

The Surprising Roots of the Common Core: How Conservatives Gave Rise to ‘Obamacore’

By David Whitman

INTRODUCTION

The Common Core State Standards have been attacked by conservatives across the country, and no one has taken a bigger beating on the political right for supporting the Common Core learning standards than Jeb Bush. Bush’s announcement that he was exploring a run for President was accompanied by instant warnings that his support for the Common Core could doom his attempts to woo the Republican base. *TIME* said that Bush was “going to have to win over the Republican conservative base, which hates Common Core with the fire of a thousand suns.”¹ In case conservative loathing of the Common Core ran the risk of being understated, the *Washington Post* weighed in with an analysis stating that “The conservative base hates—hates, hates, hates—the Common Core education standards.”² Today’s conventional wisdom, as *TIME* sums up, is that “if you’re a *real* conservative, you’re against [the Common Core]; if you’re a faker, you’re for it.”³

That media shorthand vastly oversimplifies not just the debate among conservatives over the Common Core State Standards but the rich, conservative roots of the standards themselves. In defending the Common Core State Standards, Jeb Bush is no faker. Surprisingly, the new state standards embody conservative principles in setting goals for student learning that date back to Ronald Reagan.

In fact, compared to his predecessors in the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has substantially *shrunk* the federal role in advocating for anything resembling a model national curriculum, national standards, and national assessments.

In many respects, the story of the evolving conservative role on the Common Core is rife with irony and sweeping role reversals. It is also richly relevant to the ultimate fate of the new learning standards. To date, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have been adopted by more than 40 states⁴ and are being implemented in the vast majority of the nation’s schools and classrooms. The fact that implementation is still largely proceeding—despite vociferous opposition from conservatives—is

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due in no small measure to the fact that the Obama administration did *not* repeat the federal overreach of their GOP predecessors by funding the development of national standards and model curriculum.

The conservative roots of the Common Core are little known today. Even among reporters who cover the education beat, few are familiar with, and even fewer have written about, the efforts of Ronald Reagan’s secretary of education, William Bennett, to develop and promote a model core curriculum while in office. Nor have they recounted, except in passing, the sweeping, self-described “crusade” that Senator Lamar Alexander launched to promote national standards and voluntary national assessments when he was secretary of education in the elder Bush’s administration.

What accounts for the collective ignorance of the Common Core’s antecedents and this airbrushing of history? It wasn’t a given that the Common Core State Standards would be “hated” by conservatives. Indeed, several of today’s GOP presidential candidates, like Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, and New Jersey governor Chris Christie were all famously for the Common Core standards before they were against them.

Jindal, Huckabee, and Christie would deny that their flip-flops are motivated in any way by political opportunism, partisanship, or reflexive opposition to policies that President Obama supports. Still, as Christie himself said in 2013, part of the Republican opposition to the Common Core is “the knee-jerk reaction that is happening in Washington ... if the president likes something, the Republicans in Congress don’t ... It is this mind-set in D.C. right now that says we have to be at war constantly.”⁵

While anti-Obama animus undoubtedly plays a role in the Tea Party revolt against the Common Core, conservative opposition is also grounded in objections to an active federal role in education. Some Tea Party leaders seek at one extreme to outright abolish the U.S. Department of Education. More mainstream Republicans now want to stop the federal government from providing incentives for states to set academic standards that establish the expectation students should be on track to be college- and career-ready by the time they finish high school.⁶ These anti-incentive conservatives do not seek to eliminate the U.S. Department of Education so much as block it from using incentives to encourage or support state and local reform—including state and local innovation, expanding high-quality state preschool programs, or reforming antiquated teacher evaluation systems.⁷

THE HONESTY GAP: FIFTY GOALPOSTS FOR EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

Whatever political and ideological motivations may be propelling conservative opposition to the Common Core State Standards, a first-order question for conservatives should be the compared-to-what test: Are the new standards better or worse than the standards they replaced—which, like the Common Core State Standards, were also adopted by each state, one at a time.

The consensus of the most comprehensive analyses of the Common Core standards are that they are better—higher and clearer—than the standards they replaced in the vast majority of the 45 states that initially chose to adopt the Common Core.⁸ One reason why is that many states didn’t previously set “challenging” learning standards in math and English Language Arts, as they are required to do under current federal law. Instead, state standards often lacked rigor, coherence, and clarity, and failed to set the expectation that students should be on track to graduate high school ready to enter college or start a job.⁹ Moreover, individual states and local political leaders actually had an incentive to adopt low performance standards—the lower the standard, the better the performance of a state’s students would look in comparison.

Before states started adopting the Common Core standards, expectations for student learning varied wildly from state-to-state, and were renowned for being a “mile-wide and an inch-deep.” In a knowledge-based economy, it seemed unjust to students to set expectations for learning that depended solely on the state where a child happened to live. Depending on which side of the Hudson River or the Mississippi River a student lived on, they could be either at grade level or failing reading and math.¹⁰

Having 50 different goalposts for educational success also didn’t seem like a winning formula to prepare students to one day compete against their peers from high-performing countries in a global marketplace, or to compete against each other when they applied to college. Students who haven’t been taught material on the SAT and ACT under their state standards are placed at an unfair advantage when they apply to college.¹¹ “In most fields,” says education historian Diane Ravitch, “it makes little sense to have 50 states with 50 standards. Mathematics is not different in the 50 states.”¹² With little continuity from state-to-state—and often from grade-to-grade—state learning standards in the U.S. resembled an educational Tower of Babel.

In the absence of incentives to set genuinely high, internationally-benchmarked standards, many states opted instead to set pathetically low standards for student performance following the passage of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. When the Obama administration took office in 2009, 35 states had set proficiency levels for fourth grade reading at below “Basic” levels, benchmarked against the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).¹³ In some states, students could score below the tenth percentile nationally and still be considered “proficient.”¹⁴ Seven states required eighth grade students to only have the equivalent of a D or D+ to be deemed proficient in mathematics, according to a study by the American Institutes for Research. The AIR study found that the gap in proficiency levels between states with the highest and lowest standards for student performance was equivalent to a jaw-dropping three to four grade-levels.¹⁵ That means a student in one state in America can graduate high school with eighth grade math and reading skills, while a student in another state graduates with 12th grade skills. As Bill Gates has pointed out, states “don’t have 50 different kinds of electrical sockets—we have just one. And that standard unleashed all kinds of [technological] innovation [to be used in every home] that improved lives. The same thing will happen with consistent standards for what students should know.”¹⁶

Of course, setting high learning standards doesn’t by itself guarantee students will excel academically, any more than establishing a demanding goal for lowering cholesterol ensures a healthy diet. But by contrast, the steep economic and personal toll of setting *low* standards is undeniable: Each year, hundreds of thousands of students graduate from high school under the illusion that they are ready to start college, enroll in technical training, or enter the job market. Nationwide, a third of all first-year undergraduates have to take a remedial course in English or math when they arrive in college.¹⁷ And each year, millions of students discover they are not ready for college and drop out, often after saddling themselves with debt. Other high school graduates try to join the military, where a high school diploma is a prerequisite. Yet nearly a quarter of the high school graduates who opt to take the basic military entrance exam for the Army fail it.¹⁸

This “honesty gap”—the gap between meeting state standards for proficiency and actually being on track for college and careers—is costly and unfair. “There’s no way that you can have 90 percent of your kids be at grade level and, in community college, 70 percent need remedial work,” says Tennessee’s GOP governor Bill Haslam. “If you’re not being honest about how you’re performing with kids, it’s an incredible disservice to your citizens.”¹⁹

The “incredible disservice” of setting low performance standards means that the fight over the Common Core is not just an abstract fight over politics, ideology, and pedagogy. It is also a fight with very real stakes for children, families, and communities. In the first GOP presidential debate, Jeb Bush defended his support for the Common Core by explaining that “if we are going to compete in this world we are in today, there is no possible way we can do it with lowering expectations and dummifying down everything. Children are going to suffer and families’ hearts are going to be broken that their kids can’t get a job in the 21st century.”²⁰

In the end, there is little debate that low standards—or what George W. Bush labeled “the soft bigotry of low expectations”—are inequitable to children. Most educators, parents, and elected officials would agree that public officials should not set lower expectations for students in Mississippi than in Massachusetts.²¹ And this failure of states to consistently set a high bar for all students drove the development of the Common Core State Standards. As Arizona’s conservative ex-governor Jan Brewer has written, “Unlike our previous standards that defined ‘proficiency’ with a wink and a nod, the Common Core holds students to a level that restores the value of a diploma, no matter where they go to school.”²²

COMMON CORE MYTHS AND MISINFORMATION

To appreciate the conservative lineage of the Common Core State Standards, it’s necessary to first understand what the standards are and aren’t. Unfortunately, the Common Core has been the subject of an extraordinary amount of misunderstanding and misinformation.

The problem is not simply that outlandish, paranoid claims about the Common Core are rampant on the far right (e.g., that the Common Core calls for iris scans of children and facial recognition technology to read students’ minds, that it promotes communism, homosexuality, gay marriage, teaches children Islamic vocabulary, advances global warming propaganda, equates George Washington with Palestinian terrorists, indoctrinates children into the New World Order, data-tracks students from kindergarten on, etc.).²³ The problem instead is that the *norm* of public understanding of the Common Core bears little connection to the standards themselves.

A December 2014 national survey from Fairleigh Dickinson University found that two-thirds of Americans erroneously believe that sexual education, global warming, evolution, and/or the American Revolution are included in the Common Core.²⁴ Only about one in ten Americans know these four subjects are not part of the Common Core (though the Common Core standards do require high school students to read the Declaration of Independence, and the Preamble and Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution). Other surveys show that as recently as August 2015, a majority of voters mistakenly believe that the U.S. Department of Education or Secretary of Education Arne Duncan wrote the Common Core standards.²⁵ Ohio’s governor John Kasich, a 2016 GOP presidential candidate who supports the Common Core, told the conservative news website, *The Blaze*: “When you study the issue, you separate the hysteria from the reality.”²⁶

The reality is this: The Common Core State Standards, as their name specifies, are *state* standards in English Language Arts and mathematics, created in a collaborative effort by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, with input from educators. It bears repeating that the federal government had zero involvement in drafting the Common Core State Standards—it neither wrote, paid for, or participated in the development of the standards.

When President Obama took office in 2009, the CCSS movement already had considerable bipartisan support in both red and blue states. Nearly two months *before* the Obama administration released draft guidelines for its Race to the Top competition in July 2009, 46 states had already joined in a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), signed by both the governor and chief state school officer, under which states would have three years to voluntarily adopt the Common Core standards then under development. Signatories included a solid majority of GOP governors.²⁷ States that chose to adopt the Common Core standards agreed to ensure that at least 85 percent of the state’s standards in English language arts and mathematics came from the Common Core.

In the section of the MOA entitled “Federal Role,” the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers stipulated that the Common Core was “not a federal effort.” But the MOA also stated that the “the federal government can provide key financial support” for the state-run effort “through the Race to the Top Fund” and the development of common assessments for the standards.²⁸

All along, the decision whether to adopt the Common Core was strictly voluntary—there is no federal mandate that requires states to adopt the Common Core standards, and several states that initially adopted the standards have since dropped or emended them.²⁹ However, the federal government did encourage states to adopt the Common Core, and it accelerated the existing state-led effort in two ways—both in keeping with the expressed intentions of governors and chief state school officers.

First, in the 2009-10 Race to the Top competition, the administration provided incentives for states to adopt the Common Core standards, among other goals. It gave points in the voluntary competition for federal dollars to states that had adopted or had plans to adopt college- and career-ready standards used in a “significant” number of states, with more points awarded to states that planned to adopt standards used in “a majority” of the states³⁰—a criteria likely to be met only by the Common Core. A state’s decision to adopt the CCSS played a comparatively small role in the scores of states that opted to compete for Race to the Top grants, accounting for eight percent of an individual state’s score under the competition’s guidelines.³¹

Second, in September 2010, the administration awarded a total of \$330 million to two state consortiums in a separate Race to the Top Assessment competition to develop new and better assessments aligned to the Common Core standards.³² The state consortiums were responsible for designing the new assessments, and states were free to use or not use the resulting assessments. Forty-four states and the District of Columbia initially signed up in the two state consortiums.

If the debate over the Common Core had been limited merely to whether the federal government should provide *incentives* for states to adopt higher, shared standards and better, voluntary assessments, it never would have caught fire nationally among conservatives—whose pro-growth agenda, after all, has traditionally favored incentives to federal mandates and competitive awards to formula funding.

The anti-Common Core movement only took hold among conservatives nationwide after anti-federal Tea Party activists falsely attacked the Common Core as a “national curriculum” and a “federal takeover” of what is taught in school. Both of those claims are attributable to myths, misunderstanding of the Common Core, or reflexive mistrust of the Obama administration.

The enduring fiction that the Obama administration created a federal “national curriculum” or “Obamacore,” depends critically on public misunderstanding of the difference between “standards” and “curriculum.” GOP candidates for the presidency should know the difference between the two, but many don’t. Senator Marco Rubio told an Americans for Prosperity conference in August 2013 that “we do not need a national Common Core curriculum that the federal government uses and forces on our states.” Governor Bobby Jindal has accused the Obama administration of “trying to force a federal common curriculum, through Common Core, onto the states.”³³ Senator Rand Paul, a member of the Senate education subcommittee since 2011, claimed at one of his first campaign appearances in New Hampshire that local opposition to the Common Core was based on “Washington telling them what kind of curriculum they can have in New Hampshire.”³⁴ Joining the conservative conventional wisdom wagon is Donald Trump, who tweets that “Common Core is a federal takeover of school curriculum.”³⁵

Senator Ted Cruz, meanwhile, in an apparent doubling down of his efforts to repeal Obamacare, has made the nonsensical pledge that he intends “to repeal *every word* of Common Core.”³⁶ (There is no federal statute to repeal that delineates *any* of the wording of the Common Core State Standards.) And in his recent retreat from the Common Core, New Jersey governor Chris Christie objected that the standards were adopted “200 miles away on the banks of the Potomac River.”³⁷ Christie’s statement would have been accurate if he had referred to the banks of the Delaware River in Trenton, the New Jersey state capital. The New Jersey State Board of Education, not the U.S. Department of Education, adopted the Common Core State Standards, not once but twice—first on June 19, 2010, and then reaffirmed New Jersey’s adoption of the standards on February 12, 2014.³⁸

In fact, standards and curriculum are two distinct educational tools—and in the case of the Common Core, neither have been created by the federal government. To cite an actual example of a Common Core standard, an “anchor” CCSS reading standard spanning across grade levels states that students should be able to demonstrate the ability to “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it, [and] cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.”³⁹

One might disagree with this standard. One might believe that schools should not set the expectation that students read closely to determine what the text says explicitly, or be able to make logical references from what they read. But note the language of the standard—it is about expectations for student learning, not about designating specific content.

Standards set the expectations for what students should know and be able to do by a certain grade. By contrast, curriculum is the “how” of teaching, what teachers work with to help students meet those standards—reading assignments, textbooks, homework, handouts, in-class exercises, the planning and pacing guides for a course, and the apps used in a course.

The Obama administration has not created any curriculum, much less Common Core curriculum, and the federal government has long been barred by law from doing so—as Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has pointed out. In a 2014 speech, Secretary Duncan said that “Not a word, not a single semi-colon of curriculum will be created, encouraged, or prescribed by the federal government. We haven’t done so—and we won’t be doing so.”⁴⁰ Sol Stern, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, has similarly challenged the claims of fellow conservatives who claim the Obama administration has created Common Core curriculum. “The feds,” Stern writes, “not only haven’t interfered with the curriculum decisions made by the states as part of their Common Core adoptions, but they haven’t even expressed any curricular preferences.”⁴¹ Sonny Perdue, Georgia’s GOP governor from 2003 to 2011, is equally

adamant on the point. In 2014, he wrote in the *National Review* that “Common Core is frequently a straw man for the frustrations conservatives have with the federal government. As a result, the standards are routinely conflated—often willfully—with curricula, lesson plans, confusing test questions, and even illogical homework problems.”⁴²

It is telling that no CCSS critic has identified even one example of a Common Core assignment created, prescribed, mandated, or “dictated” (in the words of Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal⁴³) by the federal government.⁴⁴ GOP presidential candidate Rick Perry claims that the “whole concept of Common Core is just like Obamacare—a bureaucrat in Washington, D.C., to sit there and decide what is going to be the right curriculum.”⁴⁵ And yet neither the ex-Texas governor, nor anyone else for that matter, can identify a single bureaucrat in Washington, D.C. who is deciding, or has decided, what is going to be the “right curriculum” in any classroom, anywhere in the country. The “Obamacare” national curriculum is nothing more than a phantom in the fevered imagination of Tea Party activists and GOP presidential candidates.

Under the Common Core, state and local educators have, and will continue to have, complete authority to select curriculum, including textbooks, homework, class assignments, and reading materials. Or, as Mike Huckabee told Oklahoma legislators in 2013 *before* he announced his presidential run, “states and local school districts will determine how they want to teach kids, what curriculum to use, and which textbooks to use.”⁴⁶

The ongoing parade of basic misstatements of fact about the Common Core by many GOP presidential candidates is not the rhetorical equivalent of rounding errors, or a bully pulpit resort to a series of slight exaggerations and small lies to make a point. Instead, conservative claims that the Obama administration has used the Common Core to engineer a “federal takeover” of what is taught in schools and to impose a “national curriculum” are tantamount, in Sol Stern’s words, to resorting to the “big-lie technique”⁴⁷—peddling fabrications so inflammatory and audacious that they can only appear to obtain legitimacy if they are repeated over and over, amid public confusion and uncertainty over the actual facts. In a recent letter to *Education Week*, no less than 21 state teachers-of-the-year wrote to express their “frustration about the maelstrom of misinformation on the Common Core State Standards that has become so pervasive as to be considered truth.” The Common Core, the exasperated educators wrote, “is not a federal takeover of our schools, nor does it force teachers into a rigid model for classroom instruction ... In fact, under the Common Core, teachers have greater flexibility to design their classroom lessons.”⁴⁸

Nevertheless, the big lie technique has succeeded in tainting the brand of the Common Core, especially for conservatives. Opinion polling shows that support for the Common Core jumps whenever members of the public are asked questions about the Common Core with the label “Common Core” removed.⁴⁹ And owing to the maelstrom of misinformation on the CCSS, the Common Core is fast approaching a Lord Voldemort-like status for conservatives as the insidious education reform with the name that must not be spoken-- even for conservative politicians who support, and who in fact (to paraphrase Ted Cruz), are implementing every word of the Common Core. Several GOP-led states (e.g., Mississippi, Iowa, and Arizona) have kept the Common Core standards but renamed them as homegrown state standards, eliminating the “Common Core” label. And at a recent campaign event in Iowa, Jeb Bush seemed to acquiesce to the disinformation campaign on the Common Core, saying “The term ‘Common Core’ is so darned poisonous, I don’t even know what it means anymore.”⁵⁰

Quite apart from the absence of any federal participation in developing or specifying curriculum for school children under the Common Core, there is also no evidence that local schools are in practice adhering to any “national curriculum” in implementing the CCSS. An analysis by Renaissance Learning of what 10 million students read in the

2012-13 school year found that the most-read book at any grade level (Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham*) was read by just 16 percent of kindergarten and first-grade students.⁵¹

When a minimum of 84 percent of students do not read the same books in school in the same grades, it hardly constitutes a singular national canon, much less one imposed by the federal government. Nor is there any test that constitutes a “national” assessment of student performance funded or mandated by the Obama administration. In February of this year, *Education Week* reported that more than half of the students in the country live in states that will not be using either of the two voluntary assessments developed by the state consortia.⁵² “In the United States, curriculum has never been nationally uniform,” says Secretary Duncan. “Our 15,000 locally-controlled school districts and more than three million teachers are just as likely to eat the same breakfast every day as to choose the same teaching materials.”⁵³

Ohio governor John Kasich, who is no left-leaning dupe, is just one of a number of conservatives that has pointedly debunked the myth of the Obamacore curriculum. “There is total local control,” he says. “There has been a hysteria about this that is not well-founded.”⁵⁴ Jeb Bush has said that “Common Core is higher standards for reading and math and nothing more. It’s not social studies. It’s not curriculum. It’s not politically correct content. It’s none of that. It’s not an imposition from up above.”⁵⁵ William Bennett, Ronald Reagan’s secretary of education is even blunter: “Lies, myths, exaggerations, and hysteria about what the Common Core means and does have dominated the ‘debate,’” he says. “The issue of honest standards of learning for our children is too important to be buried in an avalanche of misinformation and demonization.”⁵⁶

THE REAGAN-ERA ROOTS OF THE COMMON CORE

One wouldn’t know it from the present-day debate over the Common Core, but under GOP leadership, the federal government actually *did* fund the development of voluntary national standards, national assessments, and model curriculum in a host of subjects in the not-so-distant past.

The seeds of the Common Core State Standards were originally planted in the landmark 1983 report commissioned by the Reagan administration, *A Nation at Risk*. That study contained the first call in the modern era for setting higher, shared standards. A “high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture,”⁵⁷ *A Nation at Risk* observed. The report recommended that public schools “adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance.”⁵⁸ The prevailing practice at the time, as the report noted, was to express “educational standards and expectations largely in terms of [meeting] ‘minimum requirements.’”⁵⁹

In 1983, advocating for higher standards was considered to be politically conservative because it flipped the left-leaning education establishment’s preoccupation with measuring educational inputs. Instead of evaluating education by the amount spent per-student, class size, and textbook availability, conservatives wanted to set expectations for student learning—and assess education based on outcomes, especially student achievement.

If the conservative case for higher standards had its inception in the Reagan era, so did the genesis of conservative support for setting common expectations for student learning that didn’t vanish at the state line. The infamous Lake Wobegon effect—in which all 50 states reported they were above the national average in elementary school achievement—was first documented during the Reagan administration in 1987.⁶⁰ But every state’s students can

only be above average when many states set low standards, as William Bennett, Reagan's secretary of education, has pointed out.⁶¹

Having 50 states set 50 different goalposts for student performance, Bennett believes, provides a powerful incentive for states to engage in “dumbing down standards and exams in order to hide the poor performance of their students.”⁶² Obama's secretary of education, Arne Duncan, has repeatedly made the same point, using almost identical language. But unlike Arne Duncan, then-Secretary of Education Bennett explicitly promoted the value of developing a common core curriculum throughout the United States. As Kathleen Porter-Magee of the right-leaning Thomas Fordham Institute put it in the *National Review* in 2014: “An inconvenient truth is that the grand tradition of using the bully pulpit to push for curriculum reform began with the Reagan administration under the president's second education secretary, William J. Bennett.”⁶³

For today's conservatives, the inconvenient—and surprising—truth is that in 1987, the U.S. Department of Education paid for and published a 47-page booklet from Secretary Bennett outlining his personal idea of a “sound secondary school core curriculum” in English, mathematics, science, history, foreign languages, geography, civics, the fine arts, and physical education.⁶⁴ The following year, the department published Bennett's 62-page report with recommendations for a model elementary school curriculum.⁶⁵

Bennett advocated forcefully in his model curriculum guides for a more demanding and common curriculum. “Our children, whoever they are and wherever they live, share a future of common possibility and promise,” Bennett wrote. “They deserve an education—in its irreducible essence and from its first day of elementary school—of common substance.”⁶⁶ Bennett concluded that a “broad, deep, and effective core curriculum is possible for almost all American secondary school [and elementary school] students.”⁶⁷ And while Bennett affirmed that state and local educators would “vary [their] pedagogy to achieve our educational goals ... we must jealously retain and guard those goals ...: mastery of a common core of worthwhile knowledge, important skills, and sound ideas.”⁶⁸

Bennett's recommendations that students should master an effective common core of knowledge irrespective of where they lived pleased many conservatives. In 1988, speaking to the nation's governors, President Reagan said, “I urge educators and citizens to take a look at Bill Bennett's recent proposed model high school curriculum and to make sure that our schools are giving students as rich and challenging a curriculum as they deserve and as equality of opportunity demands.”⁶⁹

Conservatives today have not damned Secretary Bennett's curricular recommendations as a nefarious attempt by the federal government to impose “Reagancore” in the nation's classrooms. In fact, Chester Finn Jr. of the Thomas Fordham Institute, a former Reagan administration appointee, noted approvingly in 2011 that Bennett's curriculum guides provided “detailed and explicit curricular recommendations, developed and paid for by the Education Department and bearing the secretary's very own name as author. And pretty good curricula they were—and are.”⁷⁰

To be clear, Bennett noted in his 1987 report, *James Madison High School: A Curriculum for American Students*, that he was barred by law from exercising direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum of any school. His model curriculum, Bennett wrote, was “simply a statement of my considered judgment on an important subject, an attempt to deal with a question I am often asked: How would you do it? What would you teach? This seems to me to be a fair question.”⁷¹

Fair or not, one can only begin to imagine the conservative fury today if President Obama had endorsed two Education Department reports authored by Secretary Duncan, totaling more than 100 pages, in which Duncan spelled out his “considered judgment” of what schools should teach.

CCSS, CIVICS, AND CONTENT-RICH CURRICULUM—CONSERVATIVES WHO CAN’T ACCEPT “YES” FOR AN ANSWER

As it turns out, many of the recommended readings under the Common Core State Standards have the same conservative flavor as those recommended by Bennett—though unlike his sweeping curricular recommendations, the Common Core standards cover just English language arts and mathematics, and not science, history, foreign languages, geography, civics, the fine arts, or physical education.

For decades, conservatives have railed against the “contentless curriculum”⁷²—and Bennett strongly staked out the conservative position in the curriculum wars. He called specifically for a “content-rich” curriculum, which was out of favor in education schools that trained teachers, and which was often derided by progressive educators as rote learning of facts that should give way to learning cross-disciplinary skills.⁷³

To give an example of the curriculum that Bennett outlined, he recommended that students take a course in eleventh grade entitled the Principles of American Democracy. He advocated for students doing “detailed study of the intellectual roots of the American Revolution and Declaration of Independence, the Philadelphia Convention and the Constitution, and readings from *The Federalist*, the Gettysburg Address, Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail,’ and other speeches and essays by American statesmen.”⁷⁴

In 2015, most GOP presidential candidates, as well as many Tea Party leaders, appear to have all but forgotten the conservative principles for the study of content-rich curriculum and foundational texts in civics that Secretary Bennett promoted. The Common Core State Standards are only the second set of state learning standards to explicitly call on educators to develop and use a “content-rich curriculum” in the classroom, but one wouldn’t know it from the wild claims made about the standards by a number of Republican presidential candidates.⁷⁵ (Massachusetts was the first state to explicitly call for content-rich curriculum in state standards.) As Jeb Bush has pointed out, the CCSS literacy standards “require students to make arguments with evidence rather than just restate their own opinions and experiences.”⁷⁶ Yet many of the GOP candidates seem to have no idea that the Common Core espouses classic conservative principles for developing literacy in American history and civics. They are refusing to take “yes” for an answer.

To cite one example, in a keynote speech on the Common Core to the American Principles Project in February 2015, Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal suggested that under the Common Core standards the “elite in DC [were] making curriculum decisions for our local classrooms [to] stop teaching American exceptionalism to our students.”⁷⁷ He said the Common Core standards interpreted American history as being about “grievances and victimhood.”⁷⁸

Jindal’s claims are false. The Common Core State Standards do not contain any standards for American history, though they establish guidelines for demonstrating literacy in *reading* history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. When it comes to reading history, the Common Core standards state that secondary school students “need to be able to analyze, evaluate, and differentiate primary and secondary sources.” In sixth through eighth grades, for example, students should be able to “cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and

secondary sources” in history and social studies classes. By ninth and 10th grade, students should also “attend to such features as the date and origin of the information.”⁷⁹ By the time students are in 11th and 12th grade, they are expected to be able to “evaluate an author’s premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.”

It is hard to comprehend how such benign pedagogical standards could spell an end to teaching American exceptionalism—much less promote a historical narrative of grievances and victimhood. Nevertheless, Jindal’s claims are echoed by other Republican presidential candidates like Senator Rand Paul, who contends that the Common Core contains “anti-American propaganda, revisionist history that ignores the faith of our Founders.”⁸⁰

It is true that the Common Core State Standards identify three specific American historical texts that students are required to read in high school. But those three required readings bear a striking similarity to Bill Bennett’s curricular recommendations from 1987. The three required readings—and they are the *only* three required readings identified in all of the Common Core standards⁸¹—are the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution (the Preamble and Bill of Rights), and Abraham Lincoln’s famous Second Inaugural Address, inscribed on the walls of the Lincoln Memorial.

A socialist, an atheist, or an anarchist might well object to requiring high school students to read these three foundational documents of American democracy. But why should conservatives balk at these texts?⁸² Does Governor Jindal truly believe that requiring high school students to read the Constitution and Declaration of Independence teaches them that American history is about grievances and victimhood?

THE CONSERVATIVE “POPULIST CRUSADE” FOR NATIONAL STANDARDS AND NATIONAL ASSESSMENTS

The conservative campaign for voluntary national standards and voluntary national assessments hit its high-water mark in 1991 and 1992, when George H.W. Bush was president and Lamar Alexander was secretary of education. Ironically, the campaign for national standards and assessments was led not just by Lamar Alexander but his then-assistant secretary at the Education Department, Diane Ravitch—who now is one of the leaders of the progressive opposition to the Common Core standards.

Alexander has long championed state and local control of education, dating back to his two terms as Tennessee’s governor from 1979 through 1986. Today, Alexander, in his capacity as chairman of the Senate education committee, regularly criticizes the U.S. Department of Education for acting like a “national school board” under Arne Duncan’s leadership. In a recent opinion column in his hometown paper, *The Tennessean*, Alexander wrote that legislation he has co-authored to fix No Child Left Behind would both “put an end to the national school board” and “end the federal mandate on Common Core.”⁸³ There may be some Republican leaders who are either genuinely unaware that there is no federal mandate on the Common Core, or who perhaps choose not to distinguish between a federal mandate and a federal incentive. But as the record shows, it is unlikely that Lamar Alexander is among the uninformed.⁸⁴

In 1991, when George H.W. Bush appointed Alexander as secretary of education, Alexander didn’t believe that championing state and local rights was in any way at odds with strongly advocating for voluntary national standards, voluntary national assessments, and a vigorous federal role in education, all of which would be called for in President Bush’s America 2000 initiative. Alexander labeled America 2000 a “nine-year crusade”⁸⁵ and said it “included a

series of truly radical initiatives.”⁸⁶ He was personally involved in drafting the America 2000 plan—so much so that *Education Week* dubbed the plan “Lamar’s Baby.”⁸⁷

If Lamar Alexander is the political godfather of the Common Core and Common Core-aligned assessments, historian Diane Ravitch is their intellectual godmother. Ravitch’s chief assignment during her 18-month stint at the Education Department in 1991 and 1992 was to promote the development of voluntary national standards.⁸⁸ While in office, Ravitch recalled, “Every time I gave a speech or wrote an article, I explained why standards mattered and that low expectations were damaging to students.”⁸⁹ Under Ravitch’s guidance, the department sent a pamphlet to every public school in the country to explain the case for national standards⁹⁰ and awarded \$10 million in federal contracts to scholarly and professional organizations to develop national standards in English, science, history, the arts, civics, geography, English, and foreign languages.⁹¹

After leaving the government, Ravitch wrote a 186-page book, *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen’s Guide* for the Brookings Institution. Ravitch’s subsequent 180-degree turnaround on testing and accountability is well-documented, notably by Ravitch herself. But her flip-flop on national standards is of more recent vintage, is less well-known, and didn’t take place until almost three years after the Common Core State Standards were first released. (Ravitch’s 2010 mea culpa, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, does not mention the Common Core in its index, and Ravitch devoted a lone paragraph to the subject).⁹²

The now largely-forgotten GOP “crusade” for national standards and national tests kicked off after the 1989 National Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia. At the summit, President Bush and the country’s governors agreed to set national educational goals for the year 2000 and report annually on progress in achieving the goals. In April 1991, following up on the summit, President Bush and Secretary Alexander released their America 2000 plan. It is a remarkably ambitious reform program that, by comparison, makes Barack Obama and Arne Duncan’s efforts to encourage state adoption of the Common Core and shared voluntary assessments in mathematics and English look downright timid.

At the White House rollout of America 2000, President Bush announced that the federal government, working with governors, would “define new world-class standards for schools, teachers, and students in the five core subjects: math and science, English, history, and geography. ... We will develop voluntary national tests for fourth, eighth, and 12th graders in the five core subjects.”⁹³

Unlike Barack Obama’s Race to the Top program, George H.W. Bush’s America 2000 plan would have dramatically increased the testing burden in schools by creating 15 new national tests (five tests in core subjects in three grade levels). And unlike Barack Obama, George H.W. Bush explicitly supported voluntary *national* standards developed with *federal* funding. Frustrated by his failure to get funding from Congress for the standards, Bush eventually bypassed Congress to use discretionary funds to award grants to independent groups to develop the standards,⁹⁴ with funding coming from the Education Department, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Science Foundation.⁹⁵

Also, unlike the Obama administration, the Bush administration wanted to develop voluntary national standards that covered virtually the entire curriculum, not just English Language Arts and mathematics. President Bush called for national standards in science, history, and geography, as well as English and math. Even those five subject areas weren’t enough for Lamar Alexander. As Diane Ravitch later recounted, “The arts, civics, and foreign languages

were not explicitly mentioned in the [six national 2000] goals, but the secretary decided that the specification of five academic subjects was not intended to exclude other important subjects, especially the arts, civics, and foreign languages.⁹⁶ Once those three disciplines were added to the list, the department made federal grants to develop standards for students in *seven* subject areas (math standards had already been developed). Lamar Alexander candidly called the federally-funded development of national standards “the most comprehensive rethinking ever of what we teach.”⁹⁷

THE FEDERAL “SPARKPLUG” FOR NATIONAL STANDARDS

Instead of shrinking the federal role, Bush and Alexander’s America 2000 plan called for hundreds of millions of dollars in new federal funding and a muscular federal presence to promote national standards and incentives for school choice. (America 2000 initially provided for a \$30 million school choice demonstration project, which was later expanded to provide \$1,000 scholarships or vouchers that students could use at public or private schools.)

Bush’s FY 1992 budget set aside \$690 million for the America 2000 plan, or about \$1.2 billion in today’s dollars. The vast bulk of that funding—\$535 million—was set aside to create new “break-the-mold” schools in each of the nation’s 435 congressional districts, with 100 more schools, or two per state, thrown in to account for the nation’s 100 U.S. senators.⁹⁸ One million dollars was to be allotted per-school per-community, with the schools scheduled to be operational by 1996. Alexander himself described America 2000 as containing “the largest new proposals for federal spending to help local schools since 1965.”⁹⁹

The \$1 million in federal funding for schools in each congressional district would have had the federal government involved in creating local schools in ways that would have been almost unimaginable today—and that would surely send Tea Party conservatives into orbit in 2015. Each community, according to Alexander’s congressional testimony, was to use their million dollars as “start-up federal assistance for getting its ‘New American School’ off the ground.” That assistance could be used to buy instructional materials, training, hardware, and services from the private-sector R&D teams that were supposed to help design the new schools.¹⁰⁰ Using federal funds to buy instructional materials, training, hardware, and start-up services for new schools in each congressional district sounds almost like an apt description of the federal government acting like a “national school board.”

Finally, both President Bush and Secretary Alexander advocated for an active federal role in ways that would trigger four-alarm fires in red states if President Obama and Secretary Duncan used similar rhetoric. When Bush announced America 2000, he declared: “To those who want to see real improvement in American education, I say: There will be no renaissance without revolution. We who would be revolutionaries must accept responsibilities for our schools.”¹⁰¹

Lamar Alexander didn’t quite summon the federal government to the barricades. But he did say that America 2000 would require “major change in our 110,000 public and private schools, change in every American community, change in every American home, change in our attitude about learning.”¹⁰² And he hit the road hard to proselytize for his America 2000 plan. According to *Education Week*, the department spent nearly \$2.8 million on promotional materials for America 2000, churning out brochures, newsletters, and videotapes. Alexander himself attended about 50 events at which communities kicked off their America 2000 efforts.¹⁰³ He reported that by December 1992, more than 2,700 communities in every state were “working together on the [national] goals in the monthly America 2000 Satellite TV Town Meetings.”¹⁰⁴

Just as Arne Duncan says today, Alexander believed the federal role was “limited.” Nonetheless, Alexander pledged “that role will be played vigorously. Washington can help by setting standards, highlighting examples, contributing some funds, providing flexibility in exchange for accountability, and pushing and prodding—then pushing and prodding some more.”¹⁰⁵ “My role in the department and [the role of] the department employees,” Alexander said, “is that we should serve as a sparkplug helping the governors, help[ing] America move itself more toward the [national 2000] education goals at a more rapid rate.”¹⁰⁶ With the exception of Alexander’s reference to Washington setting standards, that’s a succinct description of the supporting role that the federal government has played with the Common Core and in granting states waivers to No Child Left Behind.

Today, Alexander contends that Secretary Duncan has overstepped his authority in granting states waivers to NCLB. One condition of the Obama administration’s waivers requires that states demonstrate they have set college- and career-ready standards for students, though a state can have college- and career-ready standards other than the Common Core and still get a waiver. Yet when Alexander was secretary of education, he advocated that the secretary should have very broad authority to waive any federal regulations he deemed less than optimal.

To provide schools with more flexibility in using federal funds, the Bush administration’s America 2000 legislation would have given the secretary of education the authority to waive federal rules and regulations if the secretary determined that they “impede the ability of a school or other service providers to meet the special needs of ... students and other individuals in the most effective manner possible.”¹⁰⁷ Jeanne Allen, then an education analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation, applauded the broad waiver authority, writing that it would “give the secretary of education the authority to waive federal rules and regulations that impede innovation.”¹⁰⁸

Initially, other conservatives joined in praise of Bush and Alexander’s America 2000 initiative. Denis Doyle of the right-leaning Hudson Institute hailed Bush’s vision as “bold, even daring” and said the plan “recognized the national interest but does not compromise local initiative.”¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, Doyle couldn’t help but marvel at the GOP’s advocacy for national standards and a vigorous federal role in education. “Who is calling for an assertive national role in education in the 1990s?” Doyle asked rhetorically. “Who is putting local control, if not at risk, at least on notice? ... Wonder of wonders, it is none other than conservatives.”¹¹⁰ Even the 1992 Republican Party platform on education—typically a collection of homilies about the many-splendored virtues of local control—endorsed a meaningful federal role in incentivizing state and local action.

Today, the Republican National Committee has officially renounced the Common Core; in 2013, it issued a resolution decrying CCSS as “an inappropriate overreach to standardize and control the education of our children.”¹¹¹ By contrast, the 1992 Republican platform language on the federal role sounded very much like Arne Duncan. It endorsed President Bush’s “bold vision to change radically our education system,” and noted approvingly: “From early times, the national government has played a role in encouraging innovation and access. In the 18th century, the Northwest Ordinance assured that school bells would ring amid frontier forests. In the 19th century, President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act establishing 50 land-grant colleges. In the 20th century, President Eisenhower signed the National Defense Education Act, providing millions with a chance at higher education.”¹¹²

Republican support for voluntary national standards and national assessments, for “radical” education reform, and for a vigorous federal role in education faded slowly in 1991 and 1992—and then largely vanished after the election of Bill Clinton. Yet the story of the demise of America 2000 departs, in telltale ways, from the story of the largely successful adoption of the Common Core. In a 1992 speech, Diane Ravitch declared that American education was

at “a historic turning of the road through the effort to set voluntary national standards. Perhaps, 20 years from now, someone else will stand before you and assess these efforts harshly. I certainly hope not.”¹¹³

THE DEMISE OF AMERICA 2000: THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD

From the rollout of the America 2000 plan in April 1991, Lamar Alexander was determined that national standards and national assessments would be voluntary and would not be created by the federal government acting alone. As Alexander testified before a Senate committee, “The federal role is to cause someone else to do it.”¹¹⁴

The obvious question was who “someone else” would be. Initially, Bush and Alexander settled on the National Educational Goals Panel, which then consisted of four representatives of the federal executive branch (including Alexander) and a group of six bipartisan governors. Bush sought \$5.3 million to support the National Goals Panel,¹¹⁵ as well as funding to assist states in implementing the standards, including federal money for state curriculum frameworks, teacher education, and professional development to teach to the new standards.¹¹⁶ But Alexander couldn’t get Congress to appropriate money to support the development of national assessments. Instead, later that summer, Alexander got Congress to appoint a panel of educators, business leaders, and government officials to *study* the idea of creating voluntary national standards and assessments. The 32-member National Council on Education Standards and Testing was formed and quickly went to work, despite its inauspicious acronym, NCEST.

As NCEST prepared its recommendations, the coalition in favor of national standards and national assessments began to unravel at opposite ends of the political spectrum, despite Diane Ravitch’s commitment to maintaining bipartisan support for national standards.¹¹⁷ Teachers unions and civil rights leaders didn’t like America 2000’s school choice provisions to allow students to use vouchers to attend public or private schools. Many on the left also strongly objected to national tests, thinking they would reflect unfavorably on disadvantaged students by highlighting poor performance and failing to take account of poverty and the inadequacy of resources invested in education. Progressive educator Ted Sizer, chairman of the Coalition of Essential Schools, claimed that voluntary national standards and assessments were just “the tip of the iceberg”—the iceberg being the “arrogation of authority over children by the central government, in the name of high standards and international competition.”¹¹⁸

In December 1991, the Representative Assembly of the largest teachers union, the National Education Association, passed a resolution opposing the development of national assessments. At the annual convention of the other leading union, the American Federation of Teachers, union members, in what would soon become a rite of passage for future Secretaries of Education, booed Lamar Alexander, just months after having cheered his selection.¹¹⁹

On the political right, the opposition was more muted, but some conservative activists were nervous that voluntary national standards would effectively preempt local control of education. “National standards are not such a bad idea,” the *National Review* allowed. “But when you get to other subjects—history, literature, social studies—the likelihood is that standards will translate into the ‘curriculum of inclusion’—i.e., no standards at all.”¹²⁰

Ultimately, the political challenge to America 2000 was whether the political center could hold. It did not. In January 1992, NCEST issued recommendations in favor of national content standards and a system of national or large-scale assessments. Lamar Alexander hailed NCEST’s recommendations, saying, “This is a revolutionary step in American education. Before it is through, it will affect every classroom in the nation’s 110,000 schools.”¹²¹ But in a

fateful bow to the political left, NCEST also urged that states develop “school delivery standards” or what is known as “opportunity to learn” standards.

Advocates of opportunity to learn standards (OTL) thought it unfair to hold disadvantaged students to the same academic standards as other students because, they argued, educational achievement was dependent on socio-economic background and school resources. In fact, some OTL advocates believed that academic standards should not apply to students until OTL standards ensured all students had equitable access to resources to learn, thereby leveling the playing field at school.

The debate on prioritizing opportunity-to-learn standards over academic standards reprised longstanding disagreements between conservatives and liberals over whether educational policy should primarily measure inputs or outcomes. But governors from both parties objected strongly to OTL standards, fearing they would generate lawsuits and unfunded mandates when state officials had to apportion and defend the equity of all school-related resource decisions. For many governors, OTL standards were little more than an acronym for opportunity-to-litigate.

Like the Republican majority in the House today, the Democratic majority in the House in 1992 did not want President Bush to make good on his claim of being the “education president”—and Democrats did their best to block all of the Bush administration’s education legislation.¹²² In the Democratic rewrite of the America 2000 legislation, House Democrats dramatically expanded NCEST’s recommendation for states to develop OTL standards by calling for *national* school delivery standards. That shift was unacceptable to the Bush administration—and Alexander recommended to President Bush that he veto the Democratic bill if it came to his desk. But it was only *after* the OTL national standards were added to the bill that Alexander wrote the House minority leader in September 1992 to warn that the Democratic legislation “creates at least the beginnings of a national school board that could make day-to-day school decisions on curriculum, discipline, teacher training, textbooks, and classroom materials.”¹²³

In the midst of the 1992 presidential campaign, the America 2000 legislation quietly died in the Senate. Still, not all was necessarily for naught. Nearly 15 years later, Diane Ravitch would observe that while “none of the components of America 2000 was enacted into law, the legislation signaled recognition by the Republican Party that the federal government should promote higher levels of academic performance.”¹²⁴

The “populist crusade” for national academic standards launched by Lamar Alexander seemed to finally run into a permanent dead-end in 1994, when the draft national history standards funded by the Bush administration were belatedly released. The history standards had been developed by the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA, with grants from the Education Department and the National Endowment for the Humanities. But Lynne Cheney, the former chairwoman of the National Endowment, hated the history standards. In the fall of 1994, Cheney blasted the draft history standards that she had funded as a “grim and gloomy” rendering of American history that was “politically correct to a fare-thee well.”¹²⁵

In the *Wall Street Journal*, Cheney lamented that none of the 31 draft standards in history mentioned the Constitution—though the standards suggested students conduct a trial in which John D. Rockefeller would be accused of “knowingly and willfully participat[ing] in unethical and amoral business practices designed to undermine traditions of fair open competition for personal and private aggrandizement in direct violation of the common welfare.”¹²⁶

Cheney's *Wall Street Journal* column—entitled “The End of History”—seemed to mark the end of the national standards movement as well. Both liberals and conservatives renounced the idea of national standards, with the Senate voting 99-1 in a nonbinding resolution to condemn the draft history standards. By 1997, Harvard education professor Richard Elmore was reporting, only half in jest, that “from 1992 onward, the standards movement has been declared officially dead at least once a week.”¹²⁷ In his 2005 book on the federal politics of education standards, Kevin Kosar concluded that “although a robust exercise of federal powers to raise standards is desirable, politics will not permit it.”¹²⁸ The new conventional wisdom, as William Bennett is said to have summed up, was that “America will never have national standards, because the Right will never do national and the Left will never do standards.”¹²⁹ By the time the Obama administration arrived in office in 2009, national standards were considered to be the third rail of education policy—a surefire, dead-on-arrival derailment.

Yet the Common Core State Standards were adopted rapidly in all but a handful of states in the space of little more than a year—and America has, for the first time in its history, if not national standards than something approaching quasi-national standards in English and mathematics for the vast majority of students and states. Why did the Common Core State Standards spread rapidly while voluntary national standards foundered in 1992?

At a superficial level, the controversy over the Common Core seems to mirror the controversy over America 2000. In both cases, conservatives initially supported voluntary, higher, and shared standards. In both cases, a coalition of strange bedfellows from the opposite ends of the political spectrum eventually developed to oppose the standards. In the fight over America 2000, and in other federal efforts to influence standards and curriculum,¹³⁰ it was “almost as if Newton’s third law of motion was at work: for every liberal action to increase the federal role in schooling there was an equal and opposite antistatist reaction to defend state and local prerogatives,”¹³¹ writes Kevin Kosar.

The very different outcomes of America 2000 and the Common Core initiative stem not so much from the suspension of Newton’s third law of motion as from the fact that the leaders of the Common Core movement learned from and avoided many of the mistakes committed with America 2000. Instead of seeking federal funding and input in developing the Common Core standards, governors and chief state school officers scrupulously kept the federal government out of the process of drafting the standards. Instead of trying to set standards for teaching politically sensitive subjects like U.S. history, the Common Core State Standards honed in on just English and math. Instead of outlining model curriculum, the federal government remained mum about selecting curriculum. As Chester Finn of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute summed up, “it was a huge relief—and a swell thing for U.S. education—when 2010’s ‘Common Core’ standards were privately developed, optional for states, and of unexpectedly strong quality.”¹³²

In a 1995 essay on her experience in developing national standards, Diane Ravitch observed that “my participation in the process as a reformer keeps me hopeful that we will somehow muddle through, that the naysayers will give change a chance.”¹³³ But she also warned wistfully that “Educators have an unfortunate habit of making the best the enemy of the good, thus beating back any proposed reform that does not promise to solve all problems simultaneously or to lift all boats equally and at the same pace.”¹³⁴ These days Ravitch herself has done her best to beat back the Common Core State Standards. But most governors, state education chiefs, and educators have not let the best become the enemy of the good on the Common Core—at least not yet.

STATE RIGHTS—AND WRONGS

Last but not least—and irrespective of previous conservative efforts to develop voluntary national standards—some Tea Party leaders and Common Core critics remain purists about federalism. They firmly oppose the Common Core State Standards on constitutional and ideological grounds for infringing on state and local control of education—an unenumerated power they believe is reserved solely to individual states under the 10th amendment, and not to consortiums of states or to the federal government.

Last year, Governor Nikki Haley, a Tea Party favorite, signed a bill requiring South Carolina to adopt new standards replacing the Common Core State Standards. “We don’t ever want to educate South Carolina children like they educate California children,”¹³⁵ Haley said.

That’s a pithy sound-bite in South Carolina. But placing political philosophy aside for the moment, stop to consider whether Governor Haley’s statement is true—should children in South Carolina *never* be educated like children in California, just because California officials decided to join in adopting the Common Core?

Many CEOs, business leaders, and teachers in South Carolina and California would beg to differ. No employer or educator claims that algebra, computer science, or chemistry is different in California than in South Carolina (or in South Korea). Employers today hire based on what you know and what you can do, not on where you grew up. And many employers in both South Carolina and California are deeply troubled by the poor math skills and low levels of scientific literacy of entry-level employees. That is why virtually every leading business association, from the Chamber of Commerce, to the National Association of Manufacturers, to the Business Roundtable, strongly supports the Common Core State Standards. So do major corporations in the heartland, such as Battelle, Eastman Chemical Company, and State Farm Insurance.

As recently as last year, before he entered the GOP presidential primaries, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee said that he didn’t “know of any student who would be benefitted by having a standard of math in Oregon that is substantially different in the fourth grade than one in Georgia—because if that student moves from one state to the other, he or she should know that the expectations of what they’re going to experience academically in one state is comparable to the other.”¹³⁶ Diane Ravitch was even blunter: “The idea that mastery of eighth grade mathematics means one thing in Arizona and something different in Maine is absurd on its face.”¹³⁷

Military families in South Carolina similarly attest to the value and need of shared learning standards. Nationwide, nearly 1.2 million school-aged children have a parent serving in the U.S. Armed Forces, and hundreds of thousands of military families move among states during their courses of service.¹³⁸ “The average military family will move six to nine times during a child’s K-12 career,” writes former Arizona GOP governor Jan Brewer. “By [providing] continuity between states, Common Core Standards help ensure a military child does not fall behind or have to sit through lessons they’ve already learned during these transitions.”¹³⁹

As Brewer notes, it’s obviously inequitable that military children face wildly different educational expectations in public schools based simply on where their parents are stationed. That’s why military leaders, who don’t always see eye-to-eye with the Obama administration, are among the strongest supporters of the Common Core State Standards. In a recent letter to Alabama GOP governor Robert Bentley, Colonel Bill Marks, the garrison commander of the Army’s Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama, wrote: “Highly mobile families, military or civilian, deserve the same academic standards at any school they attend, regardless of state.”¹⁴⁰

So what standards have South Carolina's leaders come up with to replace the Common Core State Standards? In March 2015, the South Carolina Board of Education approved new state standards. A study by the state's Education Oversight Committee found that 89 percent of South Carolina's new English standards and 92 percent of the state's new math standards aligned closely with those of the Common Core.¹⁴¹ As it turns out, the standards for what children should learn in math and reading aren't so different in South Carolina and California after all.

Despite a revival today of Tea Party rhetoric calling for the elimination of the U.S. Department of Education, by the time Ronald Reagan left office, the Republican Party had largely given up trying to abolish the department because its existence purportedly infringed on the 10th Amendment. "There has been a shift," Secretary Bennett told the *New York Times* in 1988.¹⁴² "Republicans have come to realize that the federal role in education is here to stay." Yet today's state rights advocates take those age-old objections to federal mandates and regulations a step further by claiming that it is unconstitutional interference for the federal government to even provide incentives for states to voluntarily adopt reforms like the Common Core State Standards.

That criticism of CCSS has the virtue of at least being grounded in fact—the federal government did provide incentives encouraging states to adopt the Common Core State Standards. Still, it seems peculiar for conservatives to develop an abrupt case of historical amnesia and a sudden allergy to the use of competition and incentives in federal education spending only when the Obama administration employs such market-based tools.

It is not surprising that many constituencies in the liberal education establishment, including teachers unions, prefer the status quo of handing out education dollars automatically through formula funding. It is surprising when conservatives like Senator Alexander and his House Education committee counterpart, John Kline, lead the campaign to reduce competitive funding and incentives in reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind law.¹⁴³

Even among conservatives like William Bennett, who support the Common Core, it has now become *de rigueur* to denounce the Obama administration for encouraging CCSS's adoption. "Washington incentivized states to adopt [CCSS]. That was wrong and we should be vigilant to ensure that never happens again," Bennett warns solemnly in a recent ad campaign promoting the Common Core to conservatives.¹⁴⁴ Jeb Bush, too, has shifted his position to oppose the use of incentives in federal education dollars. "Race to the Top money, when [the federal government] provided incentives for Common Core to be implemented—because that's effectively what they did—that was wrong,"¹⁴⁵ Bush told business leaders in New Hampshire earlier this year.

As it happens, the original Race to the Top competition provided incentives for states to voluntarily advance a number of favored conservative causes—among other things, it encouraged states to lift caps on the numbers of charter schools, and, for the first time, to systematically use student performance and progress as an element in teacher evaluation. Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, so despaired of the conservative tilt of the incentives in the Race to the Top competition that she accused the Obama administration of being "Bush III"¹⁴⁶ in the fall of 2009.

Traditionally, Republican leaders champion the use of competition and incentives in federal education dollars. In his 2011 book, *A Simple Government*, Mike Huckabee wrote "I fully endorse the new federal program Race to the Top, which has states compete for additional education funds, allowing them to decide which reforms to enact rather than having specific reforms imposed on them from above."¹⁴⁷ Jeb Bush told the *National Review* in 2011 that when it

comes to public education, the government should “align incentives toward things you want more of and have different consequences for things you want less of. It reeks of common sense, but it’s a radical idea for government.”¹⁴⁸

In September 2011, Bush went further, specifically applauding the Obama administration’s use of incentives in education programs like Race to the Top. On MSNBC’s “Morning Joe” program, Bush told host Joe Scarborough: “Secretary Duncan and President Obama deserve credit for putting pressure on states to change, particularly the states that haven’t changed at all. They’re providing carrots and sticks, and I think that’s appropriate.”¹⁴⁹

The truth is that before Tea Party-revisionism on the Common Core took over much of the Republican Party, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page seemed to fret that the competitive \$4.3 billion Race to the Top program was too *small* a part of the \$100 billion in education spending included in the Recovery Act. “The tragedy,” the *Journal* observed in July 2009, “is that nearly all of this \$100 billion is being dispensed to the states by formula, which allows school districts to continue resisting reform while risking very little in overall federal funding.”¹⁵⁰

CONSERVATIVES AND THE COMMON CORE IN 2015

The widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards, and their initial implementation in the vast majority of American classrooms, constitutes a major and unexpected educational advance for American students and teachers. No one foresaw the rapid adoption of the Common Core State Standards in 2009 and 2010, but no one today is predicting that higher standards and better assessments will soon create an educational nirvana in America’s classrooms. Still, even a critic of the Common Core might find it hard to argue that students and families are worse off overall today under the Common Core than in the “good ol’ days,” when public schools set low standards for student performance in all but a handful of states.

To date, the conservative critique of Common Core has been propelled primarily by ideology (the battle over federalism and the federal role in education) and politics (antipathy toward President Obama and policies he favors). For too many Republicans, the understudy in the Common Core drama has been students themselves. Ideology and politics can and should matter in the Common Core debate. But ultimately, the classroom impact of the Common Core State Standards should count even more: Are the standards advancing learning for students? Is college-readiness of students improving, and are more high school graduates better prepared to get jobs in a knowledge economy? Are teachers finding that higher standards and better assessments mean they can do more of the kind of teaching to which they aspire?

It is far too early to definitively answer these questions, particularly with respect to the impact of the Common Core State Standards on student learning and college readiness. But GOP presidential candidates and Tea Party leaders could raise legitimate questions and concerns for conservatives about how the Common Core standards are actually affecting students, once they stop peddling the false narrative that because of the Common Core, the Obama administration has taken over what is taught in class, imposing the Obamacore national curriculum. As the conservative *Washington Post* blogger Jennifer Rubin has written, “The sooner the discussion moves from ‘Is this a left-wing plot?’ to ‘Does it work?’ the better for the students, schools and states ... It may take time (perhaps not in time for the 2016 election) but soon we can see whether Common Core helps, hurts or was a major distraction from the real drivers of school deficiency.”¹⁵¹

The fact is that it is not enough for educators and policymakers to raise standards and expectations for students. Higher standards, for all their importance, are still only a necessary but not sufficient first step to accelerating educational progress. To make a big difference in student learning, better standards and better assessments have to be matched with rich, rigorous, and research-driven curriculum, and teachers who are well prepared to teach the new and more demanding standards. Implementation, in other words, matters a great deal—and the implementation of the Common Core and the assessments developed by the state consortia has been notably rocky in a number of states.¹⁵²

Conservatives can and should play a leading role in seeing if curriculum developers, state textbook adoption committees, school boards, district curriculum supervisors, and teachers are selecting curriculum to teach the Common Core State Standards that meet the traditional—and largely conservative—goals espoused in the CCSS standards.

For example, are more students getting a content-rich curriculum where the acquisition of background knowledge contributes significantly to academic progress? Are many more teachers using textbooks and lesson plans that set more demanding expectations for student learning—or are textbooks largely continuing to be pitched to the lowest common denominator and claiming a false alignment with the CCSS?¹⁵³ What evidence is there under the Common Core that state and districts are not just following pedagogical fads, but are actually using curriculum that has scientific evidence that it boosts student learning? It has long been a tenet of conservative thought that the nation's public schools should prepare students to participate in civic society and equip students with a familiarity of America's unique history and civic traditions. Under the Common Core literacy standards, are states with the CCSS showing more improvement on the NAEP history and civics assessments than states without CCSS? Those are just some of the many on-the-ground questions that conservatives might rightly ask about the Common Core's implementation.

While it is too early to judge the Common Core's impact on student learning and college- and career-readiness—the most important bottom line for the Common Core—there is some encouraging, albeit preliminary evidence to suggest that the Common Core is working as intended. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, states are setting higher expectations for student learning since the advent of the Common Core. In fourth grade, the number of states with reading standards set at or above NAEP's "Basic" level has increased from 15 in 2009 to 25 in 2013, and more states have raised their fourth grade math standards as well. In eighth grade, both in reading and math, the number of states that raised performance standards also rose. In eighth grade math, the number of states that set performance standards above the NAEP "Basic" level went from 39 in 2009 to 49 in 2013.¹⁵⁴

Similarly, a 2015 evaluation of state standards in *Education Next* found that "for the first time, substantially more states have raised their proficiency standards [from 2011 to 2013] than have let those standards slip to lower levels. Overall, 20 states strengthened their standards, while just eight loosened them. In other words, a key objective of the CCSS consortium—the raising of state proficiency standards—has begun to happen."¹⁵⁵

Finally, there is also some preliminary evidence to suggest the Common Core State Standards are boosting student achievement and college-readiness, even though NCES studies typically find that the effectiveness of new standards and curriculum can only be assessed after several years of implementation.¹⁵⁶

In Kentucky, the first state in the country to adopt the Common Core and a strong implementer of the standards, the percentage of students who are prepared for college studies has soared. The percentage of Kentucky high school graduates who are ready for college, as measured by their performance on the ACT, has jumped from 38 percent in

2011 to 62 percent in 2014, according to the Kentucky Department of Education.¹⁵⁷ A 2015 study by the American Institutes for Research found that Kentucky students who learned under the Common Core State Standards not only scored significantly higher on the ACT than students who studied under Kentucky's old standards, but also that they gained about three months of additional learning in 11th grade in mathematics and English, compared to their peers.¹⁵⁸

Previous research by Tom Loveless, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, has cast doubt on the claim that higher standards are likely to drive academic improvement. But in a 2015 study, Loveless also found that students in states with strong implementation of the Common Core State Standards did make larger academic gains than students in states that did not adopt the Common Core, though the effect was small.¹⁵⁹

To conclude, someone once complained to Voltaire that “life is hard,” to which Voltaire replied “compared to what?” Whether they are conservative or liberal, presidential candidates and party leaders, educators, and reporters all share a responsibility to sort out fact from fiction on the Common Core. And they all share a responsibility to assess the Common Core, in the words of Diane Ravitch, not by letting “the best become the enemy of the good” but rather by answering the compared-to-what question: How does the impact of the Common Core State Standards on students and teachers compare to the preexisting system of state standards and assessments?

In the end, the flip-flops and contortions of conservatives on the Common Core suggest that too many conservative leaders today are unwilling to ask the compared-to-what question—and too willing to put politics and ideology ahead of the goal of setting higher expectations for students.

For all of the battles to date over the Common Core, the true test of conservatives' commitment to setting higher expectations for student learning in America still looms ahead. As the race for the GOP presidential nomination heats up, numerous states are starting to see the results of the new, Common Core-aligned assessments. The new assessment results, many of which will be released later this fall, are showing that millions of students who were judged to be proficient under the old standards are tragically nowhere near being college- and career-ready.

As those disappointing test results roll in, and as the public outcry over the lackluster learning of America's students rises, we'll see which conservative leaders have the courage of their convictions about educating all students—and which abandon conservative principles in favor of political pandering and rewriting history.

Author's Disclaimer: The views expressed in this Brookings paper are mine and mine alone, as are any errors of fact or interpretation. No individual, organization, or institution assigned, asked for, or assisted in drafting this paper, and I have not received any compensation for preparing this analysis of the Common Core debate.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Haley Sweetland Edwards, “The One Issue That Will Complicate Jeb Bush’s Campaign,” *TIME*, Dec. 16, 2014.
 - 2 Scott Clement, “Conservatives hate Common Core. The rest of America? Who knows,” *Washington Post*, The Fix, January 28, 2015.
 - 3 Edwards, “The One Issue That Will Complicate Jeb Bush’s Campaign.”
 - 4 *Education Week* reports that as of June 30, 2015, 43 states and the District of Columbia have adopted and maintained their adoptions of the Common Core State Standards. According to *Education Week*, three states—Oklahoma, Indiana, and South Carolina—reversed their adoption of the Common Core standards. Andrew Ujifusa, “A ‘Common-Core Math’ Problem: How Many States Have Adopted the Standards,” *Education Week*, State EdWatch blog, June 30, 2015. (Ujifusa lists Alaska as one of four states that did not adopt the Common Core, but for all intents and purposes, Alaska’s Mathematics and English Language Arts standards are identical to the Common Core State Standards).
 - 5 Caitlin Emma, “On Common Core, Jeb Bush is a party of one: With Chris Christie’s about-face on the education standards, the GOP’s flip-flop is nearly complete,” *Politico*, May 28, 2015.
 - 6 The GOP-endorsed bills to rewrite the No Child Left Behind law, which have passed the House and Senate as of this writing, would bar the federal government from providing incentives to adopt the Common Core State Standards or any specific set of academic standards. See Alyson Klein, “ESEA Rewrite: A Pre-Conference Cheat Sheet,” *Education Week*, August 3, 2015. Both the House and Senate bill maintain the longstanding and loosely-observed requirement (first established in 1994) that states set “challenging” standards for students in math and reading to receive federal funds from Title I, a federal program to aid disadvantaged students and high-poverty schools. However, the GOP legislation in the House initially dropped the requirement that states set “challenging” standards, requiring only that states set some academic standards in math and English Language Arts. After the Business Roundtable objected to that deletion, House GOP leaders restored the requirement that standards be “challenging” and subsequently beat back an attempt by Rep. Steve Pearce (R-N.M) to amend the bill to give states free rein to adopt any academic standards they wanted or to have no academic standards at all. See “Business Roundtable Letter on H.R. 5, the Student Success Act”, to Congressmen Kline and Scott, February 10, 2015, available at <http://businessroundtable.org/resources/business-roundtable-letter-hr-5-student-success-act> and Michael Coleman, “Common Core under fire from both the right and the left,” *Albuquerque Journal*, July 14, 2015.
 - 7 David Whitman, “The GOP doesn’t want to leave any child behind—just the Obama programs that might help them,” *Hechinger Report*, April 9, 2015. For a more recent summary of GOP plans to eliminate competitive award programs, like the Investing in Innovation program and the Teacher Incentive Fund from the Education Department’s budget, see Lauren Camera, “Time is Short for Closing Federal Budget Deal,” *Education Week*, Vol. 35, Issue 1, Aug. 19, 2015, p.24.
 - 8 The Thomas B. Fordham Institute’s 373-page study of how the Common Core State Standards compare with existing state standards is the most comprehensive analysis of the subject. It concluded: “The Common Core standards are clearly superior to those currently in use in 39 states in math and 37 states in English. For 33 states, the Common Core is superior in *both* math and reading. However, three jurisdictions boast ELA standards that are clearly superior to the Common Core: California, the District of Columbia, and Indiana. Another eleven states have ELA standards that are in the same league as the Common Core (or ‘too close to call’). Eleven states plus the District of Columbia have math standards in the ‘too close to call’ category, meaning that, overall, they are at least as clear and rigorous as the Common Core standards.” Sheila Byrd Carmichael, Gabrielle Martino, Kathleen Porter-Magee, and W. Stephen Wilson, *The State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Washington, DC, July 2010, p. 6.
- Jeb Bush has echoed the conclusions of the Fordham Institute study, stating that the Common Core standards are “higher in most cases than all but a handful of states.” Quoted in Jennifer Rubin, “Where has THIS Jeb Bush been?” *Washington Post*, June 17, 2015. James Milgram, a Stanford University emeritus mathematics professor and member of the Common Core validation committee, has sharply criticized the Common Core’s math standards as inadequate and weak. Nevertheless, even Milgram has said that the Common Core math standards “are better than 85 or 90 percent of the state standards they replace. Not a little better. A lot better . . . That’s really a comment on the abysmal quality of these state standards.” Sarah Garland, *The Hechinger Report*, “How Does Common Core Compare to Other Countries?” *U.S. News & World Report*, Feb. 25, 2014.

For a separate assessment of how Common Core math standards compare with the math standards of the highest-achieving nations, see William H. Schmidt and Richard T. Houang, “Curricular Coherence and the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics,” *Educational Researcher*, Nov. 2012, vol. 41, no. 8:294-308. Schmidt and Houang found both that the Common Core math standards were very similar to those of the highest performing nations and that no state’s previous math

standards were as close a match (a 90 percent consistency rate) to those of high-performing countries as the Common Core math standards.

Finally, Morgan Polikoff finds that Common Core standards are stronger than many state standards because they “cover more rigorous skills, such as demonstrating understanding or solving problems, and have less of a focus on skills such as memorizing or performing procedures.” Polikoff also cites an analysis that found “approximately 40 percent of CCSS content in ELA was at the highest two levels of cognitive demand—analyzing and evaluating—and 31 percent was at the lowest two levels—memorizing and performing procedures. In contrast, typical state standards in the NCLB era had 24 percent of content at the top two levels and 38 percent at the bottom two levels of cognitive demand.” Morgan Polikoff, *Common Core State Standards Assessments: Challenges and Opportunities*, Center for American Progress, April 2014, pp. 6, 22.

9 For an excellent overview of the shortcomings of most state standards prior to the Common Core—identified in numerous studies—see Robert Rothman, *Something in Common: The Common Core Standards and the Next Chapter in American Education* (Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, MA, 2011).

10 As Joy Resmovits of the *Huffington Post* has reported, “it’s possible for a fourth-grader to be passing reading in New Jersey, but as soon as he or she moves across the Hudson River to New York, to be suddenly considered failing—despite not knowing any less.” Joy Resmovits, “States Still Differ Dramatically In Their Academic Expectations, Study Finds,” *Huffington Post*, July 9, 2015. The Editorial Board of the *Albuquerque Journal* has similarly asked, “Does it make any sense to divide K-12 curriculums based on which side of the Mississippi River students live on? Not if you want to compete in the global marketplace . . . Here’s betting nobody in China (tops in the PISA [assessment]) is tailoring curriculum based on what side of the Yangtze River students live on.” Editorial Board, “Editorial: Competition the common thread of Common Core,” *Albuquerque Journal*, June 9, 2015.

11 As Bill Gates pointed out in a March 14, 2014 speech to 3,000 teachers, “Students who haven’t been taught what’s on these tests are at a huge disadvantage. Under the old standards, if you were from Kentucky, you didn’t have to know the quadratic equation, but your neighbors in Tennessee did. If you were from Maryland, you didn’t have to learn trigonometry, but your neighbors in Virginia did.” Remarks of Bill Gates, Teaching & Learning Conference, March 14, 2014, Press Room speeches, The Gates Foundation, available at: <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Media-Center/Speeches/2014/03/Bill-Gates-Teaching-and-Learning-Conference>

12 Atlantic Unbound Interviews, “Hard Lessons: Diane Ravitch argues for a return to academic rigor in our nation’s public schools,” *The Atlantic*, Nov. 1, 2000. Or, as Ravitch put it in a 2006 commentary, “It is time to admit that the basic premise of ‘50 states, 50 standards’ is a formula for incoherence and obfuscation.” Diane Ravitch, “National Standards: ‘50 Standards for 50 States’ is a Formula for Incoherence and Obfuscation,” *Education Week*, Quality Counts at 10: A Decade of Standards-Based Education, Vol. 25, Issue 17, Jan. 5, 2006, p.54. In 2006, a couple of years before the CCSS initiative got underway, Ravitch reported that “I have reviewed all the state standards in history and English Language Arts. I have read the various reviews that have been conducted of state standards in math and science. I think it would not be too broad a generalization to say that state standards—with a few exceptions—are way below where they ought to be.” “Reconsidering National Standards, Curricula, and Tests: A Talk With Diane Ravitch,” *Education Week*, Jan. 18, 2006.

13 V. Bandiera de Mello, *Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto the NAEP Scales: Variation and Change in State Standards for Reading and Mathematics, 2005-09* (NCES 2011-458), National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 2.

In November 2005, Diane Ravitch summarized the sad state of state standards by noting that “varying state standards and tests are inadequate. Almost all states report that, based on their own tests, incredibly large proportions of their students meet high standards . . . Basically, the states have embraced low standards . . . Americans must recognize that we need national standards, national tests and a national curriculum.” Diane Ravitch, “Every State Left Behind,” *New York Times*, Nov. 7, 2005.

14 Chester E. Finn Jr. and Michael J. Petrilli, “Foreword” to Sheila Byrd Carmichael et al., *The State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010*, p. 2.

15 Gary W. Phillips, *International Benchmarking: State and National Education Performance Standards*, American Institutes for Research, Sept. 2014, Washington, DC, pp. iv-v, 5. Phillips also reported that “success under No Child Left Behind is largely related to using low performance standards. The states reporting the highest numbers of proficient students have the lowest performance standards. More than two-thirds of the variation in state success reported [under] No Child Left Behind is related to how high or low the states set their performance standards.”

16 Bill Gates, “Give Kids an Equal Chance: Speaking Up for the Common Core,” Gatesnotes, The Blog of Bill Gates, 17

March, 2014, available at: <http://www.gatesnotes.com/Education/Speaking-Up-for-Common-Core>

17 One third (32.6 percent) of all first-year undergraduate students in 2011-12 took a remedial course in English, Mathematics, Reading, or Writing. See Thomas D. Snyder and Sally A. Dillow, *Digest of Education Statistics 2013* (NCES 2015-011), National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC, May 2015, Table 311.40.

18 Christina Theokas, “Shut Out of the Military: Today’s High School Education Doesn’t Mean You’re Ready for Today’s Army,” Education Trust, K-12 Policy Paper, December 2010, p.3. Theokas reports that 23 percent of the nearly 350,000 high school graduates aged 17-20 who applied for entry into the Army between 2004 and 2009 and took the U.S. Army’s Armed Forces Qualifications Test failed to achieve a qualifying score.

19 Quoted in Grace Tatter, “Report: Tennessee improves honesty in reporting student test scores,” *Tennessee Chalkbeat*, May 14, 2015, available at <http://tn.chalkbeat.org/2015/05/14/tennessees-honesty-rises-in-reporting-student-test-scores-report-says/#.VcMTDflXqSo>

20 Lauren Camera, “Common Core is Premier Education Issue in GOP Presidential Debate,” *Education Week*, August 6, 2015.

21 Long before Deflategate, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers called in a February 2009 *Washington Post* op-ed for national standards, arguing: “Imagine the outrage if, say, the Pittsburgh Steelers had to move the ball the full 10 yards for a first down during the Super Bowl while the Arizona Cardinals had to go only seven. Imagine if this scenario were sanctioned by the National Football League. Such a system would be unfair and preposterous. But there is little outrage over the uneven patchwork of academic standards for students in our 50 states.” Randi Weingarten, “The Case for National Standards,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 16, 2009.

22 Gov. Jan Brewer, “Making Good On Our Commitment to High Standards,” *The Daily Caller*, April 8, 2015. When former CNN correspondent Campbell Brown asked Jeb Bush at an August 19, 2015 Education Summit for GOP presidential candidates in New Hampshire how states can recognize and measure higher standards if they are not common standards, Bush responded: “It’s not like pornography, where you know it when you see it, but clearly [with] low standards you know it. That’s what most states have had.” The Associated Press, “The Latest: Christie Says He’d Work with Unions, Unlike Bush,” *abcnews.com*, Aug. 19, 2015.

23 See, for example, Cara Fitzpatrick, Amy Sherman, Jeffrey S. Solocheck, “Fact-checking attacks on Common Core school standards,” PolitiFact.Com, Truth-O-Meter, *Tampa Bay Times*, Oct. 21, 2013, available at: (<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2013/oct/21/fact-checking-common-core-school-standards/>); Andrew Ujifusa, “Common Core and ‘Smile Intensity’: Together at Last?” *Education Week*, State EdWatch blog, May 13, 2013; Bill Bennett, “The Common Core: Setting the Record Straight,” *Forbes*, Forbes Opinion, Feb.20, 2015; Sonny Perdue, “The Common Core Blame Game: Conservatives are acting like liberals,” *National Review*, May 8, 2014; Michelle Malkin, “Time To Opt Out of Creepy Fed Ed Data-Mining Racket,” *MichelleMalkin.com*, March 15, 2013; Remarks of Brent Bozell, “Cultural Fascism in America,” CPAC 2015 conference, available at: (<https://www.foramerica.org/2015/02/11510/>); Southern Poverty Law Center, *Public Schools in the Crosshairs: Far-Right Propaganda and the Common Core State Standards*, May 2014; and Tim Murphy, “Inside the Mammoth Backlash to Common Core: How a bipartisan education reform effort became the biggest conservative bogeyman since Obamacare,” *Mother Jones*, Sept. 4, 2014.

24 Fairleigh Dickinson University, PublicMind Poll, “Misconceptions Fuel Deep Unpopularity of Common Core,” February 19, 2015, available at: <http://publicmind.fdu.edu/2015/commoncore/final.pdf> Also see Blake Neff, “Americans Hate Common Core, But Know Little About It,” *Daily Surge*, Feb. 20, 2015; Beth Hawkins, “What do Americans think of Common Core standards? It depends on how you ask,” *Minneapolis Post*, Aug. 27, 2015; Carolyn Phenicie, “74 Survey: 58% Confused About Common Core, 63% See ‘Serious Problems’ in U.S. Schools,” *The Seventy Four*, Aug. 24, 2015; and Scott Clement and Emma Brown, “Poll: Widespread misperceptions about the Common Core standards,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 20, 2015.

25 Memorandum from Jim Williams, Public Policy Polling, “Voters Nationally Support Provisions of Common Core State Standards,” Public Policy Polling, Raleigh, NC, Aug. 17, 2015; Press release, Center for American Progress, “Goals of the Common Core Are as American as Apple Pie, But Misinformation Remains Widespread, New PPP Poll Reveals,” Aug. 18, 2015. In the 2015 Education Next national survey, nearly three in five members of the public (58 percent) did not know whether the Common Core was being used in their local school district, and one in four adults in states without the Common Core mistakenly believed the standards were being implemented in their school districts. In their interpretation of the survey results, professors Michael Henderson, Paul Peterson, and Martin West note that “the broader public’s opposition to the Common Core appears to rest on a shallow factual foundation.” Michael B. Henderson, Paul E. Peterson, and Martin R. West, “The 2015 EdNext Poll on School Reform,” *Education Next*, Winter 2016, Vol. 16, No. 1. In a separate

commentary, Paul Peterson adds that “Much of the opposition [to the Common Core] is coming from uninformed members of the public who are unsure of whether or not it is being implemented in their community.” Paul E. Peterson, “Common Core: How Much Do People Know About Its Real Impact?” *Education Next*, Aug. 19, 2015. For a broader overview of public misunderstanding and public views of the Common Core, see Michael B. Henderson and Martin R. West, “Partisanship and public opinion on the Common Core,” The Brookings Institution, The Brown Center Chalkboard, No. 106, April 16, 2015; Michael B. Henderson, Paul E. Peterson, and Martin R. West, “No Common Opinion on the Common Core,” *Education Next*, Winter 2015, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 9-19; and professor Morgan Polikoff, “On Common Core, can two polls this different both be right?,” *morganpolikoff.com*, Aug. 25, 2015, at: <http://morganpolikoff.com/2015/08/25/on-common-core-polls-can-two-polls-this-different-both-be-right/>.

26 Fred Lucas, “Kasich Calls Common Core Opposition ‘Hysteria,’” *The Blaze*, Jan. 16, 2015, available at: <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2015/01/16/kasich-calls-common-core-opposition-hysteria/>

27 The Council of Chief State School Officers and The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, “Common Core Standards Memorandum of Agreement”, signatories as of May 2009. Also see Michele McNeil, “46 States Agree to Common Academic Standards Effort,” *Education Week*, Vol. 28, Issue 33, June 1, 2009, p. 16.

Some Common Core critics allege that the Common Core State Standards were drafted in secrecy, with teachers having little or no input. Yet according to *Education Week*, the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers circulated and shared drafts of the standards with “writing and feedback panels [that] included university scholars, state curriculum specialists, and teachers . . . drafts evolved as they were circulated among state departments of education, teachers’ unions, and groups focused on curriculum content, and then revised . . . The first official public draft [of the standards], released in March [2010], drew more than 10,000 comments on a website set up by the NGA and the CCSSO.” Catherine Gewertz, “Final Version of Common Standards Unveiled,” *Education Week*, Vol. 29, Issue 33, June 2, 2010. Gewertz notes that some critics still thought there should have been more opportunity for general public input in the drafting of the standards. But the claim that the standards were developed off-radar is false.

28 See the “Federal Role” section of the 2009 NGA-CCSSO Memorandum of Agreement, p. 3. Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal signed the NGA-CCSSO Memorandum of Agreement. He later reversed field and sued the federal government, claiming it was “hijacking” the NGA-CCSSO initiative and forcing a “federal common curriculum” on states. See Blake Neff, “Jindal’s Common Core Crusade: Principle, Or Opportunism?” *The Daily Caller*, June 30, 2015.

29 As Sol Stern, a conservative with the Manhattan Institute has pointed out: “*There is no federal imposition [of the Common Core State Standards]. States are completely free to say no thank you to the federal government, and seven have already done so* Conservatives can’t have it both ways—applauding every state defection from the Common Core but continuing to repeat the fiction that this is an unbreakable federal imposition on the states” (emphasis in original). Sol Stern and Peter W. Wood, *Common Core: Yea & Nay*, Encounter Broadside No. 40, (Encounter Books, New York, NY, 2014), pp. 3, 30.

30 “Department of Education, 34 CFR Subtitle B, Chapter II, RIN 1810-AB07, Race to the Top Fund,” 59688 *Federal Register*, Vol. 74, No. 221, Nov. 18, 2009, p. 59689.

31 Cited in “Myth v Fact: Correcting Misinformation about the Movement to Raise Standards,” Conservatives for Higher Standards, available at: <http://highercorestandards.org/myth-vs-fact/>

Conservatives for Higher Standards was a project of the Foundation for Excellence in Education (Jeb Bush’s educational foundation) and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. It’s myth-debunking fact sheet on the CCSS states that “A state’s decision to adopt Common Core played a very minor role in the Race to the Top competitive scoring process (making up just 8 percent of an individual state’s score under the federal application).”

32 Just as the Common Core State Standards are generally better and more rigorous standards than the state standards they replaced, so too are the new assessments in math and English Language Arts/Literacy developed by the two state consortia funded in the 2010 Race to the Top Assessment competition, the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of readiness for College and Careers) and SBAC (Smarter Balanced Assessment Coalition).

For decades, teachers, parents, and students alike have complained that state tests fail to assess critical thinking skills and rely heavily on fill-in-the-bubble questions of basic skills. A 2012 RAND study of 17 states (whose state achievement tests were more cognitively demanding) confirmed the low bar for learning assessed on state tests. Extrapolating their results nationwide, the RAND researchers concluded that zero percent of elementary and secondary school students in the U.S. were assessed on deeper learning in mathematics on states tests, one to six percent of students were assessed on deeper learning in reading, and two to three percent of students were assessed on deeper learning in writing. Kun Yuan and Vi-

Nhuan Le, “Estimating the Percentage of Students Who Were Tested on Cognitively Demanding Items Through the State Achievement Tests,” RAND Education Working Paper, WR-967-WFHF, Nov. 2012, p. xiv.

By comparison, a 2013 analysis of the new PARCC and SBAC assessments by researchers at the National Center for Research, Standards, and Student Testing concluded that “68 percent of consortia English questions and 70 percent of math questions were higher-order” questions and performance tasks. Cited in Emmanuel Felton, “What this spring’s Common Core tests promised, and what they will actually deliver,” *Hechinger Report*, March 19, 2015. Also see Emmanuel Felton, “Are new Common Core tests really better than the old multiple-choice tests? Experts say that new open-ended questions that tap critical thinking provide a marked improvement,” *Hechinger Report*, May 20, 2015.

While the new assessments have had numerous implementation problems, they are much better assessments than the state tests they replaced. And contrary to claims that the Common Core State Standards have led to an explosion of summative, high-stakes, end-of-year testing in classrooms, the CCSS had actually fed an explosion in formative assessments used by teachers to inform instruction. According to Simba Information, spending on state testing (including federal funding to develop the PARCC and SBAC assessments) stood at \$1.1 billion in 2013–2014, slightly *less* than the \$1.2 billion spent on state testing in 2007–08. During the same years, spending on formative classroom-based assessments skyrocketed, from \$822 million to \$1.3 billion. Spending on classroom assessment now exceeds spending on state testing, accounting for 55 percent of the testing market. See Sean Cavanaugh, “As McGraw-Hill Education Leaves State Testing, Market Thrives for Classroom Assessments,” *Education Week*, Vol. 34, Issue 37, Aug. 5, 2015, p. 9.

As Sean Cavanaugh detailed in a follow-up article, “There’s an assumption that a lot of people have been making about testing in the common-core era that goes something like this: ‘As states have scrambled to roll out high-stakes online exams aligned to the standards, the testing industry has reaped the benefits. Companies have reeled in huge contract after huge contract, creating not just a frenzy of competition but also profit, with taxpayers picking up new, daunting costs amid the gold rush.’ But the reality appears to be more complicated than that . . . there’s little evidence that overall profits [in the state testing market] has surged as a result of common core assessments, as some observers (particularly critics of the common core) have claimed . . . The real area of growth for the industry has come in a different area of testing entirely—classroom assessment . . . Classroom assessments tend not be high-stakes, strike-fear-in-the-heart-of-the-school community brands of tests. In fact, they include formative assessments—on-the-fly measurements of student learning designed to shape instruction, which tend to be popular among educators. These numbers will probably leave some readers puzzled, as data that contradict prevailing narratives often do. How can the market for state testing have flatlined, with so many states adopting new, common-core aligned exams that cost many millions of dollars to administer? One explanation is that much of the new money being poured into new, common-core tests is, in fact, not new money at all . . . In many states, policymakers have simply replaced their old assessments with new ones. It just so happens that the new ones are aligned with the common core.” Sean Cavanaugh, “Assessing the State of the K-12 Testing Market, As Dynamics Shift,” *Education Week*, Aug. 10, 2015.

33 Maureen Sullivan, “Bobby Jindal on Education: 10 Things The Presidential Candidate Wants You To Know,” *Forbes*, June 24, 2015.

34 Matthew Boyle, “Rand in New Hampshire: State’s Founders Didn’t Want To Live Half Free, Or Be Left Half Dead,” *Breitbart*, April 8, 2005.

35 Quoted in Jessica Taylor, “Donald Trump’s Policy Positions Lack Specifics . . . So Far,” NPR, Aug. 11, 2015. On May 25, 2015, Trump tweeted “Common Core is a federal takeover of school curriculum. Department of Education should be disbanded not expanded.”

36 “Ted Cruz responds to Jeb Bush’s stance on immigration, Iraq,” Transcript of The Kelly File, Fox News interview, May 12, 2015. Bill Barrow and Kimberly Hefling, Associated Press, “FACT CHECK: Myths in the political roar over Common Core,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 26, 2015. Even Michigan’s conservative GOP governor, Rick Snyder, has said of Cruz’s vow to repeal every word of Common Core: “There’s nothing to repeal. It was done by the states.” Patrick O’Connor, “Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder Carves Out Own Niche Inside GOP,” *Wall Street Journal*, Washington Wire, April 2, 2015. More recently, Cruz has advanced the equally meaningless promise that one of the first actions he will take as President is to “instruct the Department of Education—which should be abolished—that Common Core ends today!” Jim Geraghty, “Ted Cruz, Offering Up Red Meat to Americans for Prosperity,” *National Review*, Aug. 22, 2015. Also see Ron Cole, “GOP presidential candidate Cruz visits Dover,” *Foster’s Daily Democrat*, Aug. 31, 2015.

37 Lyndsey Layton, “Chris Christie, a onetime booster, now wants to dump the Common Core,” *Washington Post*, May 28, 2015.

38 See State of New Jersey, State Board of Education, “Resolution in Support of and Commitment to the Common Core

Standards,” Adoption Level, February 12, 2014; and Peggy McGlone, “NJ State Board of Education backs Common Core standards, again,” *nj.com*, Feb. 12, 2014.

39 Common Core State Standards Initiative, “English Language Arts Standards/Anchor Standards/College and Career reading Anchor Standards for Reading,” CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R1, at: <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/R/>

40 Remarks of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, “Seize the Day: Change in the Classroom and the Core of Schooling,” Leadership Institute Conference, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, U.S. Department of Education, Jan. 27, 2014, available at: <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/seize-day-change-classroom-and-core-schooling>

41 Sol Stern, *Common Core: Yea & Nea*, p. 26.

42 Sonny Perdue, “The Common Core Blame Game: Conservatives are acting like liberals,” *National Review*, May 8, 2014.

43 In the Introduction to his campaign’s PAC report on education, Governor Jindal writes “Common Core has become a way for the federal government to dictate a national curriculum.” AMERICA NEXT, K-12 Education Reform: A Roadmap,” p.8, released Feb. 9, 2015, at: <http://americanext.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/America-Next-K-12-Education-Reform.pdf>

44 In the absence of being able to identify a single example of a Common Core assignment created, prescribed, or mandated by the federal government, conservatives critics of the Common Core has resorted to three rhetorical gimmicks to substantiate their claims that the Obama administration has created a federal national curriculum, national standards, and national assessments.

The first such rhetorical device is to reinterpret the plain-English language meanings of the terms “standards,” “curriculum,” and “national.” To cite one leading example, Hoover Institution fellow Bill Evers argues that the terms “standards,” “curriculum,” and “assessments” cannot be meaningfully distinguished from each other, writing that “They mirror and match each other and cannot be disentangled.” Williamson M. Evers, *Federal Overreach and the Common Core*, Pioneer Institute, White Paper No. 133, July 2015, p. 8. In the face of educators and political leaders having distinguished for decades between standards, curriculum, and assessments, Evers does allow that “Of course, others use narrower definitions of ‘curriculum’” than the expansive definition of curriculum invoked by Evers from Ralph Tyler’s 1949 book, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Ibid, pp. 7-8.

Even if, for the sake of argument, “standards,” “curriculum,” and “tests” could not be meaningfully disentangled from each other, Evers needs to go several steps further to show that the Obama administration’s incentives for states in Race to the Top to adopt the Common Core State Standards, and its funding for two state consortiums to develop voluntary assessments pegged to the standards, created or mandated a “national curriculum.” Lacking examples of the national curriculum allegedly created and prescribed by the Obama administration, Evers opts instead to change the meaning of the word “national” in the phrases “national standards,” “national tests,” and “national curriculum.”

To the layman, the plain-English language meaning of the term “national” in the phrase “national curriculum” could refer either to the federal government creating or mandating a national curriculum in all public schools, or it could refer to the existence of a school curriculum in multiple subjects that is used nationwide. Despite referring repeatedly to the Obama administration’s “national curriculum,” “national tests,” and “national standards” in his White Paper, Evers never provides any evidence that America actually now has a “national” curriculum in either sense of the use of the word “national.” In short, his claims fail the duck test—if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it is a duck. He has identified the national curriculum that won’t quack.

The second rhetorical device used to justify the claim that the Obama administration has created a “national curriculum”—again, in the absence of evidence of a national curriculum—is to warn that the Obama administration’s support of the Common Core State Standards will *someday* create a national curriculum in an as-yet unspecified way, or that the Obama administration has put America on “a path to a national curriculum.” In the first GOP presidential debate on August 6, 2015, Sen. Marco Rubio implicitly acknowledged that after more than six years of the Obama administration, there is still no federal mandate to adopt the Common Core. Yet Rubio nonetheless confidently predicted that “The Department of Education, like every federal agency, will never be satisfied. They will not stop with it being a suggestion. They will turn it into a mandate.” Emma Brown, “Bush, Rubio spar over Common Core State Standards in GOP Debate,” *Washington Post*, August 7, 2015.

The most prevalent formulation of the path-to-a-national curriculum argument goes like this: “Everyone knows the adage that ‘what gets tested gets taught.’ The Obama administration funded two state consortiums to develop new tests aligned to the Common Core State Standards. These tests will necessarily determine what gets taught. Therefore, the Obama administration has created (or is going to create) a national curriculum.”

There are a number of obvious gaps in this reasoning. Even if the two tests developed by the state consortiums, the PARCC and SBAC assessments, do ultimately influence curriculum in as yet-unspecified ways in some states in the country that would hardly demonstrate that the Obama administration has created a “national curriculum.” A “national” curriculum is just that—it is imposed nationally or used nationally, and it is impossible to miss.

Inferences that new assessments will produce a new national curriculum are also subject to confusing causation with correlation, or what logicians call a post hoc fallacy. How does one know that that the state consortia tests funded by the Obama administration caused a change in curriculum and not some other factor—like the learning goals set in the Common Core State Standards, or data gathered from formative assessments that were not funded by the federal government? In fact, it is quite possible that the adoption of shared state standards will lead to diversifying curricular offerings, rather than narrowing options to a single standardized “national curriculum.” To cite just one example, Certica Solutions, a provider of K-12 data management and education content solutions, has developed a Formative Assessment Item Bank that has more than 50,000 Common Core-aligned Math and English Language Arts selections that teachers and district staff can use to help students practice the next generation of assessments. “Skyward Partners with Certica to Launch Formative Assessment Solution,” Press Release, August 4, 2015, available at: <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/skyward-partners-with-certica-to-launch-formative-assessment-solution-2015-08-04-8173577>

The third and final rhetorical device to cover for the lack of a smoking gun of the Obamacore “national curriculum” is to invoke the magic words theory. Evers writes that “When Education Secretary Duncan announced the department’s grants to the testing groups [the two state consortiums] on September 2, 2010, he pointed enthusiastically to one group ‘developing curriculum frameworks and ways to share great lesson plans’ and the other group developing ‘instructional modules’. Later, when the department had additional discretionary funds available, it gave the consortia further money for developing curriculum materials. The new national curriculum will be designed to complement the federally-funded national testing system.” Evers, *Federal Overreach and the Common Core*, p.35. (For similar language, see Bill Evers, Kent Talbert, and Robert Eitel, “Education hornets’ nest: Creating a national K-12 curriculum,” *The Hill*, May 9, 2011).

Under the magic words theory, if Secretary Duncan said the federal government would fund groups that develop “curriculum” and “instructional” material—there, he said it himself!--then the federal government has created a “new national curriculum,” Q.E.D. But Evers’ dog won’t hunt. Any fair reading of Secretary Duncan’s remarks show that he is referring not to funding curriculum and traditional instructional materials but rather to the state consortia providing professional development support to help teachers as they make the switch to using new standards and assessments. (Here’s what Duncan said, unedited: “I want to stress that neither of the two state consortia will suddenly drop new, ambitious assessments in the laps of teachers in 2014-15 without significant preparation and training. Both consortiums recognize that involving teachers in the development, scoring, and implementation of the new assessments are absolutely essential if the assessments are going to support better teaching and learning. It is teachers who will help ensure that test items are instructionally usefully. And both consortia will help their member states provide the tools and professional development needed to assist teachers’ transition to the new assessments. PARCC, for example, will be developing curriculum frameworks and ways to share great lesson plans. The SMARTER Balanced Assessment coalition will develop instructional modules and professional learning communities to support teachers in understanding and using assessment results. They will involve teachers not just in writing and reviewing test items but in scoring assessments—especially complex performance tasks.”)

Evers’ claims about the Education Department funding a “new national curriculum” are further countenanced by the fact that PARCC and SBAC have actually now released the voluntary “curriculum frameworks” and “instructional modules” that Secretary Duncan referred to in 2010—and they bear no resemblance to curriculum, much less a national curriculum. For example, instead of releasing “curriculum frameworks,” PARCC has released “Model Content Frameworks” for Grades 3-11 in English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics. PARCC notes that “Model Content Frameworks are voluntary resources meant to be used as a companion to the Common Core State Standards to help educators and those developing aligned curricula and instructional materials . . . The Model Content Frameworks are neither a curriculum nor a replacement to the standards. Rather, they ought to be used as a companion to the standards, and as a lens through which to analyze and build local curricula.” “PARCC Model Content Frameworks,” Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, available at: <http://www.parcconline.org/resources/educator-resources/model-content-frameworks> In 95 pages, the Model Content Frameworks in English Language Arts do not cite or recommend a single text or author by name. (The ELA/Literacy Model Framework does note that the Common Core State Standards recommend that students in grades 9-10 should “Analyze how an author draws on and transform source material in a specific work [e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare].” Similarly, the Model Content Framework notes that the 11th grade Common Core ELA/Literacy standards recommend that students delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, such as notable U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents, *The Federalist Papers*, and presidential addresses.) See “PARCC Model Content Frameworks: English Language Arts/Literacy, Grades 3-11”, Version 2.0, August 2012, link available at: <http://www.parcconline.org/resources/educator-resources/model->

[content-frameworks](#)

45 Beth Reinhard, “Bill Bennett Defends Common Core in Iowa TV Ad,” *Wall Street Journal*, Washington Wire, April 20, 2015. Donald Trump has made much the same claim about the Common Core State Standards, saying that Jeb Bush’s support of CCSS means he wants “kids educated directly by the bureaucrats of Washington.” Jake Miller, “Donald Trump shocked by Neil Young’s music objection,” CBSnews.com, June 24, 2015.

46 Blake Neff, “Flip-Flop-A-Bee? A Quick Look At Huckabee’s Common Core Evolution,” *The Daily Caller*, May 9, 2015.

47 Sol Stern and Peter W. Wood, *Common Core Yea & Nay*, p.5. Stern writes: “Conservatives should be careful what they wish for. They could find themselves being held responsible for undermining the only education reform of the past 40 years that has any chance of restoring traditional academic content to the classroom. They might also be remembered for using the big-lie technique and for smearing conservatives who support the Common Core.”

48 “Letter: State Teachers of the Year Defend the Common Core,” *Education Week*, Vol. 34, Issue 31, May 20, 2015, p. 24.

49 See Michael B. Henderson, “Public Supports Common Standards When Not Called ‘Common Core,’ The Louisiana Survey 2015, Louisiana State University Public Policy Research Lab, The Reilly Center for Media and Public Affairs, Louisiana State University, May 2015, pp. 4-9; Michael B. Henderson and Martin R. West, “Partisanship and public opinion on the Common Core,” The Brookings Institution, The Brown Center Chalkboard, No. 106, April 16, 2015; and Michael B. Henderson, Paul E. Peterson, and Martin R. West, “No Common Opinion on the Common Core,” *Education Next*, Winter 2015, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 9-19. In the national survey done by *Education Next* and in the LSU survey in Louisiana, the survey samples were split into two groups of respondents that were asked identical questions about their views on the Common Core but one group was asked questions without using the phrase “Common Core.” Other surveys also show that the public strongly supports common, higher standards, but that support dips once the phrase “Common Core” is added to questions. See Justin McCarthy, “Public School Parents Now Divided on Common Core,” *Gallup*, Oct. 28, 2014, and the full data set for the UConn Poll, cited in the May 5, 2014 press release from the University of Connecticut, “UConn Poll: Americans who know about Common Core are likely to be skeptical of it.”

More than five years after the Common Core State Standards were released, the goals and principles of CCSS continue to enjoy overwhelming public support. In August 2015, 90 percent of voters agreed that the U.S. should raise national academic standards to be more competitive with other countries. And roughly 80 percent of voters think both that the U.S. should develop academic standards with the input of teachers, school districts, and states, and that the country should create a set of high-quality academic standards or goals in English and math and let communities developed their own curricula and strategies for meeting the standards. An August 2015 survey by Public Policy Polling found that “The development and aims of the Common Core State Standards poll better than kittens (60% favorability) and baseball (63% favorability).” See memo from Jim Williams, Public Policy Polling, “Voters Nationally Support Provisions of Common Core State Standards,” Public Policy Polling, Raleigh, NC, Aug. 17, 2015, and the press release from the Center for American Progress, “Goals of the Common Core Are as American as Apple Pie, But Misinformation Remains Widespread, New PPP Poll Reveals,” Aug. 18, 2015.

50 Quoted in Eli Stokols, “Jeb Bush puts up a fight in Iowa,” *Politico*, August 14, 2015. Stealing a page from the satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, ThinkProgress at one point headlined their story on Bush’s remarks “Jeb Bush Calls Common Core ‘Poisonous,’ Forgets He Actually Supports It.” Jack Jenkins, “Jeb Bush Is Trying Really Hard To Sound Like He Doesn’t Support Common Core,” ThinkProgress.org, Aug. 15, 2015. After Bush professed that he no longer knew what the term “Common Core” means, the *Washington Post* editorial board noted wryly that “The former Florida governor then described what he does favor: ‘I’m for higher standards, state-created, locally implemented, where the federal government has no role in the creation of standards, content or curriculum.’ In other words, he’s for the Common Core.” Editorial Board, “The right and left poison Common Core with inflammatory rhetoric,” *Washington Post*, August 18, 2015.

51 Libby Nelson, “How the Common Core made Kafka way more popular,” *Vox*, May 8, 2014. Nelson reports that the Renaissance Learning study found that optional and illustrative stories, poems, plays, and nonfiction readings listed in a 13-page, single-space list of Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards were enjoying an upsurge in popularity in classrooms. However, she also reported that “books that saw the biggest popularity boost are generally still read by less than two percent of all students.”

52 Catherine Gewertz, “Final Testing Count: More Than Half of Students Will Take Non-Consortium Exams,” *Education Week*, Curriculum Matters blog, Feb. 5, 2015.

53 Remarks of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to the Leadership Institute Conference, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, “Seize the Day: Change in the Classroom and the Core of Schooling,” U.S. Department of

Education, Jan. 27, 2014.

54 Fred Lucas, “Kasich Calls Common Core Opposition ‘Hysteria,’” *The Blaze*, Jan. 16, 2015.

55 Interview with Karen Swallow Prior, “Q+A: Talking to Jeb Bush About Religious Freedom at Liberty,” *Christianity Today*, May 13, 2015. Sounding a bit like Arne Duncan, Jeb Bush believes that it is a misconception that the Common Core State Standards are “a federal takeover of education” and says that “criticisms and conspiracy theories are easy attention grabbers” about the Common Core. See, respectively, Reid J. Epstein, “Bush, Walker Clash in Style, Substance,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2015, and Lloyd Dunkelberger, “Jeb Bush Defends Common Core,” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, Oct. 17, 2013. He also told *Education Week* in August 2012 that “I don’t believe that Common Core is a federal initiative. A majority of the Republican governors support this . . . Forty-five states and the District of Columbia have signed on to this . . . I don’t think it’s coercive.” Alyson Klein, “A Conversation with Jeb Bush,” *Education Week*, Aug. 29, 2012.

56 Bill Bennett, “The Common Core: Setting the Record Straight,” *Forbes*, Forbes Opinion, Feb. 20, 2015.

57 David P. Gardner et. al, *A Nation At Risk*, National Commission on Excellence in Education, April 1983, p. 7.

58 *Ibid.*, p.27.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

60 John Jacob Cannell, *Nationally Normed Elementary Achievement Testing in America’s Public Schools: How All Fifty States are Above the National Average* (Friends of Education, West Virginia, 1987). The following year, Dr. Cannell published his study, in an edited version in an educational journal. John Jacob Cannell, “Nationally Normed Elementary Achievement Testing in America’s Public Schools: How All 50 States Are Above the National Average,” *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Summer 1988, pp. 5-9. For coverage of the Cannell study, see Edward B. Fiske, “Standardized Test Scores: Voodoo Statistics?” *New York Times*, Feb. 17, 1988.

61 William J. Bennett, “Common Core has no better alternative,” *CNN.com*, Dec. 2, 2014.

62 *Ibid.*

63 Kathleen Porter-Magee, “What’s Happening to Conservative School Reform?” *National Review*, Jan. 23, 2014. Porter-Magee adds that Bennett “went as far as using his position as secretary to promote a particular—and narrowly defined—vision for curriculum.”

64 William J. Bennett, *James Madison High School: A Curriculum for American Students*, U.S. Department of Education, December 1987, p.2.

65 William J. Bennett, *James Madison Elementary School: A Curriculum for American Students*, U.S. Department of Education, August 1988.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

67 Bennett, *James Madison High School: A Curriculum for American Students*, p.4; also see Bennett, *James Madison Elementary School*, p. 9, for the same sentence with respect to teaching a broad, deep, and effective core curriculum to elementary school students.

68 Bennett, *James Madison High School: A Curriculum for American Students*, p.7.

69 Remarks of President Ronald Reagan to the National Governors Association, Feb. 22, 1988, at: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=35450>

70 Chester E. Finn, Jr., “Bill Bennett, James Madison, and National Curricular Materials,” *Education Next*, May 25, 2011.

71 Bennett, *James Madison High School: A Curriculum for American Students*, p.3.

72 As education historian Diane Ravitch wrote in 2002: “The new consensus that undergirds the contentless curriculum is built on certain assumptions: that America lacks any common, shared culture worth speaking of, much less preserving; that there are not particular literary works that should be read by all students; that historical studies are problematic insofar as they require students to memorize and recall certain facts (this is derided as ‘rote learning’). The traditional curriculum could have been expanded to make it more inclusive of women and minority groups, but instead critics attacked its very

nature. They derided it for emphasizing a ‘canon’ and for expecting students to master a ‘body of knowledge’ (the notion of ‘mastery’ was itself suspect). Once the very idea of mastering a specific set of facts and texts was discredited, there was nothing left to teach but various methods, such as ‘basic skills,’ ‘discovery learning,’ ‘critical thinking,’ and ‘problem-solving.’” Diane Ravitch, “Education After the Culture Wars,” *Daedalus*, Summer 2002, pp. 15-16.

73 In a section of *James Madison Elementary School: A Curriculum for American Students* entitled “The Case for Content,” Bennett wrote: “No child can think critically or conceptually about American history, for example, if he doesn’t yet know who George Washington was, or what took place at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Information—basic content—must come first In the professional schools that train our teachers and develop our curricula, it is still possible—more than a decade after the nation’s disastrous educational experiments of the 1960s and 1970s—to see content-rich elementary student derided as ‘rote’ learning, to be told that children may be taught ‘higher-order thinking skills’ without reference to specific knowledge, or to hear that ‘mere facts’ of traditional school subjects are unimportant in more relevant general ‘understandings.’ These superstitions and prejudices still find their way into our children’s elementary school classrooms—in English programs that spurn serious literature in favor of bland basal readers and skill-workbooks; in social studies teaching that neglects history and geography to concentrate on mundane details of everyday life; in mathematics instruction that, however dressed up with fancy new strategies and slogans, is nevertheless restricted to years of repetitive, rudimentary arithmetic; in science lessons without scientific method; in art and music ‘experiences’ which rarely extend beyond undisciplined appeals to feelings and emotions; and in foreign language education that hardly exists at all. It sometimes seems that such curricula are constructed on the assumption that it doesn’t really matter *what* young children study so long as it is frivolous, unchallenging, and easily accessible. (pp. 3-4)”

74 Bennett, *James Madison High School: A Curriculum for American Students*, p.19.

75 The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts/Literacy state that “while the Standards make references to some particular forms of content, including mythology, foundational U.S. documents, and Shakespeare, they do not—indeed, cannot—enumerate all or even most of the content that students should learn. The Standards must therefore be complemented by a well-developed, content-rich curriculum consistent with the expectations laid out in this document.” *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*, Common Core State Standards Initiative, p.6. Robert Pondiscio of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute has called this admonition to educators “the 57 most important words in education reform, simply because the connection between knowledge and literacy is too little appreciated in our schools.” Robert Pondiscio, “Knowledge is Literacy: Why restoring the liberal arts to elementary school can help us raise better readers,” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 18, 2015.

Sol Stern of the Manhattan Institute reports that “With the exception of the Massachusetts’ 1993 Education Reform Act . . . no other state’s standards have ever explicitly called for a content-knowledge curriculum [Conservatives who oppose the Common Core] could find themselves being held responsible for undermining the only education reform of the past 40 years that has any chance of restoring traditional academic content to the classroom.” Sol Stern and Peter W. Wood, *Common Core: Yea & Nay*, pp. 34, 5. Editorial writers have also noted the oddness of conservatives opposing the Common Core, given the initiative’s support for content-rich curriculum. See Tom Dennis, “Our Opinion: Conservatives, of all people, should support Common Core,” *Grand Forks Herald*, Feb. 5, 2015.

76 Jeb Bush and Joel Klein, “The Case for Common Educational Standards,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 2011. As Natalie Wexler recently pointed out in the *New York Times*, the Common Core State Standards assert the conservative principle that background knowledge, and not just general “skills”, are integral to learning. Wexler writes that “The root cause of today’s narrow elementary curriculum [which pays little attention to history and science] isn’t testing, although that has exacerbated the trend. It’s a longstanding pedagogical notion that the best way to teach kids reading comprehension is by giving them skills—strategies like ‘finding the main idea’—rather than instilling knowledge about things like the Civil War or human biology....However, as the cognitive scientist Daniel T. Willingham and others have demonstrated, you can’t improve reading comprehension just by practicing free-floating skills. For students to understand what they’re reading, they need relevant background knowledge and vocabulary....While critics blame the Common Core for further narrowing curriculums, the authors of the standards actually saw them as a tool to counteract that trend. They even included language stressing the importance of ‘building knowledge systematically.’” Natalie Wexler, “How Common Core Can Help in the Battle of Skills vs. Knowledge,” *New York Times*, Aug. 28, 2015, p. A23.

77 David Weigel, “Bobby Jindal Warns That Common Core Standards Will Make Kids Un-Learn ‘American Exceptionalism,’” *Bloomberg*, Feb. 5, 2015; Dr. Susan Berry, “Bobby Jindal: ‘What Happens When We Stop Teaching American Exceptionalism to Our Students?’”, *Breitbart*, Feb. 6, 2015.

78 Jim Geraghty, “Jindal Sets Up an Early 2016 Cycle Clash on Common Core,” *National Review*, Feb. 9, 2015.

79 CCSS literacy standards in history/social studies quoted in Robert Rothman, *Fewer, Clearer, Higher: How the Common*

Core State Standards Can Change Classroom Practice (Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, MA, 2013), pp. 124-125.

80 Ali Elkin, “Rand Paul Lashes Out At Common Core, 2016 Rivals in Fundraising E-mail,” *Bloomberg*, Jan. 29, 2015; Bill Barrow and Kimberly Hefling, “Fact Check: Myths in the political roar over Common Core,” Associated Press, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 26, 2015.

81 Ross Weiner, “The Common Core’s Unsung Benefit: It Teaches Kids to Be Good Citizens,” *The Atlantic*, March 5, 2014. See the Common Core State Standards strand CCSS.ELA-LITERACY RI.11-12.9 at: <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RI/11-12/>

82 The same question has puzzled Sol Stern of the Manhattan Institute who notes that “The most hopeful part of the new standards is that they reject the instructional malpractice that prevents public schools from fulfilling their historic mission of producing literate American citizens who know something about their country’s history and its republican heritage. Contrary to the conservatives’ complaints, the Common Core is, in fact, a document that the founders would approve.” Sol Stern and Peter W. Wood, *Common Core: Yea & Nay*, pp. 7-8.

83 Lamar Alexander, “Let’s fix No Child Left Behind, end Common Core mandate,” *The Tennessean*, July 3, 2015.

84 It is noteworthy that when Lamar Alexander was making the case for reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind law in 2011 and 2012, he was already indicting the U.S. Department of Education for acting like a “national school board.” Yet at the time, Alexander cited the spread of the Common Core State Standards as evidence that more control of education should be returned to the states because they were “both highly capable and highly motivated”—rather than suggesting states had been forced to adopt the Common Core because of a fictitious federal “mandate.” See Lamar Alexander, “A Better Way to Fix No Child Left Behind,” *New York Times*, Sept. 26, 2011; and Lamar Alexander, “NCLB Lessons: It Is Time for Washington to Get Out of the Way,” *Education Week*, January 5, 2012.

85 Lamar Alexander, “America 2000: An Education Strategy,” U.S. Department of Education, April 1991, p.1; also see Alexander’s opening statement to a Press Briefing for the Regional Reporters’ Association, America 2000, April 19, 1991. Alexander opened the press briefing for regional reporters on the release of the America 2000 plan by saying “My main challenge is going to be to help a city that has grown accustomed to nine-second sound bites and hundred-hour wars to get accustomed to a nine-year crusade, or the idea of one.” When Secretary Alexander testified before the House Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education on June 18, 1991, his prepared statement on page two said “let me reiterate that America 2000 is not just another Federal program. It is a nine-year crusade—one that is already beginning in some places and is going to fan out quickly across the country.” If his plans for an educational crusade needed reiteration, Alexander added on the next page of his prepared testimony, “America 2000 is not just another Federal program. It is a nine-year crusade to help America move itself toward the National Education Goals.”

86 Lamar Alexander, “What We Were Doing When We Were Interrupted,” in John F. Jennings, ed., *National Issues in Education: The Past is Prologue* (Phi Delta Kappa and the Institute for Educational Leadership, Bloomington, Indiana and Washington, DC, 1993), p. 4.

87 Julie A. Miller, “Bush’s School Plan is ‘Lamar’s Baby,’ Participants Agree,” *Education Week*, June 5, 1991.

88 Diane Ravitch, *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen’s Guide* (The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 1995), p.xi.

89 Diane Ravitch, “Adventures in Wonderland: A Scholar in Washington,” *The American Scholar*, August 1995, Vol. 64, No. 4, p.513. Ravitch reports (p. 497) that in 1991 Lamar Alexander “asked me to join his team. We would start a crusade to improve education, he said, and my assignment would be to put the topic of standards high on the nation’s agenda.”

90 Office of Educational Research and Improvement, “World Class Standards for American Education,” U.S. Department of Education, October 1992, OAS 92-6024. Ravitch reports that the “pamphlet was distributed to every school in the country.” Diane Ravitch, *National Standards in American Education*, p. 211, ft. 11.

91 Diane Ravitch, “The Search for Order and the Rejection of Conformity: Standards in American Education,” in Diane Ravitch and Maris A. Vinovskis, eds., *Learning from the Past: What History Teaches Us About School Reform* (The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1995), pp. 185-186.

92 Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education* (Basic Books, New York, 2010), pp. 235-236. Ravitch did not announce her opposition to the Common Core State Standards until the end of February 2013, nearly three years after the standards were released. Ravitch declared her opposition to the standards in her blog. Even then, Ravitch professed that “I will continue to watch and listen. While I cannot

support the Common Core standards, I will remain open to new evidence. If the standards help kids, I will say so. If they hurt them, I will say so. I will listen to their advocates and their critics.” Diane Ravitch, “Why I cannot Support the Common Core Standards,” February 26, 2013, at: <http://dianeravitch.net/2013/02/26/why-i-cannot-support-the-common-core-standards/>

93 “Address to the Nation on the National Education Strategy,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George H. W. Bush (1991, Book I)*, April 18, 1991: 395-399.

94 Kevin R. Kosar, *Failing Grades: The Federal Politics of Education Standards* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 2005), p. 97.

95 Diane Ravitch, “The Search for Order and the Rejection of Conformity,” p. 186; Diane Ravitch, “Adventures in Wonderland: A Scholar in Washington,” p. 514.

96 Diane Ravitch, “The Search for Order and the Rejection of Conformity,” p. 185.

97 Lamar Alexander, “What We Were Doing When We Were Interrupted,” p. 16.

98 Lamar Alexander, “America 2000: An Education Strategy,” U.S. Department of Education, April 1991, pp. 15-16, pp. 29-31.

99 Lamar Alexander, “What We Were Doing When We Were Interrupted,” p. 5.

100 Statement of the Honorable Lamar Alexander, Secretary, U.S. Department of Education, June 4, 1991, in *Factors Affecting U.S. International Competitiveness*, Hearings before the House Committee on Ways and Means, Part 1 of 2, 102nd Cong., 1st session, Serial 102-70, p. 202. Long before the Obama administration’s Race to the Top program provided incentives to adopt the fledgling Common Core State Standards, the Bush administration’s America 2000 proposal provided powerful incentives to communities to adopt the national standards and national tests that President George H.W. Bush had promised to develop.

To receive the \$1 million federal grant to create a “New American School”, each community had to meet four federal requirements. A community could be designated as an America 2000 community and receive its \$1 million federal grant if it agreed to: 1) Adopt the six national education goals for itself; 2) Establish a community-wide strategy for achieving the six national education goals; 3) Develop a report card for measuring its progress; and 4) Demonstrate its readiness to create and support a New American School. Communities that met these conditions would be designated, by the governors of their states, as America 2000 communities.

Not surprisingly, the Bush administration anticipated that communities would adopt both the new national standards and new national assessments that were under development as part of their “strategy for achieving the six national goals” and compiling a “report card for measuring its progress.” According to the Education Department’s America 2000 plan, the mission of the private sector R&D teams that would help design the New American Schools was “to help communities create schools that will reach the national education goals, including New World Standards (on all five core subjects) for all students, as monitored by the American Achievement Tests and similar measures.” Lamar Alexander, “America 2000: An Education Strategy,” U.S. Department of Education, April 1991, p. 16.

101 “Address to the Nation on the National Education Strategy,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George H. W. Bush (1991, Book I)*, April 18, 1991: 395-399.

102 Lamar Alexander, “America 2000: An Education Strategy,” U.S. Department of Education, April 1991, p. 1.

103 Julie A. Miller, “Without Congress, E.D. Spent \$3.2 Million on America 2000,” *Education Week*, Nov. 4, 1992.

104 Lamar Alexander, “What We Were Doing When We Were Interrupted,” p. 4.

105 Lamar Alexander, “America 2000: An Education Strategy,” U.S. Department of Education, April 1991, p. 2.

106 Transcript of Press Briefing with Regional Reporters’ Association, “America 2000,” U.S. Department of Education, April 19, 1991, p. 15.

107 Quoted in Jeanne Allen, “Assessing the Bush Education Proposal,” *The Heritage Foundation*, Issue Bulletin No. 166, June 28, 1991, p. 8.

108 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

109 Cited in Lawrence J. McAndrews, *The Era of Education: The Presidents and the Schools, 1965-2001* (Univ. of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2006), p. 141.

110 Denis P. Doyle, "America 2000," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 73, No. 3, Nov. 1991, p. 185.

111 Republican National Committee, "Resolution Concerning Common Core Education Standards," Adopted by the Republican National Committee, April 12, 2013. On August 8, 2014, the RNC issued a second anti-Common Core resolution that turned William Bennett and Arne Duncan's repeated warnings about the problem of "dumbed down" state performance standards on their head. The RNC resolution hailed "activist parents" in Indiana, Missouri, South Carolina, Oklahoma, and North Carolina who had "realized that their children's curriculums had been 'dumbed down' by implementation of the Common Core Standards." The 2014 RNC resolution went so far as to declare that "the mothers, fathers, and other citizens engaged in this [anti-Common Core] effort are, through their activism, following in the footsteps of the Founders." Republican National Committee, "Resolution Commending Parent Activists on Anti-Common Core Victories," Aug. 8, 2014.

112 Republican Party Platform of 1992, "The Vision Shared: The Republican Platform, Uniting Our Family, Our Country, Our World," adopted Aug. 17, 1992, at: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25847>

Secretary Duncan has cited many of the same historical precedents as the 1992 Republican Party platform for the federal role in education. To take one example, in an October 2009 speech to the National Association of State Boards of Education Secretary Duncan said: "American leaders have always considered education to be an important priority. They've always believed that a strong and innovative education system is the foundation of our democracy and an investment in our economic future. This national commitment to education predates even the ratification of the Constitution. In the Northwest Ordinance governing the sale of land in the Northwest Territories, the fledgling government required townships to reserve money for the construction of schools. In the middle of the Civil War, President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act to create land grant colleges and universities. Today, those institutions are some of the best teaching and research institutions in the world. In 1944, President Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Program. We know it today as the G.I. Bill. As much as anything, the G.I. Bill has built the longest period of economic growth in our nation's history. In 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik. They showed the world that they were leading the space race. President Eisenhower and Congress responded by establishing NASA. But they also funded efforts to create new curriculum and programs to advance mathematics and science in our schools. They understood that education would help us win the Space Race—and any other race." Secretary Arne Duncan's remarks to the National Association of State Boards of Education, "Partners in Success," U.S. Department of Education, Oct. 16, 2009.

113 Text of Diane Ravitch speech, "Developing National Standards in Education," reprinted in the April 20, 1993 *Congressional Record/Senate*, pp. 7898-7901.

114 *The Administration's Education Reform Proposal*, Hearing before the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, Senate Hearing 102-146, 102nd Cong., 1st sess., April 23, 1991, p. 16.

115 Julie A. Miller, "Administration Says It Lacks Funds To Support Goals Panel," *Education Week*, Sept. 4, 1991.

116 Seen Diane Ravitch's prepared statement in *Telecommunications and Education*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Communications, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, Senate Hearing 102-1001, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess., July 29, 1992, p.12.

117 Ravitch, a lifelong Democrat, was an unusual appointee for the Bush administration. But as she testified in 1992, she believed "Education must be bipartisan, and everything I have done in my conduct in office has been to promote a bipartisan approach to education. I think that education is much too important to get caught up in any kind of divisive issues." *Telecommunications and Education*, Subcommittee on Communications, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, Senate Hearing 102-1001, 102nd Cong., 2nd session, July 29, 1992, p. 17.

118 Robert Rothman, "Standards and Testing Report is Hailed, Criticized," *Education Week*, Feb. 5, 1992.

119 Lawrence J. McAndrews, *The Era of Education: The Presidents and the Schools, 1965-2001*, p. 143.

120 *Ibid.*, p. 143.

121 Robert Rothman, "Standards and Testing Report is Hailed, Criticized," *Education Week*, Feb. 5, 1992.

122 Diane Ravitch's experience at the Department was that the majority party in Congress was quick to reflexively dismiss the proposals of the President's if the president was from the opposing party, and that Democrats would become

infuriated if the Republican administration sought to use its executive authority on its own—two themes that resonate in today’s education wars with respect to the House Republican majority and their relationship with President Obama. Ravitch recalled that “Dealing with House members and their staffs was a constant ordeal; the majority had been in power continuously for forty years, and they—especially their staffs—exhibited the arrogance of uncontested power . . . They were especially enraged at the thought that President Bush wanted to be ‘the education President,’ a prospect that brought sneers and a determination to block anything that the Department proposed. The attitude of House members was that they (and they alone) decided every educational issue and the Department did their bidding; under no circumstances was the Department to have a program that did not emanate from the Democratic majority in Congress. So, for example, when Secretary Alexander awarded competitive grants for teacher-training academies in subject areas (math, science, history, English, geography) without asking permission first, the House Education and Labor Committee punished the Department by cutting millions of dollars in discretionary funds. This activity, they said, was unauthorized by Congress and amounted to ‘politicization’ (anything that they didn’t like was characterized as ‘politicization,’ but nothing that they themselves did—like directing federal funds to their favorite causes or harassing administration officials—ever amounted to ‘politicization’).” Diane Ravitch, “Adventures in Wonderland: A Scholar in Washington,” p.505.

123 Letter of U.S. Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander to Congressman Robert H. Michel, Sept. 30, 1992. Reprinted in 138 *Congressional Record* 29119, Sept. 30, 1992. Conservative columnist George Will uncharacteristically botched the history of Alexander’s 1992 warning about creating a “national school board.” In Will’s retelling, Alexander urged Bush “to veto proposed legislation to expand federal involvement in K-12 education.” Will seems unaware that Bush and Alexander had in fact vigorously promoted national standards, national assessments, and expanded federal involvement in federal education for the better part of two years, prior to House Democrats adding national OTL standards to the America 2000 legislation. George F. Will, “Education is the business of the states,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 8, 2015.

While Lamar Alexander has warned about the dangers of the U.S. Education Department acting like a “national school board” on numerous occasions since October 1992, he was not the first Republican leader to use the national school board meme. In 1991, during his confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court, Judge Clarence Thomas was questioned about a 1988 speech in which he had stated that the Supreme Court had made “itself the national school board, parole board, health commission, and election commission.” *Nomination of Judge Clarence Thomas to be Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States*, Hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Part 2 of 4 Parts, J-102-40, Senate Hearing 102-1084, Sept. 17 and 19, 1991, p. 646. It would appear that some conservatives believe multiple branches and institutions in the federal government are capable of acting like a national school board. In the latest conservative iteration of the national school board meme, “the College Board will become a kind of unelected national school board” by virtue of controlling Advance Placement exams. See Stanley Kurtz, “APUSH Revisions Won’t Do: College Board Needs Competition,” *National Review*, July 30, 2015.

124 Diane Ravitch, “National Standards: ‘50 Standards for 50 States’ Is a Formula for Incoherence and Obfuscation,” *Education Week*, Quality Counts at 10: A Decade of Standards-Based Education, Vol. 25, Issue 17, Jan. 5, 2006, p. 54. Lesley Arshnt, Secretary Alexander’s communications adviser for America 2000 similarly argues that “the Bush administration was successful at one thing in education and failed at everything else. They staked the ground around standards and national goals and began a conversation that raised the profile of education.” Quoted in Patrick J. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy* (University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2006), p. 73.

125 Cited in Diane Ravitch, “Standards in U.S. History: An Assessment,” *Education Week*, Dec. 7, 1994, p. 48.

126 Lynne V. Cheney, “The End of History,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 20, 1994.

127 Richard F. Elmore, “The Politics of Education Reform,” *Issues in Science and Technology*, Fall 1997.

128 Kevin R. Kosar, *Failing Grades: The Federal Politics of Education Standards*, p. 5. In a 2006 op-ed for the History News Network, Kosar similarly concluded that “While national education standards may make good sense as policy, politically they would appear to be as doomed as they were 15 years ago.” Kevin R. Kosar, “National Education Standards . . . They’re Back!” *History News Network*, March 13, 2006.

129 Quoted in Joel Klein, *Lessons of Hope: How to Fix Our Schools* (HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2014), p. 257. Checker Finn’s version of the adage explaining why national standards would never happen was: “The right dislikes anything ‘national’ while the left is skittish about anything objective.” Chester E. Finn Jr., “The Shanker national education standards,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 9, 1997, p. A14.

130 In this study of the roots of Republican advocacy at the federal level for national standards and model curriculum, I have not covered the efforts of George W. Bush’s administration to influence reading instruction in elementary schools through the Reading First program, originally enacted as part of the 2002 No Child Left Behind law. The Reading First

program, while not related to the national standards movement, nonetheless fits squarely in the GOP tradition that began in the Reagan administration with Secretary William Bennett of seeking to influence curriculum at the federal level. It is no small irony that a number of the most outspoken conservative critics of the Obama administration's purported federal "overreach" on "curriculum" were themselves Bush administration political appointees in the U.S. Department of Education when the department implemented Reading First, a controversial program that, unlike the Obama administration's support of the Common Core State Standards, was explicitly prescriptive about curriculum. (See Bill Evers, Kent Talbert, and Robert Eitel, "Education hornets' nest: Creating a national K-12 curriculum," *The Hill*, May 9, 2011. Evers was Assistant Secretary for Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development at the Education department from 2007-09; Kent Talbert and Robert Eitel were, respectively, General Counsel and Deputy General Counsel from 2006-09).

As recounted by Sol Stern in his history of the Reading First program, the initiative provided \$1 billion a year in federal grants to state education agencies over a period of six years to reading programs in 5,700 high-poverty elementary schools. Reading programs were eligible for federal funding if they conformed to the principles of "scientifically based reading research," but that statutory requirement landed the department smack in the middle of the reading wars. Rigorous scientific evidence had documented that programs which taught phonemic awareness and phonics tended to be more effective in teaching reading to disadvantaged students than many widely-used reading instruction programs, such as whole language literacy and balanced literacy. While Stern notes that the Reading First program was "not an actual mandate—no state or school district was ever forced to join the program," he describes Reading First as "a \$1 billion per year federal bribe to get districts to finally begin doing what they should have been doing all along . . . [using] scientifically based [reading] instruction in [elementary school] classrooms." Sol Stern, *Too Good to Last: The True Story of Reading First*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, March 2008, pp. 11-19. Mike Petrilli (who, like Evers, Talbert, and Eitel, also was a Bush administration appointee) has been candid about the impact of the Reading First program on curriculum. "Federal officials *did* prevent states from using certain programs, programs not based on scientific research, and advised them to look for better ones, just as Congress intended," Petrilli writes. "That was the whole point." Michael J. Petrilli, "Hooked on Hysterics: Reading First, politics second," *National Review*, April 19, 2007.

While Stern was a supporter of Reading First, he is under no illusion that the Obama administration's encouragement to states to adopt the Core Common State Standards even remotely interferes with curriculum at the local level as the Reading First program did—and he is not shy about telling his fellow conservatives so. Stern writes: "One part of NCLB, the Reading First *program*, offered extra money to states on the condition that their schools only use programs and curricula approved by the Bush administration's Education Department. Let's not mince words about President Bush's NCLB: this education reform *really* was all about federal 'bribes' and coercion of states and localities . . . Very few of the conservative critics and politicians now attacking the Common Core for the sin of federal dictation of education policies have ever protested the imposition on the states of the far more restrictive NCLB mandates. Most critics haven't even acknowledged that NCLB went miles further along the road to federal control of education than anything called for in the Common Core . . . The authors [of the Common Core State Standards] were acutely aware that U.S. education law forbids the federal government from creating curricula for the schools. (Never mind that in the case of NCLB's Reading First program, the Bush administration willfully ignored the prohibition)." Sol Stern, *Common Core: Yea & Nay*, pp. 27,28, and 36.

131 Kevin R. Kosar, *Failing Grades: The Federal Politics of Education Standards*, p. 81.

132 Chester E. Finn Jr., "Agenda-Setters and Duds: A Bully Pulpit, Indeed," in Frederick M. Hess and Andrew P. Kelly, eds., *Carrots, Sticks, and the Bully Pulpit* (Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, MA, 2011), p. 220. Finn concludes that Lamar Alexander's "well-intended" America 2000 initiative "turned into worse than a washout. It discredited an important reform. The left-wing history standards that emerged ...were condemned by a near-unanimous vote of the U.S. Senate. (The lone nay-caster later claimed he had misunderstood what he was voting on!) The English standards were so weak that Clinton education secretary Dick Riley terminated the federal grant to finalize them. The geography standards were fine, in one sense, but were also the size of the Chicago phone book and seemed to redefine all of human knowledge as part of geography, rendering this subject (seldom taught seriously in U.S. school anyway) essentially unmanageable....just about everyone in Washington concluded that national standards (and tests) are a political nightmare, best shunned." *Ibid.*, p. 220.

133 Diane Ravitch, "The Search for Order and Conformity: Standards in American Education," in Diane Ravitch and Maris A. Vinovskis, eds., *Learning from the Past: What History Teaches Us About School Reform*, p. 188.

134 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

135 Lyndsey Layton, "Some states rebrand controversial Common Core education standards," *Washington Post*, Jan. 30, 2014.

136 Brandon Wright, "Mike Huckabee quotes about education," *Flypaper* blog, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, May 6, 2015.

137 Diane Ravitch, “National Standards: ‘50 Standards for 50 States is a Formula for Incoherence and Obfuscation,” *Education Week*, Quality Counts at 10: A Decade of Standards-Based Education, Vol. 25, issue 17, p. 54. In a Q&A that accompanied her commentary, Ravitch also pointedly observed, “Let’s face it, reading is reading, regardless of what district you live in.” “Reconsidering National Standards, Curricula, and Tests: A Talk with Diane Ravitch,” *Education Week*, Jan. 18, 2006.

138 Emily Richmond, “Schools on U.S. military installations raising standards, tracking students beyond high school,” *Hechinger Report*, June 21, 2015. Richmond, the public editor for the National Education Writers Association, reports that children in military families move an average of six times between kindergarten and high school.

139 Gov. Jan Brewer, “The Long Term Security of America Depends on the Quality of Education Given to Military Families,” *The Daily Caller*, June 25, 2015.

140 Paul Gattis, “Redstone Arsenal to Gov. Robert Bentley: We Support Common Core,” *The Huntsville Times*, May 20, 2015.

141 Andrew Ujifusa, “New Standards Ease Political Pushback in South Carolina,” *Education Week*, Vol. 34, Issue 32, June 3, 2015, pp. 1, 25. Also see Blake Neff, “Common Core is Dead in SC . . . Or Is It?” *Daily Caller*, March 13, 2015.

142 Edward Fiske, “Reagan Agenda: Taking New Tack,” *New York Times*, Jan. 27, 1988, p. B8.

143 David Whitman, “The GOP doesn’t want to leave any child behind—just the Obama programs that might help them,” *Hechinger Report*, April 9, 2015.

144 The Collaborative for Student Success released Bennett’s radio spot in early March 2015. The full text of the ad, “A Message from Bill Bennett” is at: http://forstudentsuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/CSS-IA-SecB-March2015.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_source=cfss&utm_content=11+-+print&utm_campaign=Daily+Roundup-3-5-15&source=Daily+Roundup-3-5-15

145 Quoted (with a link to a video of Jeb Bush’s remarks) by anti-Common Core blogger Shane Vander Hart, “Jeb Bush’s Flawed (Common) Core Values,” *Caffeinated Thoughts* blog, March 18, 2015. Bush’s comments come at the 13-minute mark of his talk with the Nashua, New Hampshire Chamber of Commerce, an event held at Integra Biosciences: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RnaEhHvBfrQ&feature=youtu.be>

146 Nick Anderson, “Unions Criticize Obama’s School Reform’s Reliance on Tests, Charters as ‘Bush III,’” *Washington Post*, Sept. 25, 2009.

147 Quoted in Blake Neff, “Flip-Flop-a-Bee? A Quick Look at Huckabee’s Common Core Evolution,” *The Daily Caller*, May 9, 2015.

148 John J. Miller, “The Education Ex-Governor,” *National Review*, Feb. 21, 2011.

149 Jeb Bush remarks on MSNBC’s “Morning Joe” Show, Sept. 27, 2011.

150 “Obama’s ‘Race to the Top’: Who’ll blink first: the unions, or the White House?” *Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 2009.

151 Jennifer Rubin, “The fight over the Common Core standards is misguided,” Right Turn blog, *Washington Post*, April 21, 2014.

152 Not even the staunchest Common Core advocate anticipated that implementing this sea-change in standards and assessments would be seamless. Teachers especially have faced a heavy burden of teaching to new standards and preparing students for new assessments in a relatively short period of time. Still, it is important to distinguish between problems particular to the Common Core, such as the administration of new computer-adaptive assessments linked to the Common Core, and perennial problems that arise whenever states adopt new standards. To cite a couple of examples in the latter category, numerous textbook publishers have falsely claimed over the years that their instructional materials are rigorous and carefully aligned with state standards when in fact they are dumbed-down textbooks, poorly aligned with state standards, and dotted with goofy inaccuracies and ideologically-loaded material—as has been the case with some instructional materials that are allegedly aligned with the CCSS. See Diane Ravitch’s seminal study of the textbook industry, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (Knopf, New York, 2003), and David Whitman, *The Mad, Mad World of Textbook Adoption* (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Sept. 2004), introduction by Diane Ravitch.

Similarly, the press has been filled with reports about frustrated parents who are unable to assist their children with their

math homework due to instructional shifts under the Common Core--Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal has complained that the math worksheets his 7-year old son brought home from school required him not just to do math computation but to explain how he derived his correct answers using several steps.

Parents of K-12 students today are too young to remember that such frustrations with math instruction long predate the Common Core. In fact, 50 years ago, in 1965, singer and satirist Tom Lehrer had a hit song called "New Math." In the introduction to the song, Lehrer, who himself was a Harvard-educated mathematician, explained "in the new approach, as you know, the important thing is to understand what you're doing, rather than to get the right answer." The chorus of "New Math" went: "Hooray for New Math, New-hoo-hoo Math, It won't do you a bit of good to review math. It's so simple, so very simple, that only a child can do it!"

153 There is mounting evidence that publishers are falsely claiming that their textbooks are carefully aligned with the Common Core State Standards. A review of 80 mathematics textbooks by EdReports found that just 11 textbooks met expectations for alignment with the Common Core. See Matt Collette, "The Great Common Core Textbook Swindle," *Daily Beast*, July 8, 2015. For a rigorous, peer-reviewed study of "Common Core-aligned" mathematics textbooks for fourth graders, see Morgan S. Polikoff, "How Well Aligned Are Textbooks to the Common Core State Standards in Mathematics," *American Educational Research Journal*, May 6, 2015. Professor Polikoff's study found "substantial areas of misalignment; in particular, the textbooks studied systematically overemphasize procedures and memorization relative to the standards, among other weaknesses."

154 National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto NAEP Scales: Results From the 2013 NAEP Reading and Mathematics Assessments*, NCES 2015-046, IES, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, July 2015, pp. 1-2.

155 Paul E. Peterson and Matthew Ackerman, "States Raise Proficiency Standards in Math and Reading: Commitments to Common Core may be driving the proficiency bar upward," *Education Next*, Vol. 15, No. 3, Summer 2015.

156 U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has noted that NCES "studies have also found, not surprisingly, that effective implementation of a new curriculum takes time. Many of our evaluations, for example, build in a practice year in which schools or teachers get used to implementing the curriculum and supporting materials." Remarks of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to the Leadership Institute Conference, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, "Seize the Day: Change in the Classroom and the Core of Schooling," U.S. Department of Education, Jan. 27, 2014.

157 "Schools/Districts Improve in Third Year of Unbridled Learning Assessments and Accountability," Kentucky Department of Education, News Release No. 14-094, Oct. 3, 2014, p. 9. Performance on the ACT is one widely-used benchmark of college readiness and Kentucky is one of a few states that require all 11th graders to take the ACT.

158 Zeyu Xu and Kennan Cepa, *Getting College and Career Ready During State Transition Toward the Common Core State Standards*, American Institutes for Research, Working Paper 127, March 2015, pp. 15, 21.

159 Tom Loveless, *The 2015 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well are American Students Learning?* Part II, Vol. 3, No. 4, Brown Center on Education Policy, The Brookings Institution, March 2015, p. 25. For overviews of initial state results on the new Common Core-linked assessments, especially the Smarter Balanced assessment, see Peter Cunningham, "Rising to the Challenge of New Tests," *Education Post*, July 29, 2015; and Christine Armario, "As Common Core results trickle in, initial goals unfulfilled," *Associated Press*, Aug. 29, 2015.

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