

The Conservative Case for the Common Core



By [Chester E. Finn, Jr.](#) 03/09/2012

Writing last about the “[war against the Common Core](#),” I suggested that those English language arts and math standards arrived with four main assets. (In case you’re disinclined to look, they boil down to rigor, voluntariness, portability, and comparability.)

Let me now revisit a fifth potential asset, which is also the main reason that small-government conservatives should favor the Common Core or other high-quality “national standards”: This is the best path toward getting Uncle Sam and heavy-handed state governments to back off from micro-managing how schools are run and to return that authority to communities, individual schools, teachers, and parents.

It’s the path to getting “tight-loose” right in American K-12 education, unlike NCLB, which has it backward. (I refer to the well-known management doctrine that large organizations with many parts should be “tight about ends, loose about means.”) The proper work of conservatives going forward is to stop doing battle with the Common Core and instead do their utmost to ensure that the “loose” part gets done right. This could also be the path toward a [viable political compromise on NCLB/ESEA reauthorization](#).





Common Core or other high-quality “national standards” are the best path toward getting Uncle Sam to back off from micro-managing how schools are run. Photo by DonkeyHotey.

Some on the Right don't yet see any need for compromise because they expect to be in the driver's seat in both houses of Congress and the Oval Office after November. Maybe that will happen. Maybe John Kline will have his way in the 113th Congress and at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., meaning that future federal K-12 dollars will be turned over to states with essentially no strings attached.

But I wouldn't stake our kids' future on the election working out that way. And even if it were to, there's never yet been an ESEA reauthorization that wasn't bipartisan to some extent. Which suggests to me that compromise is going to be needed and “tight-loose” is the right basis for it.

Here's the core proposition: If all U.S. public schools embraced the same rigorous standards (for their curricular core), were assessed on the same tests, and had their results made public via a transparent system, then everybody would know how their own schools are doing and could decide for themselves whether to (a) leave things be, (b) demand a makeover, or (c) move their kids to other schools.

Communities would have grounds to rally in support of their schools, to fire the school board, to encourage charters and other innovators and entrepreneurs to arrive, etc. State-level voters would have grounds to fire the governor or legislature at the next election and to vote for higher or lower education taxes in the next referendum. Employers would know where to locate their education-intensive plants and offices and where to avoid. Philanthropists would know where to invest—or not. Reformers would know where to intervene with what. Above all, parents would know how content (or not) to be with the schools attended by their own kids.

Uncle Sam could then cease and desist from telling states and districts how to run their schools, how to “qualify” and evaluate their teachers, how and on what to spend their money, what to do about low-performing schools, to whom and how to provide choices among which sorts of schools and how many of them, etc.

But “loose” isn't going to happen all by itself. Literally hundreds of federal programs (starting with but by no means limited to Title I and IDEA) will

need to be reshaped by statute (or consolidated or abolished) for “loose” to work.

The brainpower and policy energy needed to prepare for that enormous undertaking isn't going to be available if conservatives in the education space spend all their time battling against the “tight” part of the deal.

Remember, too, that “tight” is voluntary and should stay that way. No state needs to buy into the Common Core or the assessments now under development—as Education Secretary Arne Duncan [underscored in a letter](#) this week to Utah's state superintendent. (An important question for potential compromisers, however: If a state doesn't accept “tight,” how much “loose” does it get and on what basis?)

Let me restate the essence of the compromise I'm suggesting: If everybody's schools use the same academic targets and metrics to track their academic performance—duly reported by demographic subgroup, perhaps by individual classrooms, too—and if everybody has access to this information via a transparent reporting system, a powerful case can be made for getting “big government” to back away from managing schools. This case would be strengthened further if the education dollars—from every source—also accompany individual pupils to the schools they actually attend. Then those schools can and should be freed up to “run themselves” in the ways that matter most: budget, staffing, curriculum, schedule, and more. They can decide for themselves whether to pool resources for various external purchases and back-office operations (and where to obtain those). They can also decide for themselves what to teach on top of the “common” standards in the same or additional subjects. Schools will be freer than today to specialize in, say, art/music, STEM, technical-vocational education or history and literature.

This will lead to an overdue revolution in school governance at the state/local level, too, not just in Washington. The role of districts will change dramatically, at least in states that see this through to its logical conclusion. And the demand for outstanding building-level school leadership will soar.

Yes, this could all happen without the Common Core per se. It could be pegged to other widely agreed-upon academic standards and assessments—if such existed. Nor does any of this mean that the standards and assessments should come from the federal government. The tight-loose “compromise,” however, is mainly about the terms accompanying future federal K-12 funding and will need to be incorporated in some workable fashion into federal law.

This will, of course, be attacked from both sides. Some conservatives, as noted, will insist that the voters will soon vindicate their preference for restoring control and authority to states and districts with no expectation of common standards or tests. Some liberals will hate the “loose” part because they don't trust states, communities, or schools to do right by kids and will therefore want continued heavy regulation from Washington. (How well has *that* worked, folks?)

But that's the sort of “nobody's pleased” situation that creates the possibility of compromise. Which would surely be better than today's reauthorization gridlock *cum* waivers of dubious constitutionality (and continued heavy-handedness).

Compromise means everybody yields some of what's important to them in return for getting (or keeping) another part that would be jeopardized if they didn't also yield. It's a term that's fallen out of use in Washington of late. Can it return to favor in federal education policy in 2013?

- Chester E. Finn Jr.

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