

# ***Fellow Travelers Of Totalitarian Education***

## **Is The One Size Fits All *Common Core* Degrading American Education?**

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October 7, 2014

Many educators and stakeholders in K-12 education almost blindly follow and support trends in the field that are being promoted by the various centralized bureaucracies of education. We think that many of these “followers” are *fellow travelers* of those who have statist or totalitarian goals- either in education or in government more generally.

We purposefully chose this terminology because it reminds us of its earlier use as applied to worries about a somewhat different kind of totalitarianism- that of Communism.

Our focus on this subject now is in reaction to the imposition of ***Common Core State Standards***<sup>1</sup> by the U.S. Department of Education in what we regard as an unlawful and unconstitutional process that will establish a one-size-fits-all curriculum for all public schools and some private ones as well. Forcing these standards on the states is a totalitarian exercise well beyond anything done before.

Beyond the criminal aspects of these policies, we argue that they are unwise from a number of standpoints. We are not opposed to national curricula if they are voluntary and pluralistic. In what follows we expand on these ideas.

### ***They Are Confused***

By *Confused* we refer to the fact that most players in the education field are not fully aware of the condition of primary and secondary education within the United States nor are they keeping abreast of technological and methodological trends affecting its future. Moreover, many participants have been taken in by various political and social agendas that are overly centralized and are arguably harmful to this important sector of American life.

Confusion is often the result of being misinformed or of being ignorant of the relevant issues. Those who teach in and administer public and private schools are often less competent than what parents and other stakeholders expect. Such shortcomings are often not obvious to the general public or to others relying on the systems. Consider the following areas of weakness among these educators:

- The list begins by considering the cognitive ability levels of entering college freshman according to their intended majors. Of 27 academic disciplines *Education* ranked 26<sup>th</sup> in terms of students’ aggregate SAT scores.<sup>2</sup> Only *Agriculture* was lower, at 27<sup>th</sup>.
- Then consider the skill levels of newly trained educators- those who have completed degrees from education departments of colleges and universities. In California, for example, new teachers are required to pass the CBEST examination, which is a 10<sup>th</sup> grade competency

test in reading, writing and mathematics. A significant fraction of entering teachers fail the CBEST.<sup>3</sup> (This author took and passed this test in 2004.) But aren't teachers supposed to be college graduates with at least 16<sup>th</sup> grade skills?

- In many jurisdictions, holders of teaching credentials are eligible to teach but those with only academic degrees (including advanced degrees) in the subjects to be taught are excluded from consideration. (For that reason, this author was once blocked from public school employment, but was able to teach physics and mathematics in a private high school.)
- Politically “progressive” influences in many school systems have led to a de-emphasis of the instruction of American history and civics. This not only leaves the students relatively ignorant of American laws and traditions, but it also preserves the biases and lack of knowledge of the teachers in these areas as well. It often puts teachers in the position of being susceptible to education policies that are not only ineffective but that are sometimes illegal and/or unconstitutional.
- Almost totally lacking in the preparation of school staff and officials is any emphasis on the economic aspects of education. As a result there is little concern about the benefits of cost efficient operation of schools and other educational services.

These and other weaknesses of public educators (and some private ones as well) leave them more as a part of the problem rather than being reformers in search of solutions.

### **The Appeal Of Totalitarianism**

We use the relatively old phraseology *Fellow Travelers* because it conveys a nuanced meaning much like its use during the 1950's when it was applied to the Communist menace that worried many Americans. Here we use the term with respect to statist or totalitarian philosophies of education—particularly those that match the *One-Size-Fits-All* label.

To better understand these folks it is helpful to understand those philosophies first. We see three characteristics that motivate policy makers towards these statist systems:

- Through a misunderstanding of economics, many educators seek economies of scale that require the imposition of uniformity across the community, region, state or nation. We are now witnessing a “power grab” to bring uniformity of curricula from the state levels to the federal. The vehicle is, of course, the ***Common Core State Standards***. We would not generally refer to a common curriculum within a school district as totalitarian, but as a common curriculum is imposed on larger and larger demographics and geographies the totalitarian labeling becomes more and more appropriate. Thus ***Common Core*** is totalitarian because it is now being required nationally.
- To impose an education system that teaches their *politically correct* totalitarian political, social, cultural and economic philosophies in preference to others not so favored.
- To undermine the legal framework of K-12 education through subversion of the Constitutional and statutory provisions therein.

## **Who Are They?**

Why would we use the label *fellow traveler* anyway? We believe that there are many observers of K-12 education who get swept along by the propaganda put forth from the education establishment who have not carefully considered the issues. They're the *fellow travelers* who have been "taken in."

Our first encounter with the concept of *fellow travelers* dates to the 1950's when many Americans were worried about subversives within the U.S. government.

In terms of the advocacy of Communist revolution to overthrow the United States government, former FBI director J. Edgar Hoover defined "fellow traveler" as this:

"...someone not a potential Communist or influential advocate for Communist views but who agrees with some of those views."<sup>4</sup>

## **Some Of Their Species**

In terms of K-12 education we can identify some types of these *fellow travelers* of totalitarian education policies:

- Those who want academic standards to be mandated by the federal government to be uniform across the United States- such as advocates of the ***Common Core State Standards***, which prohibit curricular variations more than 15% from the published requirements.
- Those who want class sizes dictated at the state or federal levels.
- Those who would impose credentialed teachers on students over those with academic degrees.
- Those who oppose school vouchers.
- Those who oppose charter schools.
- Those who oppose for-profit schools.
- Those who oppose patriotic exercises at school.
- Those who want more dietary regulations enforced at schools.
- Those who claim the U.S. Constitution is a mutable living document.
- Those who oppose teaching civics.
- Those who oppose teaching about the founders.
- Those who promote identity politics.
- Etc.

Most of these naïve folks are seemingly well-intentioned educators or are other stakeholders who have not had the opportunity to become very well informed about education policies. If they had a broader perspective, many would oppose the totalitarian approaches and possibly work against them. Or at least take a more cautious view of them.

### **The Education Establishment Resists Progress**

K-12 education in the United States is largely a government function and sometimes that of non-profit private organizations. It is rarely provided by for-profit enterprises. In most other economic sectors, for-profit firms dominate with some services and products coming from the non-profit or governmental sectors. In fact, in most economic sectors the government does not participate.

To us “progress” would move the education sector into the free marketplace of capitalism while reserving a role to the government to do what it can do best: Provide funding. A system of vouchers would be the means by which all parents could have the responsibility of choosing their children’s schools and other educational services.

The education establishment consists of many interest groups that are politically active. Teachers’ Unions, Associations of School Boards and Parent Teacher Organizations are the most important. Their interests are both pecuniary and ideological. They have been forceful opponents of vouchers and other forms of school choice. They often display their hatred of capitalism and even resist teaching much about it in their schools.

### **Common Core Degrades American K-12 Education**

A number of scholars have reviewed the published standards from *Common Core* and found them wanting.<sup>5 6</sup> This author has also published a review that goes farther and recommends the consideration of the ACT organization’s tests and standards as a national “curriculum” that states and other educators could use on a voluntary basis without federal interference.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Common Core Advances Their Totalitarian Agenda**

Until the recent imposition of the *Common Core State Standards* in nearly all states, public education was more or less centralized at the state level. Depending on the state, statewide control of school operations had some totalitarian aspects- such as uniform textbook selection, uniform curricula and certain administrative functions. Federal involvement had been limited mainly to supplementary funding and relatively loose testing requirements- such as is included in the *No Child Left Behind* legislation.

To the extent that *Common Core* remains in control of various state’s curricula and instruction, those jurisdictions have put themselves under federal control that is uniform across the states. In other words, they have put themselves under totalitarian control.

### **Who Are The People Pushing This?**

To get a better understanding of these activities it is helpful to know something about the various individuals and organizations involved in this push towards totalitarian K-12 education.

First we consider some of the people who have played significant roles in the development, adoption, and enforcement of the *Common Core State Standards*.

- Bill Ayers: This education professor from the University of Illinois (former domestic terrorist and self-described communist with a small “c”) has been involved with some of the proponents of *Common Core*. During the 1990’s and early 2000’s he worked with Barack Obama, first in the Chicago Annenberg Challenge and later in the Chicago Public Education Fund.
- David Coleman: Co-founded the Grow Network with Jason Zimba and then obtained a \$2.2 million contract from the Chicago Public Schools (run by Arne Duncan) in 2001. Co-founded Student Achievement Partners with Jason Zimba and Susan Pimentel in 2007 that in 2008 solicited Bill Gates to “bankroll” their *Common Core* proposals. He has been the lead author of the English standards under *Common Core* and now is CEO of the College Board that is busy “modifying” the academic standards used in the SAT and other tests affecting K-12 education.
- Arne Duncan: This former professional basketball player worked in the Chicago Public Schools administration in the 1990’s and became its CEO in 2001. During that time he befriended neighbor and basketball enthusiast Barack Obama. As CEO of the CPS he gave contracts to Coleman and Zimba’s Grow Network. More recently, as Secretary of Education, in 2010 he led the *Race to the Top* effort to coerce states to adopt the *Common Core State Standards*.
- Bill Gates: Through his foundation, dozens of grants were given to other non-profit players with the understanding that they would push Common Core and make it a national standard. This was partly the result of being solicited by David Coleman in 2008 to help the *Common Core* proposals become national standards.
- Barack Obama: Worked with Bill Ayers in the Chicago Annenberg Challenge project in the 1990’s and later in the Chicago Public Education Fund. Befriended Arne Duncan in the late 1990’s as Duncan was working his way up in the Chicago Public Schools administration. In his role as president he has supervised the adoption of *Common Core* through the *Race to the Top* competitions.
- Jason Zimba: Co-founded the Grow Network with David Coleman and then obtained a \$2.2 million contract from the Chicago Public Schools (run by Duncan) in 2001. Co-founded Student Achievement Partners with David Coleman and Susan Pimentel. He has been the lead author of the mathematics standards under *Common Core*.

We don’t have enough information to give details about the planning that these individuals cooperated in. But we find it very curious that most of these individuals that had Chicago connections over a decade ago are now heavily involved with the implementation of the *Common Core State Standards*.

We also find it troubling that all of the above individuals appear to be left leaning political progressives. Why is there no representation from the political middle or right? How can these standards be in “Common” if their authors have no input from other parts of the political spectrum. Hell, there aren’t even any average Democrats weighing in!

### **Supporting Organizations Funded By The Gates Foundation**

We found an interesting article in *Mother Jones* detailing the destinations of some \$200 million in grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation- all in the support of *Common Core*.<sup>8</sup> Bill Gates is surely

well intentioned but he seems poorly informed about the efficacy and legality of imposing **Common Core** on the states. Wouldn't you count him among the *fellow travelers*?

Among the organizations cited in the Mother Jones article there were a number of "Think tanks/advocacy groups." Of those, here are the ones that received approximately \$1 million or more:

- American Enterprise Institute
- Council for a Strong America
- Foundation for Excellence in Education, Inc.
- Fund for Public Schools, Inc.
- James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute
- National Association of State Boards of Education
- Research for Action, Inc.
- The Aspen Institute, Inc.
- The Education Trust
- Thomas B. Fordham Institute
- U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

In total the *Mother Jones* list of recipient Think Tanks and Advocacy Groups sums to over \$41 million received from the **Gates Foundation** for their support of **Common Core**. Nearly all of this money was spent after the heavy-handed tactics were successfully applied to coerce adoption of the **CCSS**. It suggests that proponents in the **Gates Foundation** were worried that the standards would unravel without a heavily subsidized campaign of support.

Some of the notables caught up in the **Common Core** controversy who still support it include:

- Chester Finn and Robert Pondisco of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute
- Gov. Jeb Bush of the Foundation for Excellence in Education
- William Bennett, who penned a recent op-ed favoring it
- Chris Christie, Governor of New Jersey

We don't understand how these serious people could support **CCSS** except to think that they have not carefully studied the details of it. Why would anyone support something like this that is academically

wanting and that was established by legally suspect means? Surely they're not fans of this kind of totalitarianism? They must be misinformed.

### **If That's Failure, What Does Success Look Like?**

Implied or written between the lines of the foregoing is the suggestion that there are better alternatives that sensible leaders of education could be developing and offering. First, let's consider that success is not a single system. There are many ways to instruct, many ways to develop curricula and many ways to organize schooling. Let's look at just two of the aspects: instructional methods and curricula.

### **Traditional Tutoring Is The Best Instructional Method But Expensive**

Until the advent of group instruction, tutoring had always been the primary instructional format for primary and secondary education. Following the development of group instruction, which resulted from the Protestant Reformation, tutoring was still the preferred method for learning but was considerably more expensive than group instruction. As a result, age based group instruction became the cost effective format for educating the masses. And as a result, group instruction has been by far the most common mode of K-12 schooling.

Homeschooling, which is a version of tutoring, has been gaining adherents in recent years and generally produces better-educated students than public or private schools that rely on group instruction.

### **Computers And Online Instruction Enable Cost-Effective Tutoring**

As in other fields, automation has ushered in alternatives to traditional methods of instruction. Distance learning and now online instruction allow expert instructors and other instructional materials to reach very large numbers of students. They can be used in conjunction with group instruction, but are flexible enough to be used individually- more or less on demand. In this latter case, students can self pace their learning and by doing so avoid the frustrations of falling behind or being bored by too slow a pace.

### **Local, State Based and National Standards To Consider**

According to the laws and customs of the United States, K-12 public education is something organized within states and their subdivisions. The federal government is specifically prohibited by statute from controlling curricula of public schools. The closest the US Government had come to violating these laws was with respect to its administration of the *Nation's Report Card*- more officially known as the *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)*. Its content standards could be used to create a curriculum, but federal officials had never done so nor had they put any undue pressure on states to adopt NAEP standards as curricular components.

The advent of the *Common Core State Standards* have now put the federal Education Department in violation of these laws because the *CCSS* are now required (if the various states want to keep their federal funding flowing).

This movement toward national standards by itself is not troubling when they are voluntary. In fact, there already exist a number of national curricula that are well respected. They include the tests and standards of:

- *The ACT* organization, which are specified and administered for grades 3 through 12.

- *The International Baccalaureate* program for primary, middle and secondary school levels.
- *Hillsdale Academy* through its *Reference Guides* that cover the years K – 12. There is no formal testing program of which we are aware. The Guides have been used in hundreds of schools in all 50 states as well as in schools abroad.
- *K12, Inc.*, which offers online instruction across the country.
- *A Beka Academy*, which provides its Christian oriented services and materials nationally.
- *The Well Trained Mind*, which is a nationally available book describing academic content for home educators providing a classical education in the Trivium format.

Thus we don't need the illegally imposed ***Common Core State Standards***. In a recent Heartland Institute Report we wrote about their defects as to being incomplete, incompetent and illegal.<sup>9</sup> Why embrace such *rubbish* when a variety of voluntary national standards are available for consideration? And why risk that *fellow traveler* designation by supporting totalitarian education?

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<sup>1</sup> We cite the ***Common Core State Standards*** organization for purposes of completeness. We do not regard their website as reliable. Here is the citation required by them to footnote the “standards.” Authors: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, Title: *Common Core State Standards*, Publisher: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington D.C., Copyright Date: 2010. The content is accessible at <http://www.corestandards.org>

<sup>2</sup> College Board, *2010 College-Bound Seniors: Total Group Profile Report*, accessible at <http://www.joshuakennon.com/sat-scores-ranked-by-intended-college-major-show-teachers-are-below-average/>

<sup>3</sup> Debra J. Saunders, *CBEST Idea For High School Exit Exam*, San Francisco Chronicle SFGate, March 26, 1999, accessible at <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/saunders/article/CBEST-Idea-For-High-School-Exit-Exam-3329128.php>

<sup>4</sup> J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It*, Kessinger Publishing, 1958.

<sup>5</sup> R. James Milgram and Sandra Stotsky, *Lowering the Bar: How Common Core Math Fails to Prepare High School Students for STEM*, A Pioneer Institute White Paper, #103, September 2013, p 7, access it at: <http://pioneerinstitute.org/download/lowering-the-bar-how-common-core-math-fails-to-prepare-high-school-students-for-stem/>.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Sandra Stotsky, *How Common Core's ELA Standards Place College Readiness at Risk*, A Pioneer Institute White Paper, #89, September 2012, p 2, access it at: <http://pioneerinstitute.org/download/how-common-cores-ela-standards-place-college-readiness-at-risk/>.

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<sup>7</sup> David V. Anderson, *Replacing Common Core with Proven Standards of Excellence*, Heartland Institute, Chicago, IL, October 1, 2014, accessible at <http://heartland.org/policy-documents/replacing-common-core-proven-standards-excellence>.

<sup>8</sup> A. J. Vicens, *Bill Gates Spent More than \$200 Million to Promote Common Core. Here's Where it Went*, September 4, 2014, accessible at <http://motherjones.com/politics/2014/09/bill-melinda-gates-foundation-common-core>.

<sup>9</sup> David V. Anderson, *Ibid.*