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The Platte Institute

PLATTE CHAT

Considering the Common Core: Could Nebraska Benefit from Interstate Education Standards?

By Alex West
Platte Institute

The Common Core State Standards, frequently referred to as the "Common Core," are the fruits of a state-led collaboration coordinated by both the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to develop nation-wide educational standards in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. As it stands now, 32 states, the District of Columbia, and several territories have adopted the new standards, and a majority of the remaining states are still considering their adoption. This is an impressive feat if one considers the official unveiling of the Common Core occurred less than three months ago.^[1] In Nebraska, the State Board of Education is still considering the pros and cons of adopting the Common Core. Indeed, the tradition of local control over education holds sway for good reason; sometimes one solution does not work best in every situation. Nebraskans need to decide whether or not that conventional guidance applies here too. The following analysis will focus on what potential benefits and pitfalls adopting the Common Core would have on education in Nebraska.

strongly believes in the importance of citizens participating in the public dialogue on issues important to Nebraska. Writing a letter to the editor is an outstanding way to partake in the discussion and have your voice heard by thousands of people. To make the process easier, the Platte Institute has assembled a list of links which allow you to submit a letter to the editor to nearly all Nebraska newspapers. Simply [CLICK HERE](#) for a listing of the newspapers and follow the appropriate link to submit your letter.

Contact Us

If you would like to contact someone at the Platte Institute, you are always welcome to give us a call, drop us an email or stop by the office. Our telephone number is 402.452.3737. We are located at 10050 Regency Circle – Suite 120 – in Omaha. Below is a list of staff email address:

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Uniformity or Universal Regimentation?

One expected benefit of the widespread adoption of the Common Core standards is the uniformity of content across the nation—a characteristic that would strengthen the inter-school mobility of students among institutions from state to state in K-12 and when entering college. However, supporters are quick to point out that though the standards, or interpretively "the ends," are the same among the states that adopt the Common Core, decisions about how to meet those goals, choosing curriculum for instance, are still entirely up to the individual state and are not dictated by the Common Core.^[2] Common Core proponents argue that this distinction is critical because the benefit of local autonomy in education is not in meeting different but somehow abstractly equal levels of achievement across the board, but rather, that the innovation occurs in the "means" used to reach a universally reasonable measure of success. Then again, in Nebraska apprehension exists because of "overly prescriptive 'illustrative' text/writings lists" and suspicion that they may one day be understood as a "national reading list."^[3]

Quality of Educational Standards

Another dominating concern among states during their consideration of Common Core standards is the quality of the standards themselves compared to those already held by the states. In Massachusetts, this debate drew national attention due to the highly regarded educational standards already in place in the state, especially in ELA. Indeed, according to the Fordham Institute's *State of State Standards - And the Common Core - in 2010*, an evaluative study of educational standards from each and every state, Massachusetts received an A- for their standards in ELA and a B+ in mathematics. The Common Core received a B+ and an A-, respectively. However, Massachusetts was also in the process of refurbishing their decade-old standards which, according to the study, would have improved an already strong ELA program while maintaining the status quo in rigor and clarity in mathematics. In fact, the authors of the evaluation made this observation: "Massachusetts's existing [ELA] standards are clearer, more thorough, and easier to read than the Common Core standards." Therefore, policy makers in Massachusetts had to take into consideration that the adoption of the Common Core

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could constitute a weakening of the State's academic expectations, at least in ELA. Nonetheless, the State adopted the Common Core on July 21, 2010.^[4]

On the other hand, it appears that undecided Nebraska does not have the enviable luxury of deciding between two reportedly excellent sets of standards. That is, while state officials say that Nebraska's standards and those of the Common Core are similar, according to the Fordham Institute they are not at all comparable. The Fordham Institute grades Nebraska with an F in ELA and a C in mathematics while the Common Core receives a B+ and A-, respectively. As a matter of fact, the study has some rather harsh comments, stating that "Nebraska's ELA standards are among the worst in the country," and that "Nebraska's mathematics standards are mediocre." Consequently, according to the Fordham Institute's judgment, Nebraska has a lot to gain in terms of quality through the adoption of the Common Core.

Concerns have come up during the hearings of the Nebraska Board of Education, the final authority in determining educational standards in Nebraska, about the Common Core supposedly pushing "some skills into lower grade levels inappropriately," and lacking the specificity and measurability "to pass Attorney General muster." Whether either of these concerns is reasonable is not easily discernable, but the latter issue comes into direct contradiction with the evaluation of the Fordham Institute. Plus, both parties have their own motivations; as the Heritage Foundation notes, the Fordham Institute by its own admission is sympathetic to the concept of national education standards^[5] while the State Board is likewise concerned with preserving its own authority.^[6]

Federal Intrusion

On the issue of eroding authority, the fact that adopting the Common Core puts states at a significant advantage in President Obama's "Race to the Top" education grant program has left many education policymakers hesitant in accepting the new standards, particularly in Nebraska. The injection of Federal money necessarily has many in the educational community worried, especially in the wake of Washington's last "bipartisan" foray into reforming education, No Child Left Behind. Nonetheless, Common Core supporters continue to

maintain that their effort is entirely state led and does not represent a federal attempt to force states into adopting national education standards. Opponents, however, worry that the good intentions of Common Core proponents may be easily hijacked by the federal government to subvert traditionally local control over education.

Indeed, the Federal government commonly wields influence over non-federal issues by dangling a financial carrot before the states to be relinquished only when they conform to a new standard, regulation, or policy. In this way, states are technically retaining their jurisdiction over an issue, but in reality, they are not left with much choice. The most notable example of this form of federal strong-arming is the standardization of the minimum drinking age to 21 back in 1984 when Congress had to threaten to withhold federal transportation dollars from states that refused to raise the drinking age to 21. This is presented as keeping the decision a "state issue," while putting the states in a position with no realistic alternative.

Costs and Savings

One more angle to considering the Common Core has to do with potential savings and expenses. Presently, each state prepares and pays for their sets of academic standards. Even those states that have adopted the Common Core are still responsible for setting the bar in every subject other than ELA and mathematics. Obviously, the development of these standards is an additional expense for state education budgets, but exactly how much in Nebraska is not an easy question to answer. In the estimation of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, interstate collaboration through the Common Core will lead to similar efforts for curriculum, textbooks, and assessments thus saving billions of dollars across the board.^[7] On the other hand, specific figures have yet to be determined, at least for Nebraska. As to the costs, those are typically understood to be short term expenses affiliated with the implementation of the new standards.

More Information

Nebraskan elected officials relevant to this debate:

- Nebraska State Board of Education
<http://www.education.ne.gov/StateBoard/StateBoard.html>
- o **Kandy Imes**, President, District 7
- o **Jim Scheer**, Vice President, District 3
- o **Robert Evnen**, District 1
- o **Mark Quandahl**, District 2
- o **Rebecca Valdez**, District 4
- o **Patricia Timm**, District 5
- o **Fred C. Meyer**, District 6
- o **Joe Higgins**, District 8

More information on the Common Core and the surrounding debate can be found on the following websites:

Proponents:

- www.corestandards.org (The official site for the Common Core produced by the NGA and CCSSO)
- <http://www.achieve.org/achievingcommoncore> (A Common Core Proponent)

Opponents:

- The Heritage Foundation
<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/05/why-national-standards-won-t-fix-american-education-misalignment-of-power-and-incentives>
- The Cato Institute
http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=11217
)

[1] Common Core: State Standards Initiative. 2010. "National Governors Association and State Education Chiefs Launch Common State Academic Standards." Accessed August 9. <http://www.corestandards.org/news>.

[2] Common Core: State Standards Initiative. 2010. "Frequently Asked Questions." Accessed August 9. <http://www.corestandards.org/frequently-asked-questions>.

[3] "Common Core Standards - To Adopt or Not?." Handout presented at the July meeting of the Nebraska State Board of Education [Listed in the Nebraska State Board of Education Minutes of Meeting, July 7-8, 2010, 2.2.4]

[4] Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education. 2010. "Education Board Adopts Common Core Standards to Keep Massachusetts Students National Leaders in Education [Press Release]." June 2. Accessed August 9, 2010 <http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=5634>.

[5] Burke, Lindsey M. and Jennifer A. Marshal. 2010. "Why National Standards Won't Fix American Education: Misalignment of Power and Incentives." *Backgrounder*. No. 2413. May 21. The Heritage Foundation.

[6] "Common Core Standards - To Adopt or Not?." Handout presented at the July meeting of the Nebraska State Board of Education [Listed in the Nebraska State Board of Education Minutes of Meeting, July 7-8, 2010, 2.2.4]

[7] Lewin, Tamar. 2010. "Many States Adopt National Standards for Their Schools." July 21. Accessed August 6, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/21/education/21standards.html>.

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