

When the Circus Descends

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We are pretty familiar with this story: A perfectly sensible if slightly boring idea is walking down the street. Suddenly, the ideological circus descends, burying the sensible idea in hysterical claims and fevered accusations. The idea's political backers beat a craven retreat. The idea dies.

This is what seems to be happening to the Common Core education standards, which are being attacked on the right because they are common and on the left because they are core.

About seven years ago, it was widely acknowledged that state education standards were a complete mess. Huge numbers of students were graduating from high school unprepared either for college work or modern employment. A student who was rated “proficient” in one state would be rated “below basic” in another. About 14 states had pretty good standards, according to studies at the time, but the rest had standards that were verbose, lax or wildly confusing.

The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers set out to draft clearer, consistent and more rigorous standards. Remember, school standards are not curricula. They do not determine what students read or how teachers should teach. They are the goals for what students should know at the end of each grade.

This was a state-led effort, supported by employers and financed by private foundations. This was not a federal effort, though the Obama administration did encourage states to embrace the new standards.

These Common Core standards are at least partially in place in 45 states. As is usual, the initial implementation has been a bit bumpy. It's going to take a few years before there are textbooks and tests that are truly aligned with the new standards.

But the new initiative is clearly superior to the old mess. The math standards are more in line with the standards found in the top performing math nations. The English standards encourage reading comprehension. Whereas the old standards frequently encouraged students to read a book and then go off and write a response to it, the new standards encourage them to go back to the text and pick out specific passages for study and as evidence.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which has been evaluating state standards for more than 15 years, concluded that the Common Core standards are “clearly superior” to the old standards in 37 states and are “too close to call” in 11 more.

But this makes no difference when the circus comes to town.

On the right, the market-share-obsessed talk-radio crowd claims that the Common Core standards represent a federal takeover of the schools. This is clearly false. This was a state-led effort, and localities preserve their control over what exactly is taught and how it is taught. Glenn Beck claims that Common Core represents “leftist indoctrination” of the young. On Fox, Elisabeth Hasselbeck cited a curriculum item that supposedly taught students that Abraham Lincoln’s religion was “liberal.” But, as the education analyst Michael J. Petrilli quickly demonstrated, this was some locally generated curriculum that was one of hundreds on a lesson-sharing website and it was promulgated a year before the Common Core standards even existed.

As it’s being attacked by the talk-radio right, the Common Core is being attacked by the interest group left. The general critique from progressives, and increasingly from teachers’ unions, is that the standards are too difficult, that implementation is shambolic and teachers are being forced into some top-down straitjacket that they detest.

It is true that the new standards are more rigorous than the old, and that in some cases students have to perform certain math skills a year earlier than they formerly had to learn them. But that is a feature, not a bug. The point is to get students competitive with their international peers.

The idea that the Common Core is unpopular is also false. Teachers and local authorities still have control of what they teach and how they teach it. A large survey in Kentucky revealed that 77 percent of teachers are enthusiastic about the challenge of implementing the standards in their classrooms. In another survey, a majority of teachers in Tennessee believe that implementation of the standards has begun positively. [Al Baker of The Times interviewed a range of teachers in New York and reported](#), “most said their students were doing higher-quality work than they had ever seen, and were talking aloud more often.”

The new standards won’t revolutionize education. It’s not enough to set goals; you have to figure out how to meet them. But they are a step forward. Yet now states from New York to Oklahoma are thinking of rolling them back. This has less to do with substance and more to do with talk-radio bombast and interest group resistance to change.

The circus has come to town.