



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on May 11, 2014

N.D. Official Sparks Outrage With Attack on Common Core Expert

It began as a quiet plot by at least one North Dakota education official to personally attack and defame an expert on Common Core, Dr. Duke Pesta, who was set to give public speeches and briefings to lawmakers exposing the dangers of the Obama administration-pushed nationalization of schooling. The plan, however, backfired — big time.



Within days, the scheme against Dr. Pesta had been exposed, along with at least one official involved in it. Now, the resulting scandal is sending shockwaves through North Dakota and making [national headlines](#), as public calls grow for the resignation or firing of state Department of Public Instruction officials behind the half-baked attack.

Using an anonymous Google e-mail address, which critics have suggested was aimed at skirting public-records laws, North Dakota DPI Public Information Officer Dale Wetzel began sending “talking points” about Dr. Pesta to legislators and opinion molders. Among the most shocking: “What is Pesta’s motivation? Money,” claims a document obtained from Wetzel by *The New American* entitled “The Truth About Duke Pesta.”

The basis for the accusation, according to the document, is that in addition to his job as a university professor, Pesta serves as academic director for [FreedomProject Education](#), a Common Core-free online K-12 school. “Pesta is best thought of as a traveling salesman,” the document sent out by Wetzel continues. “He’s peddling his own school product and bad-mouthing Common Core to make money for himself and his organization.”

In a bizarre editorial, one self-styled “news website” known as “Forum” regurgitated some of the libelous talking points almost verbatim. Wetzel also went on the radio to [angrily denounce Pesta](#), who does not charge speaker fees and has given 170 talks in 29 states on the subject, for his [increasingly influential criticism of Common Core](#).

Superintendent of Public Schools Kirsten Baesler originally claimed the state DPI had nothing to do with the attacks on Pesta. Soon afterwards, however, thanks largely to the efforts of [North Dakota Watchdog.org Bureau Chief and journalist Rob Port](#), the truth came out and Wetzel was exposed.

Much of the public was outraged that a supposed public servant would be making vicious and false accusations against a private citizen seeking to educate fellow Americans — especially after being told that the DPI had nothing to do with it. Baesler spent part of the weekend apologizing and distancing herself from the attacks, but concerns remain.



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Reached by phone, Wetzel told *The New American* that it was all him. "It's my private account, I set it up, and I use it on my own time," Wetzel said, as if reading from a prepared script, adding that he had used his own "Toshiba" laptop. "Taxpayers have not paid for this. This was on my own initiative. I did not consult the superintendent or the deputy superintendent beforehand."

Still, he remained adamant in attacking Pesta. "He's out here passing himself off as some kind of expert on Common Core — I think he's just spreading a bunch of nonsense," Wetzel said. Asked for examples of the "nonsense," Wetzel said he would send some after the call via e-mail. By press time, none had been received aside from the "talking points" and "truth" documents.

No statements by Dr. Pesta were cited in either — much less any that were "nonsense" — though the document noted that unlike most states, North Dakota had not received federal bribes to accept Common Core. "In fairness, most states did accept the federal money, but we did not," Wetzel said, referring to the FPE website stating that state governments were bribed into imposing the scheme. On the other hand, North Dakota did receive some foundation grants, as well as various handouts from the federal government for [Common Core-linked data-mining schemes](#) and more.

The attacks on Pesta's character by a government official drew special public condemnation, but Wetzel remained steadfast when speaking to *The New American*. "I don't think this guy is going around bad mouthing Common Core just out of the goodness of his heart — he has a financial motivation," Wetzel claimed. Asked for evidence backing up the inflammatory allegations about Pesta's supposed monetary motivations, Wetzel again pointed to FPE.

"They sell homeschool materials to people that want them," he said. "His sales technique, or one of them, is to try to defame Common Core so that people might buy the products offered by them. If you wanted to buy school instruction by this outfit, you'd pay more than \$30,000."

Aside from the fact that [the numbers are way off](#), FPE said in a statement that the speeches are not used to advertise educational materials. In fact, Pesta says, "Common Core is the single best advertisement to come down the road for homeschooling in the past 50 years."

"If you look at the IRS filings for American Opinion Foundation, their whole reason for being is to sell homeschool materials," Wetzel said before sending the foundation's IRS filing by e-mail. "I think he should disclose his financial interests. I don't know if he does that, but on a radio interview I heard he didn't do that." Wetzel acknowledged that he did not know what Pesta's compensation was for his job at FPE, a non-profit organization and affiliate of this magazine.

When asked about why he supported Common Core, Wetzel was quick to respond. "I work at the Department of Public Instruction, and the Department of Public Instruction supports Common Core," he said.

When asked whether that was the only reason, he added that prior to taking his current job, he had reviewed the standards and thought they were fine, and that some 60 North Dakota educators had reviewed and approved them as well. He also used foul language to describe the efforts of Common Core opponents, repeatedly saying it was all "bull" and that critics were trying to make themselves look "bigger than they are."

By Saturday, the DPI scandal was still growing, and citizens were calling for public servants to be fired. State education chief Baesler [went on the radio](#) and told listeners that protocol had not been followed by Wetzel, and that she would not have approved the sending out of the documents attacking Pesta.



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However, based on public comments under an article featuring her remarks, more than a few citizens are still furious. Questions about whether any laws may have been broken are also being raised. Many do not believe the claim that Wetzel was acting on his own, either. Some commenters even said Wetzel should be fired and Baesler, who accepted responsibility for the scandal, recalled by voters.

Dr. Pesta, who spoke to *The New American* by phone after a giving a series of talks to around 500 people and two-dozen lawmakers, also noted that the DPI was getting a lot of blowback over the scandal. "While I have no reason to doubt Superintendent Baesler's comments about how this happened, I certainly hope that people like Dale Wetzel will be prohibited from using public resources to try to quash dialog in a state that so seriously craves it with regard to the Common Core standards," the popular English professor said.

"I call it pre-emptive targeting," Pesta added. "They are trying to preclude discussion by character assassination and wild insinuation. Being involved in this kind of political discourse means you're going to get blowback from the powers that be. However, that does not justify out-and-out lies about character or motivation from people who have never bothered to inquire with me or done any research into the legitimacy of the allegations."

Pesta concluded by saying that he had a productive dialogue with the people of North Dakota about the deeply controversial standards, which have sparked a [bipartisan uprising among teachers](#) and [parents all across America](#). "I sincerely hope that the discussion on Common Core in North Dakota continues," he added. "Something of this magnitude deserves to be thoroughly debated and understood by the public before it is imposed on our children."

Alex Newman is a correspondent for The New American, covering economics, education, politics, and more. He can be reached at anewman@thenewamerican.com. Follow him on Twitter [@ALEXNEWMAN_JOU](#).



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