



Common Core standards are hard to top, despite the complaints

Still a good conservative idea

By Michael J. Petrilli

Back in 2010, when Wisconsin chose to adopt the Common Core state standards, it wasn't a difficult decision. While the Badger State has long led the nation on school choice, it has one of the worst records in the country on standards-based reform. Its reading and math standards were among the lowest in the country, and its tests among the easiest to pass — possibly explaining why Wisconsin's student performance mostly flat-lined over the 2000s while other states made significant gains.

Common Core gave Wisconsin a chance to start fresh, aim higher and catch up to leading states like Massachusetts.

The standards haven't changed over the past five years, but the political calculus certainly has. Opposition to the Common Core has become a cause célèbre of the Tea Party — both its organic grass roots and its more opportunistic fundraising factions. The main concern was the unfortunate role of the federal government in encouraging — some would say coercing — the states to adopt the Common Core via the \$4 billion Race to the Top initiative.

So it's not surprising that politicians — especially Republican governors — find themselves trying to triangulate between their anti-Common Core base and the business wing of the GOP, which sees these standards as important building blocks for stronger public schools and a more competitive economy.

Enter Gov. (and presumptive presidential candidate) Scott Walker. Walker has a history of successful triangulation, particularly around Obamacare. Rather than take the Medicaid money, as fellow Midwestern Govs. John Kasich and Rick Snyder did, he reformed Wisconsin's BadgerCare

See **PETRILLI** on page 14

Wisconsin can do better

By Leah Vukmir

I am no stranger to the debate over educational standards. My foray into politics began two decades ago as a mom who questioned standards and practices in my daughter’s elementary classroom. My grassroots efforts to educate other parents caught the eye of Gov. Tommy Thompson, who appointed me to the Model Academic Standards Board.

Our board created Wisconsin’s first educational standards in 1997, and I learned a great deal about the standards-writing process. Believing our children deserved more rigor, I joined the minority and voted against the board’s English Language Arts standards. Today, I look at the Common Core standards and once again believe our children deserve better.

Not exceptional

For a set of standards billed as world-class and internationally benchmarked, Common Core lacks the rigor and clarity found in many exceptional standards around the country

See **VUKMIR** on page 15



Editor’s note: Few issues have divided Wisconsin conservatives as much as the Common Core state standards. These educational benchmarks were adopted in 2010 as the basis for curriculum and student assessment in Wisconsin. The state’s old standards “were not considered ‘college and career ready,’” as the Legislative Fiscal Bureau noted in 2013. The bureau described the new standards as rigorous and detailed. But are they rigorous enough? And is it right for the federal government to push the states to adopt them? We’ve asked a Common Core proponent, Michael J. Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and a Common Core opponent, state Sen. Leah Vukmir (R-Wauwatosa), to make their cases.



Common Core standards lack rigor, hurt local control

Education Reform

From **PETRILLI** page 12

program to expand coverage to needy citizens without putting Wisconsin on the hook for budget-busting liabilities down the road.

He appears to be seeking a similar “third way” on Common Core. In his second inaugural address and in his State of the State address, Walker promised to push for the repeal of Common Core and replace it with even higher standards. In the meantime, he wants legislators to clarify that it’s up to school districts to decide what to teach.

In principle, Walker’s position is more than reasonable. Academic standards are the province of the states. And regardless of the standards — Common Core or something else — local control of curriculum remains sacrosanct.

But, in reality, there are three problems with his approach. The first is that it’s hard to “go higher” than Common Core because, while not perfect, its standards are quite good. The second is that the polarized nature of today’s debate makes the creation of new, better standards quite challenging, as other governors have learned. The third is that schools in Wisconsin have spent almost five years — and millions of dollars — implementing the Common Core. Throwing a wrench into their efforts now carries significant costs, in terms of dollars, disruption and morale.

Let’s take these issues in turn:

The standards are conservative

In 2010, we at the Fordham Institute reviewed the English and math standards of the 50 states and compared them to the Common Core. We’ve been doing similar reviews of state standards for 15 years. And the results? The Common Core standards were good enough to earn an A-minus in math and a B-plus in English, significantly better than the grades of three-quarters of the states, and on par with the rest. Meanwhile, Wisconsin’s English standards received a D from our expert reviewers, and its math standards received an F. They were among the worst standards in the country.

What makes the Common Core so strong? The math standards are solid on arithmetic, especially in the early grades, expecting students to know their math facts cold, to memorize their multiplication tables, to use standard algorithms, and not to use calculators until they are older.

The English standards ask schools to bring back rigorous content in history, science, art and music. That’s why E.D.

Hirsch Jr., founder of the Core Knowledge program and author of *Cultural Literacy*, is such a big fan. The standards ensure that students read great works of literature as well as solid nonfiction works, such as the nation’s founding documents.

Some Common Core opponents have thrown all sorts of accusations at the standards, most of which have been batted down by fact-checkers and educators. “They promote ‘fuzzy math.’” “They discourage Western literature.” “They weigh in on sex ed.” False, false, false.

That’s not to say that they are perfect. Some math standards have caused confusion in the classroom and among parents; there’s a legitimate debate about the level of math, reading and writing students need for college, and how to prepare students going to selective universities and/or into challenging science and math fields. But such blemishes call for tweaking, not a start-from-scratch overhaul.

Harder than it looks

But what about Walker’s desire to “repeal and replace” the Common Core with something higher? He might talk to a few of his fellow Republican governors about their experiences, which have not been pretty.

For all the hoopla, just a handful of states have proposed significant changes to Common Core, and none of them has written higher standards. South Carolina’s new draft standards have been widely panned, and they will probably need to go back to the drawing board. Oklahoma passed a bill that requires Common Core to be replaced with the state’s old standards while yet another set of standards is written. Missouri, which passed a bill to review and possibly replace the standards, seems unlikely to please both those who want high

standards and those who evaluate standards only in terms of how different they are from Common Core. And in Indiana, modifications to Common Core were met with skepticism from supporters and detractors alike, giving Gov. Mike Pence little political benefit.

The basic problem is that it’s impossible to draft standards that prepare students for college and career and that look nothing like Common Core. That’s because Common Core represents a good-faith effort to incorporate what the current evidence indicates students need to know and do to succeed in college or to land a good-paying job — and the milestones younger students need to pass to reach those goals. That’s why

**Math standards
are solid on
arithmetic,
expecting students
to know their
math facts cold.
The English
standards bring
back rigorous
content in history,
science, art
and music.**

See **PETRILLI** on page 16

From **VUKMIR** page 13

and around the world. Common Core did improve upon the standards developed in 1997, and many Common Core proponents like to point to this as the sole reason for adopting these new standards in Wisconsin. However, arguing that Wisconsin had to improve its standards is not the same as justifying the adoption of Common Core.

The most vocal critic of Common Core's English and Language Arts standards is Sandra Stotsky, a dissenting member of the Common Core Validation Committee. As a national expert on English standards, Stotsky has helped states write standards before and after the advent of Common Core. Her biggest concern is the Common Core's emphasis on teaching methods over actual knowledge/content standards. The pro-Common Core Fordham Institute echoed this in its review of the standards, stating that true content standards "would be more helpful to teachers."

Another major concern with the new English and Language Arts standards is their emphasis on teaching writing skills over reading skills. Stotsky believes this is backwards and flies in the face of established research. She contends, "The foundation for good writing is good reading." Increasing the time a student reads is the only way to improve both reading and writing.

Experts have also complained that the English standards are developmentally inappropriate at lower grade levels. Child psychologist Megan Koschnick points out that having children under the age of 7 "explain, justify and apply principles that are abstract in nature" can lead to stress because children that young don't have the emotional or intellectual capacity for such tasks. Stotsky echoed the sentiment, stating that it was unreasonable to expect elementary school students to make academic arguments.

The Common Core math standards are more worrisome. R. James Milgram, a math professor and another dissenting member of the Common Core Validation Committee, believes the Common Core math standards are a mixture of too much rigor in kindergarten and first grade and insufficient rigor through 12th grade. These standards, he believes, place children one to two years behind those of other countries and in no way make students "college ready," as the standards claim.

Another particularly troubling fact is that Common Core does not introduce algebra until high school. Most high-performing countries include algebra in their eighth grade standards. Studies from California State University show that one of the best indicators of college success is the level of math that students

complete in high school. Delaying algebra until high school will leave our students less prepared for college and lagging behind students in top-performing countries.

Jason Zimba, an author of the Common Core math standards, admitted that his group delivered "a minimal definition of college readiness." Before the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, Zimba said Common Core prepares students "for colleges that most kids go to, but not that most parents probably aspire to ... not for selective colleges."

With only 27% of Wisconsin public college students graduating in four years, we cannot afford to leave our children less prepared for post-secondary education.

Lack of local control

Until recently, public education in America was left to the discretion of the states. Unfortunately, Common Core represents the latest in a series of poorly executed federal interventions in education.

Defenders attempt to dismiss federal involvement by pointing to groups like the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association as the two state groups primarily charged with developing the standards. However, one cannot deny the federal government's role. After Common Core's development, the federal government provided two major incentives for states to adopt these new standards: Race to the Top funding and a waiver from the onerous requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act.

In a time of tight budgeting, many states were quick to grab the additional revenue. Adoption of Common Core became a silver bullet even for states that already had top-notch standards, including California, Indiana and Massachusetts.

The reach of federal involvement also extends into testing. Standards and tests go hand in hand. The federal government helped fund the development of the two tests aligned with the Common Core. According to Fordham's president (and my debate opponent) Michael Petrilli, federal officials will also review the tests. According to the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, federal officials will also review the tests.

Proponents of Common Core may simply shrug this off as only minor federal involvement that is in no way as intrusive as the No Child Left Behind legislation. I see no difference. Both cede power to national and federal interests. I believe students are best served when accountability occurs closer to home. State and local elected officials are closer to the people

**The stakes are
too high
for our state
and our students
to not reject
Common Core.**

See **VUKMIR** on page 17

Education Reform

From **PETRILLI** page 14

states that are sincere about wanting to aim higher would be smart to start with Common Core as a base for additions or refinements — as Florida did when it added calculus standards several years ago. But that won't be enough to please the Tea Party base.

Flavor of the month?

Starting from scratch also pulls the rug out from under educators who have spent almost five years implementing Common Core in their classrooms — and who see the standards as a big improvement over what the state required before. Several such educators spoke at a state Senate Education Committee hearing last March when legislators were contemplating creating a commission to replace the Common Core. Terry Kaldhusdal, Wisconsin's teacher of the year in 2007, told lawmakers, "At this moment, my kids are using Common Core state standards to understand that the roots of our republic go back to ancient Rome." Furthermore, he explained, "The curriculum was determined by the school board. The texts were determined by me."

According to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Michelle Langefeld, Green Bay's superintendent of schools, asked, if the Common Core was to be scrapped, where were schools going to get the money to implement something else?

Education professor Jeanne Williams, meanwhile, argued that "the standards are not perfect, but they are far more specific, focused and demanding" than what Wisconsin had before. She was right to say that backing away now would demonstrate that the "winds of political opinion" drive education decisions in the Badger State.

Teachers are all too familiar with the *fad du jour*. Policymakers promised them that Common Core would be different, that it would have staying power. They are right to be angry that, because of politics, years of hard work might be thrown in the trash bin — to the detriment of their students.

The way forward

If the primary conservative criticism of the Common Core standards is not their content, but their entanglement with the federal government, the best solution is not to dump the standards but to break up with the feds. In other words, get Uncle Sam out of the Common Core business.

Thankfully, that's exactly what Republicans in Congress are committed to doing. Both the House and Senate are working on reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind Act, and one major goal is to clarify that the Secretary of Education is to have no influence over state choice of academic standards. No "incen-

tives," no coercion. Nothing.

Wisconsin should give support to such efforts. Reining in the federal government is the right way to fix the legitimate concerns with the Common Core, while keeping its many benefits. Such measured, prudent action may not give satisfaction to the populist GOP base, but it would represent a truly conservative approach.

Michael J. Petrilli is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education policy think tank. He's also a research fellow at the Hoover Institution.

Leah Vukmir responds

While I admire Mr. Petrilli's unabashed determination to prop up the sinking S.S. Common Core, I disagree with a number of his points.

Dismissing the anti-Common Core movement as simply being Tea Party-led is incorrect and lazy. It echoes arguments by liberals in Wisconsin and nationally. Parents, teachers, school board members and elected officials from across the political spectrum have protested these standards. I find it hard to label the New York teachers union, the Washington Democratic Party and the National Education Association as members of the Tea Party.

Having poor standards is a reason to replace them, not a reason to adopt Common Core. We should strive to have true world-class standards that set us apart from other states. California, Massachusetts and Indiana already have standards that surpass Common Core. It can be done.

Failures by other states have no bearing on the success or failure in Wisconsin. We have been a leader in School Choice and welfare reform — areas where other states failed. Fear of failure has never stopped Wisconsin from doing what is right.

Schools districts that deviate from Common Core are at a disadvantage on state tests. That's why we need to give school districts flexibility to adopt standards and tests that best meet their needs. Funds used for teacher development and computer system upgrades would be needed no matter what tests were taken. They are not wasted costs. Local school boards, teachers and parents — not the state or federal government — should decide how to best deliver educational results.

While I welcome any changes Congressional Republicans can make to No Child Left Behind, states were already co-opted into Common Core. Many states adopted Common Core simply for the increased federal funding and flexibility. Any changes at the federal level should make it easier to dump Common Core, not save it.

From **VUKMIR** page 15

they serve.

The top-down approach to education ties the hands of local school districts and stifles innovation. While school districts are not required to adopt Common Core, any attempts to change these standards put the districts at a disadvantage.

All school districts will use the Smarter Balanced Assessment based on Common Core, a test whose price tag continues to rise. The more a district deviates from Common Core, the more it puts itself at risk on school-wide assessment scores. Teachers are in a similar predicament. There is no incentive for teachers to go beyond the Common Core standards because their own evaluation and pay are partially tied to how well students do on the test.

Common Core advocates may argue that these standards are the floor — the baseline — for acceptable knowledge, but we have to be prepared for the reverse: The incentives in play may make them the ceiling.

Lack of choice

Wisconsin has been a national leader in education reform. We empower parents to choose the best available education for their children. Through bold reforms like School Choice and Open Enrollment, we give parents the tools to chart brighter futures for their children.

The federal standardization of education through Common Core will negate the tremendous advantages conferred by School Choice and Open Enrollment. If proponents of Common Core succeed in full implementation, innovators at both the school district and classroom level will be reduced to assembly-line cogs.

Creating our own Wisconsin standards will not happen overnight, but we don't have to start from scratch. We know what exceptional standards look like. States like California, Indiana and Massachusetts have universally regarded standards that surpass Common Core.

We can harness a wealth of educational expertise in this state to develop great Wisconsin-based standards. At the very least, by writing its own standards, Wisconsin would afford school districts a choice between Common Core and the new Wisconsin standards.

Wisconsin standards won't solve every problem in education, but they would put Wisconsin back in the forefront of the education reform movement. We should also reform our testing requirement by giving schools more than one state testing option. This will allow both public and private schools the flexibility to choose the right test to fit local standards.

We cannot hesitate to do what is right for Wisconsin be-

cause we fear the federal government might rescind our waiver from the flawed No Child Left Behind requirements. The stakes are too high for our state and our students.

During our work of the Model Academic Standards Board almost 20 years ago, we grappled with the notion of whether to pursue Wisconsin standards or national standards. The answer then still rings true today: "While educational needs may be similar among states, values differ. Standards should reflect the collective values of the citizens and be tailored to prepare young people for economic opportunities that exist in Wisconsin, the nation and the world."

As elected officials, our duty is to meet that goal and finish the work of creating world-class educational standards for Wisconsin.

Leah Vukmir is a Republican state senator representing the 5th District in southeastern Wisconsin. She lives in Wauwatosa.

Michael J. Petrilli responds

Sen. Vukmir makes a reasoned and reasonable argument against keeping the Common Core standards exactly as is. While I don't agree with all of her critiques (for instance, the standards can't be "developmentally inappropriate" because the whole notion of "development appropriateness" is bunk), I certainly agree that they could be improved. What Sen. Vukmir doesn't do is make a compelling case for throwing out the Common Core, root and all.

For all the reasons explained in my essay, I believe that a sane, sober and, yes, conservative, approach would focus on improving the standards rather than starting from scratch. Sen. Vukmir, Gov. Walker and others could invite educators, parents, citizens and experts to suggest refinements to the Common Core. A public commission could work through the suggestions and vote on the ones that make sense — particularly if they are backed by strong research evidence.

The end product would almost surely represent an improvement over the current expectations, but would also maintain continuity that will be important to educators. Analysts could then determine whether the standards are so different from the Common Core as to necessitate a new set of assessments besides the Smarter Balanced tests to be used this year.

If that sounds like a reasonable compromise, beware: Hard line opponents will not be satisfied. That's because the issue, sadly, has entered the domain of the culture wars, and those wars don't tend to end in armistice.

The goal should be creating — and maintaining — great standards for Wisconsin's schools. Burning Common Core at the stake is not a promising strategy for achieving that end.