously the argument that our children are all ultimately the same child when it comes to educational outcomes? That despite the differences in aptitudes, attitudes, resources, intellectual curiosity, self-discipline, and family support, we are better off forcing all children into the same educational mold, rather than allowing them to find their own levels through actual achievement and ability?

For decades, whenever the federal government took over things they had no business meddling in — such as education and healthcare — they gave their unconstitutional power grabs benign titles designed to camouflage their true intent: “No Child Left Behind,” after all, stranded millions of school kids in the ditch of low achievement; and did anyone actually believe that the Affordable Care Act would be in any



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way affordable? But with Common Core, the name and the intent are finally the same. The purpose of FedEd is to standardize education, to level it off, to squash student excellence on the grounds that not all kids can be — or wish to be — excellent, to view learning first as an exercise in social justice, not content mastery or skill building.

Testing, Testing 1-2-3, Houston, We Have a Problem

A neglected but extremely dangerous consequence of the new FedEd regime is the implicit and explicit threats posed to private and home schools by such centralization. Far too few people realize that immediately after overseeing the creation of the standards, David Coleman became the ninth president of the College Board, the organization that designs the SAT exams used in the college application process, and that manages all the Advanced Placement (AP) courses that high-school students take to earn college credit. That Coleman could orchestrate the Common Core Standards, and then be allowed to oversee the entity that creates the SATs, is alarming, all the more so given the fact that he has no formal training in education. All of this amounts to an end run around constitutional principles and representative government, as unelected, unaccountable, unqualified, and largely unknown factotums — from Bill Gates to David Coleman to Sir Michael Barber (chief education advisor for Pearson Publishing) — transform American education off the grid and without any input or oversight from Congress or the people.

It is inconceivable that Coleman and those driving FedEd would standardize and collectivize public-school children, only to allow outs for those in Common Core-free private schools or those who elect to homeschool. Simply aligning the exams that students take as part of the college admission process — or suggesting future alignment — has been enough to drive many private schools to adopt Common Core without any other pressure being brought to bear. Roughly 70 percent of Roman Catholic diocese schools have already “adopted” or “adapted” Common Core, for instance, and a main reason for the switch is the testing: both the national standardized tests used to gauge public-school performance and the threat that both the SATs and the ACTs will eventually align with Common Core methodology.

And by controlling the Advanced Placement Exams, Coleman’s College Board now has another tool to shape curriculum in the classroom. The first AP course revised under Coleman was Advanced Placement U.S. History (APUSH), and the new tests jettison fact-based history and civics in favor of “constructing historical narratives,” all of them dealing with the presumed racism, sexism, imperialism, and homophobia that drove American expansionism, military supremacy, and economic success. The tests no longer measure quantifiable knowledge about American history — from dates to places to facts to people — but instead require students to write highly tendentious essays conforming to the progressive assumptions that drive the course. The great popularity of AP courses — which provide college credits for high school-based courses — means that schools are scurrying to change the way they teach American history so as to prepare their students for the politicized exams.

Many non-Catholic Christian schools have also begun the process of alignment, recognizing that non-Common Core textbooks are increasingly hard to find, and that sooner or later their students may run into Common Core tests. This amounts to a type of educational extortion, where federal oversight of the exams, combined with the collusion of textbook companies to print only Common Core materials, causes Christian schools to align out of fear, not sound pedagogy or curriculum.

This unforced alignment of Christian schools is especially dangerous: Reacting out of fear about what



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might happen, these schools jump on the Common Core bandwagon, all but guaranteeing that what they initially feared *will* happen, as the market for non-Common Core books shrinks even further, and more and more private and parochial students gravitate to Common Core-aligned tests. When did our Christian schools decide that worldly success — as measured by statist educrats and informed by secular pedagogical approaches — was more in line with faith-based education than character formation and the classical educational models that have a proven track record of success? And why would parents continue to pay expensive private-school tuition for an education that merely replicates the secular, progressive, and ultimately anti-Christian assumptions and methods of the public schools?

For homeschool parents — many of whom opted out of public schools precisely because of bureaucratic overreach and the growing recognition that government schools seek to supersede parental authority — the move to greater federal involvement is justifiably seen as ominous. Seeing the shock, hurt, and confusion of public-school parents, who were never consulted about the Common Core takeover, and whose schools were transformed without their input, is a dramatic reminder to the homeschool community that a federal government that values progressive ideology over sound and developmentally appropriate pedagogy will not, in the long run, continue to allow educational alternatives that deviate from the collectivist status quo. As usual, homeschool families must care deeply about the hijacking of public education, and indeed must actively fight such takeovers on behalf of too many public-school parents who are still in the dark about the dangers that face them. In the long run, the only way to guarantee the freedom to educate at home is to help prevent public education from fully becoming government education. On the plus side, homeschool families have burgeoned since the turn of the century. Nevertheless, according to one source nearly 40 percent of available homeschool curricula has aligned or begun the process of adapting to Common Core methodologies, and many parents are hesitant to homeschool over fears that a non-Common Core education — even a superior one — may be a hindrance to college enrollment once FedEd consolidates its gains.

Snatching Defeat From the Jaws of Victory

People skeptical about the federal origins of Common Core — or who refuse to believe, despite four decades of evidence, that the purpose of all this constant reform is FedEd — often wonder why the feds didn't just appropriate education the way they appropriated healthcare. The answer is simple: legally, they could not. Unlike unconstitutional healthcare edicts, written to skirt the law, that cruised to implementation, new federal decrees to federalize education faced high hurdles. Besides the 10th Amendment to the Constitution, which leaves such decisions to the states, three federal statutes from 1965 prohibit the creation of national standards or national curriculum. This is the reason Common Core has such shadowy and corporate origins, tacitly underwritten with government input, money, and support. Nevertheless, as we demonstrated above, only the federal government has the power and resources — both financially and punitively — to wedge the standards into the schools and keep them there: The federal Race to the Top program was the engine that drove that wedge.

If indeed Common Core *is* the coalescing development in the ascendancy of FedEd since the creation of the Department of Education, it stands to reason that both political parties contributed to its rise, defense, and continued endurance, even as both parties inside the Beltway benefit financially and in terms of control. This explains why, despite Republican control of the House, Senate, and the majority of governorships and state legislatures, no real progress has been made in removing Common Core at the state level. Between 2012 and 2014, when anti-Common Core activism was most vibrant, candidates



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for Republican offices in all 50 states vied to be the on the right side of the issue, promising to push back on the intrusive standards if elected. American voters installed them in record numbers and even won back the U.S. Senate, but predictably the zeal for real educational reform passed as quickly as election-night celebrations, dissipating like bubbles in a champagne flute.

So feckless are Republicans on the issue that none of the 46 states that originally accepted Common Core has successfully removed it, and those that boast of having banished it — such as Indiana or Florida — simply rebranded the standards as “Indiana College and Career Academic Standards” and the “Next Generation Sunshine State Standards,” respectively. Even the four states that in theory never accepted Common Core — Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia — all have Common Core textbooks, assignments, and test preparation in their schools. Texas was most adamant in refusing Common Core, even though — unbeknownst to the legislature — an early prototype of Common Core named C-Scope was already loose in Lone Star schools. And then there are Republican demagogues such as Jeb Bush, who zealously defended Common Core in the face of mounting evidence of its false promises and untested methods. John Kasich too mocks those who oppose, bleating the same discredited talking points about the standards being “state led” and “academically rigorous.”

Make no mistake: Common Core is a progressive idea, crafted by progressive activists, implemented by progressive bureaucrats, and designed to benefit progressive educrats. But it is shielded, defended, funded, and now — for the first time — *protected under the law*, courtesy of the Republican-controlled Congress. In December 2015, as the country turned its attention to the coming holidays, both chambers voted into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) by a combined vote of 444 to 76. President Obama signed the bill into law on December 10. Anti-Common Core activist Emmett McGroarty correctly characterizes the bill as “a disaster that would cement, not overturn, the odious progressive-education philosophies of the Obama Administration.” Besides setting in stone Common Core, the bill retroactively legalizes — or at least provides legislative cover for — the questionably legal means by which Common Core was created and implemented.

Among other dangerous precedents, the bill legitimizes and mandates certain types of intrusive data gathering on American students, props up the national standardized test regime, green lights the imposition of psychosocial evaluative techniques in classrooms, and sets legal standing for FedEd by sanctioning all sorts of federal interventionism in American public education. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan gave his caucus *just two days* to study the nearly 1,100-page bill, a dense revision of the failed No Child Left Behind bill. Ryan muscled the ESSA into law before anyone had the opportunity to digest it, let alone consider long-term ramifications.

How bad is the ESSA? Bad enough that Arne Duncan — Obama’s secretary of education from 2008 through 2015 — shared his elation after the bill’s passage in an interview with *Politico Pro*:

I’m stunned at how much better it ended up than either [House or Senate] bill going into conference. I had a Democratic congressman say to me that it’s a miracle — he’s literally never seen anything like it.... If you look at the substance of what is there ... embedded in the law are the values that we’ve promoted and proposed forever. The core of our agenda from Day One, that’s all in there.... For the first time in our nation’s history, that’s the letter of the law.

“The core of our agenda”: This is what Republicans ceded to the feds, and for the first time in America’s history, they have an unshakable foothold from which to scale even higher peaks of control.



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Duncan's rambling interview sheds deeper light on the Republican betrayal of America's families by the likes of Ryan, Senator Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), and Representative John Kline (R-Minn.). Speaking of their secret negotiations prior to the vote, Duncan reveals: "We had many, many conversations behind the scenes.... And I said for us [the progressives] to support it, they'd [Alexander and Kline] have to shed their far, far right [those opposing Common Core].... I honestly didn't know if they'd have the political courage to do that. But they both said they would and they did. I give them tremendous credit for that." Duncan had further kind words for the "courage" of Ryan: "About a month before [Senate passage of the bill], I ran into Speaker Ryan and we just talked briefly. I asked if he was going to back this, whether he's willing to take on the far right. I just asked him straight up. And he said, 'Absolutely. We're going to back this.' And, he did. That's when I thought it had a real shot."

Fool Me Once, Shame on Me. Fool Me Twice, Run for Congress!

As depressing as all of that sounds, it does provide an opportunity for a rare moment of clarity. Those who oppose FedEd must recognize that when it comes to issues of states' rights and individual liberties, there are not two distinct political parties. While there are good people in politics fighting these issues — including some on the Democrat side of the aisle — the real struggle is between Beltway bureaucrats and the rest of us. Call them Republicrats or Democans if you prefer, but they constitute the Beltway plutocracy that seek to advance their own power at the expense of the citizenry. Coming full circle, we remember that the same president and Congress that gave us ObamaCare are the same bunch that exempted themselves from the legislation. It is true for Common Core as well: Obama's kids will not suffer under Common Core, nor will the Bush children or the Clinton grandbaby. For them, it is, and was, swanky private schools, without a hint of common core.

The good news is that no educational development in the last 50 years has roused as much concern about the practices and policies of public education as Common Core. People are paying attention again, and parents are slowly awakening from a long slumber of complacency induced by the opiate of "free education" (pay no attention to those property taxes) and eight hours a day of "free day care." Such soporific blandishments ring hollow when our kids come home from school wagging their fingers about climate change and nattering about white privilege. Beyond the wake-up call, Common Core has also convinced more and more parents to homeschool. For many reasons, homeschool is booming, and parents are increasingly recognizing the benefits of keeping the kids home. Academia is paying attention as well, with universities and colleges dedicating resources to recruit homeschool students. The more vibrant and viable homeschool remains, the harder it will be for the federal government to move against it.

We find ourselves as a nation in the grip of FedEd because we forgot what our Founding Fathers understood so well. When the federal government is in charge of educating our kids, they will do so for their benefit, not for the benefit of the parents or local communities. All it takes to reverse the process is for parents to realize that they are the primary educators of their children and embrace the responsibility. As in so many things, the more passive the citizenry, the more control will be imposed by government. We must stand up for our kids and take charge of their education: Practically, morally, and biblically, it just makes sense.



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