

Public Policy Assessment Common Core Standards

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Restoring Excellence to Education *A Historical Review and a Path Forward*

by Amy Edmonds

Foreword by Susan Gore, M.A.

In this paper Amy Edmonds tells how policies such as those found in the Common Core Standards [Common Core] have been promoted historically and here in Wyoming. She reminds us that centralized micromanagement *fails* to increase scores on achievement tests. Further, she calls to mind the simple truth that letting good teachers do their jobs increases academic growth.

We know kids are learning and growing when students, teachers and parents used words like “love learning,” “respected,” “exciting,” “unforgettable connections” and “rewarding.” Teacher Ellie Rubenstein used these words when she spoke about the years before micromanagement, when she was allowed to be creative in her work:

My first few years of teaching were incredibly exhausting but also extremely exciting and rewarding. Ten-hour workdays felt worth it. I was making a difference in children's and their families' lives. I was actively helping students love learning and forming unforgettable connections with students who would come back to visit me year after year to recall their time in my classroom and just chat. Also, at that time teachers were respected and highly regarded as hardworking professionals who dedicated their lives – yes lives – to children. I was proud to say, “I am a teacher.”¹ – Ellie Rubenstein

Unfortunately, love of learning can be regulated away. These days proponents of Common Core like to use the word “rigor,” as in, from various dictionaries [Miriam Webster, The Free Dictionary, Dictionary.com]:

“Harsh inflexibility in opinion, temper, or judgment;”

“Strictness or severity, as in temperament, action, or judgment;”

“Strictness, severity, or harshness, as in dealing with people.”

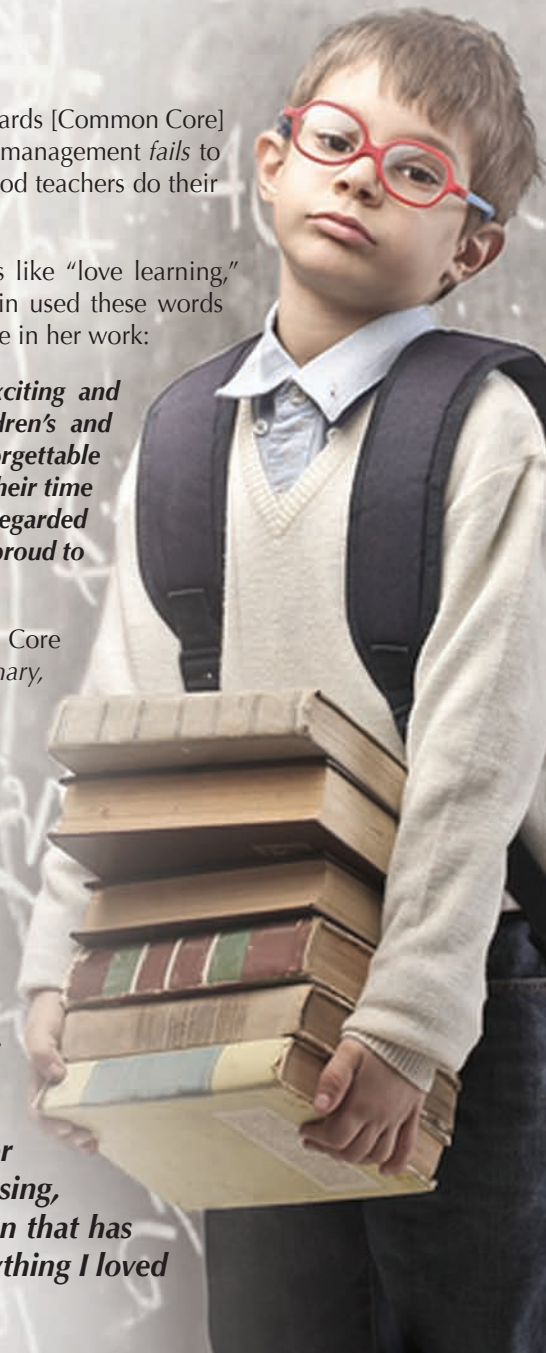
As Edmonds illustrates, rigor is exactly what centralized micromanagement is about. It is not good for students, and it drives capable teachers like Ellie Rubenstein out of their profession. This need not continue.

Introduction

“I was proud to say I am a teacher, but over the past 15 years I've experienced the depressing, gradual downfall and misdirection of education that has slowly eaten away at my love of teaching. Everything I loved about teaching is extinct.” Ellie Rubenstein



Wyoming Liberty Group



Ellie Rubenstein, a teacher in Highland Park, Ill., gained overnight notoriety when she posted a video she entitled, "In Pursuit of Happiness." In it Rubenstein tenders her resignation to school officials after discussing the decline in education she has seen over the past 15 years.

The details of Rubenstein's criticisms are telling. She describes "the depressing, gradual downfall and misdirection of education that has slowly eaten away at my love of teaching. The emphasis in education has shifted from fostering academic and personal growth in both students and teachers to demanding uniformity and conformity."

Describing the rise in bureaucratic commands, Rubenstein continues: "Raising students' test scores on standardized tests is now the only goal, and in order to achieve it the creativity, flexibility and spontaneity ... have been eliminated."

Rubenstein addresses the central themes that have propelled public education over the past half century – control and loss. The fight for *control* over the public education system has become a driving political agenda for every local, state and federal administration. But these political agendas have led to real and sustained losses for those closest to education; the loss of more and more parental rights and responsibilities, the long-term loss of "creativity, flexibility and spontaneity" for teachers like Rubenstein and the actual loss of a meaningful, whole and relevant education for the child.

The Battle for Control: A Historical Catalogue of Political Agendas

Public education in America has a long and winding history. The past half century has seen some of the most substantial shifts in control, shifts away from the local authority of parents and teachers and to the distant centralized, bureaucratic control of state and federal government. These shifts have a less-than-impressive track record of improving education and have exacted a steep sociological cost to American families.

Federal money and with it tighter federal control first began to take a serious foothold in locally managed

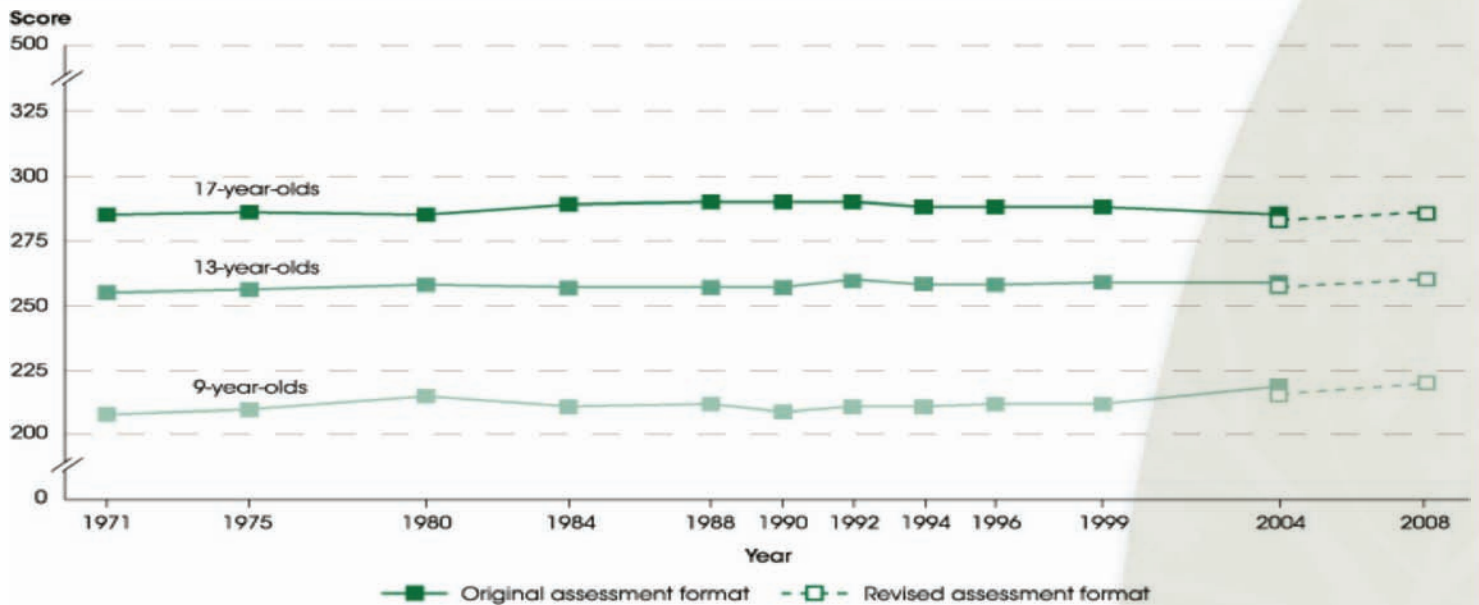
public education in the 1950s. Since then, parents and teachers have endured a continuous barrage of policy initiatives that compromise the effectiveness of teaching children and the absolute authority of parents to raise their children without interference from the state.

1960s

In 1965 President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as part of his "War on Poverty." ESEA marked the beginning of federal intrusion into multiple areas of education such as identifying and funding at-risk children and low-income schools while increasing per-pupil expenditures. Johnson described the law as: "The most sweeping educational bill ever to come before Congress. It represents a major new commitment of the Federal Government to quality and equality in the schooling that we offer our young people." ⁱⁱ

Under the cry of bringing equality to an educational system plagued by the fight over segregation, Johnson's "War on Poverty" began the ESEA program known as *Title 1: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged*, which is still in existence today. ESEA was the first major call for federal involvement in public schools. The Act, according to the Johnson administration, would provide more equitable economic and social opportunities for all students. ⁱⁱⁱ But in the almost five decades since it first became a reality in American schools, Title 1 funds have hardly fulfilled the promises made by the architects of Johnson's Great Society.

Take for instance the achievement gaps in average math scores between black and white public school students at age 9, which narrowed by only eight points between 1978 and 2004. ^{iv} The gap in average reading scores for the exact same demographic decreased by only six points. ^v So much for the big government promises made by President Johnson upon signing this federal behemoth: "By passing this bill, we bridge the gap between helplessness and hope for more than 5 million educationally deprived children." (Table 1) ^{vi} The promises of the Great Society have proven a failure; achievement scores have flat lined for over three decades!



1970s

In 1979, President James Earl “Jimmy” Carter, Jr., expanded the U.S. Office of Education’s role by making the Office of Education a Cabinet-level agency by signing the Department of Education Reorganization Act. In his address upon signing the Act, Carter stated: “The Department of Education bill will allow the Federal Government to meet its responsibilities in education more effectively, more efficiently and more responsively.”^{vii} This change initiated the current era of executive branch control of public education.

1980s

In 1983, during the Reagan administration, Secretary of Education Terrell Bell assembled the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which released “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform.” Bell’s report was used to raise national awareness of supposed failings in the public education system and sounded yet another government call to action and, therefore, more government control.

One of the report’s 38 findings served to undermine a key Reagan policy position – to eliminate the U.S. Department of Education altogether. Instead, one of the findings sought to cement the federal government’s control of local public education: “We believe the Federal Government’s role includes several functions of national consequence that States and localities alone are

unlikely to be able to meet.” The report continues: “The Federal Government has the primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education. It should also help fund and support efforts to protect and promote that interest.”

What started with President Johnson’s dream of a Great Society and evolved further under President Carter was now strengthened by Secretary Bell under Ronald Reagan’s watch.

1990s

In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed the “Goals 2000: Educate America Act,” a standards-based education policy that outlined eight “national” goals that would be achieved through “voluntary” government intervention (and government money) by the year 2000. Note that in the most creative nation in the world, a nation that had thrived in part due to its variety of educational goals, government set itself up to declare mono-goals and “standards” for the whole country. “Standards” and “accountability” were bywords employed to spread the presumption that government actors are smarter and know better -- than who? -- than you and me and the rest of us, apparently.

Federal legislation over the past three decades has worked effectively to normalize the creeping federal reach into education. Goals 2000 took yet another step forward by creating the National Education Standards

and Improvement Council, which was established to “certify and periodically review voluntary national content standards and voluntary national student performance standards that define what all students should know and be able to do.”^{viii}

Looking back on the lofty goals of Goals 2000, dismal performance and outright total failure in achieving most of these goals is all that remains. Goal 2000’s second goal was to increase the national graduation rate to at least 90 percent by 2000. Graduation rates nationally went from 73.7 percent in 1990 to 72.6 percent in 2000, a decrease of 1.1 percent.^{ix} Once again government’s promises failed.

Early 2000s

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a reauthorization of ESEA. Along with reauthorizing ESEA, NCLB included a host of new education reforms that focused on measuring accountability using Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). NCLB was even more prescriptive than Goals 2000 in that it required states to establish a set of statewide academic standards and benchmarks to establish above, at or below “proficiency.” Then states were to put in place a statewide standardized test to measure the proficiency level of all students based on those standards.

NCLB coined the newest educational buzzword – “accountability”—and brought with it a slew of federal consequences for local “underperformance.” Failure to meet measurable benchmarks triggered a series of required school-level actions, many of which required more and more administrative and teaching time spent on filling out forms and writing out plans rather than teaching students.

After a decade in place, NCLB also has left a legacy of government failure. Test scores have not seen significant improvements while graduation rates continue to remain steadily around 78 percent. One-

hundred percent proficiency in math and reading – one of the impossible-to-achieve pipedreams of NCLB – unsurprisingly has not been achieved.^x

2009-Present

On July 24, 2009, President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan announced the creation of “Race to the Top,” a \$4 billion competitive education grant for states featuring a veritable Gordian knot of attached federal strings.

This brings us to the most recent federal push, the Common Core State Standards Initiative. While other federal incursions into individual state education programs since the 1960s have been fairly straightforward in their mission, CCSSI is different in that proponents of those standards came up with a rather clever way of masking federal involvement. Most important, no federal legislation was used.

Rather, using the trade associations National Governor’s Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) as fronts for the progressive initiative, national public and private statisticians attempted to hide behind the ruse that Common Core was a “state-led” initiative with no federal or national connection.

Yet closer inspection shows large amounts of federal grant dollars flowing into the NGA and CCSSO from the very beginning, and federal Race to the Top dollars were also part of the federal hook.

Financial statements reveal that between 2010 and 2012 both trade associations received more than \$28.4 million in federal grant monies for their pet education initiatives, chief among them Common Core.^{xi xii} In addition, these organizations also received substantial donations from corporate fellows such as Microsoft, Apple and General Electric, Inc., as well as donations from such for-profit education giants as Pearson Education, Inc., and nonprofit education giants ACT and Educational Testing Service (ETS).

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The push to sell Common Core to the states did not stop with federal dollars, however. One of the leading national private organizations, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has also given the NGA and CCSSO more than \$11.4 million over the past five years to “support the Common Core State Standards work” and “work with state policymakers on the implementation of the Common Core State Standards.”^{xiii}

In a recent article for The Foundation for Economic Education, Lenore Ealy points out that the Common Core is:

A relentless and coordinated push by philanthropic and bureaucratic experts to shift authority and responsibility from local citizens and independent school districts to the far-removed high cover of central authorities. The Obama administration quickly tied Race to the Top dollars to Common Core adoption by the states, not only tainting the appearance of the Common Core’s voluntary roots but compromising their reality, too.^{xiv}

In a 2009 press release, Arne Duncan promised states a chance at \$4 billion in federal money if they simply implemented four earmarked reforms – one of them included “raising standards.”^{xv} At the time the grant was written, the Common Core State Standards Initiative was the only set of national standards that fulfilled the grant requirements, and was weighted for 50 points of the overall 500 points a state could receive. In an application where every point counted, placing the adoption of the Common Core standards on the same points level as raising scores in low-performing schools clearly showed the federal government’s priority to push the Common Core State Standards onto states using federal dollars.

Wyoming’s Path to the Common Core

When the latest federal Race to the Top program was revealed, states like Wyoming rushed to join the national standards movement with the hope of obtaining big-government money and attaining big-government

promises; promises of new standards that were – in the words of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – Fewer, Clearer, Higher.^{xvi} Outside of government, proponents like the Gates Foundation had been making spurious promises such as *fewer* overall standards, which were both *clearer* and at a *higher* level than all other state standards.

With the stroke of a pen in the spring of 2009, Wyoming Governor Dave Freudenthal and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jim McBride signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the backers of the Common Core State Standards Initiative, entangling Wyoming in the national Common Core State Standards.^{xvii} In joining, Wyoming promised to submit to the leadership of the Common Core initiative, submit to the development process of the standards as well as the national validation process. Ultimately, Wyoming was on the hook to comply with the rigid standards-adoption process with no path for Wyoming to directly impact the content of the standards themselves.

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The MOA, like the philanthropic powerhouse backing the Common Core, promised yet another round of decades-old “big dreams” including national standards that are “aligned with college and work expectations, so that all students are prepared for success upon graduating from high school” and “inclusive of rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills, so that all students are prepared for the 21st century.”^{xviii}

Note that the claim is to produce young people who will have economic utility. This is far from the American Dream that each person should become the most that he or she can be, according to a personal pursuit of happiness. Such dull materialistic thinking is characteristic of socialistic values.

The ambiguity of these promises seemed to fall on deaf ears among Wyoming’s public figures. Indeed, the exact words in the MOA were repeated time and

again by Wyoming bureaucrats in memos to describe the Common Core, leaving the reader to wonder if the proponents had even read beyond the MOA to the standards themselves.

The memorandum signed by the governor and state superintendent also stated very clearly that development of K-12 English Language Arts (ELA) and Math standards would happen at the national level spearheaded by the NGA and CCSSO, which would oversee the development-process group that included Achieve, ACT and the College Board.

States were encouraged to “provide input” with no real understanding of how that “input” would be used to shape or possibly change the standards. Instead, the memorandum laid out an airtight development and validation process that left no room for states to collaborate on the writing of new standards.

And governors and state education chiefs from all over the country signed-on, creating the illusion that states were leading the creation of the standards.

In notes dated April 29, 2009, and obtained from the Wyoming Department of Education (WDE), information from a teleconference call between interested states (including Wyoming) and CCSSO/NGA organizers noted that the MOA would not be made public until received by all the governors and state education chiefs. ^{xix} States were then given only three weeks to respond, granting no time for state policymakers to seek input from parents and teachers. The notes describe information from the call regarding the link between standards and curriculum: “CCSSO recognizes that standards are only one piece – the development of companion curricula and instructional materials should be addressed at a later date.”

The notes contain concerns expressed by callers regarding the rigid adoption process for the standards: “The MOA includes a commitment that member states

will ‘adopt’ the common core of standards. Clarification is needed on what ‘adopt’ means in different states.”^{xxi}

Issues arose even before the MOA was signed, however, as Wyoming statutes puts the setting and revising of Wyoming’s State Standards solely under the Wyoming State Board of Education (SBE). The SBE possesses no authority to delegate that statutory duty to the Governor or the State Superintendent. Yet the MOA was signed by the Governor and the State Superintendent with no consultation of the SBE.

This last fact was a potential sticking point for Superintendent McBride and the Wyoming Department of Education (WDE) in the spring of 2009. According to a briefing memo provided by the WDE, authored by WDE staff members Alan Moore and Christine Steele, concerns were raised to the Governor over the lack of involvement by the SBE in the apparent three-week rush to sign the memorandum with the CCSSO: “The Wyoming State Board of Education has not been part of the discussion regarding this project. They are charged with reviewing and adopting the state Standards. Signing the MOA before they are involved may be problematic.”^{xxii}

Problems arising from the Superintendent and Governor’s approval of the MOA and the SBE’s lack of involvement were never realized, however, and Wyoming’s compliance with the memorandum’s tight deadline and ridged adoption process continued through the summer of 2009.

In the SBE’s August 5, 2009, meeting, WDE staff updated the SBE on the standards revision process taking place and tied this process in with the Common Core State Standards for seemingly the first time publically. The Department established a timeline for adoption of these standards, beginning with Fine and Performing Arts, Foreign Language and Health. English Language Arts and Math, the two content standards covered by the Common Core standards, would not start being

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reviewed until April 2010 with a completion date set for January of 2012.^{xxiii}

In the January 14, 2010, teleconference meeting of the SBE, Superintendent McBride briefed the board on the state's Race to the Top application. McBride noted the award grant would be \$162 million, with \$81 million apportioned for school districts. He also stated that the WDE had applied for an \$11 million data grant the previous December, and he asserted the state had an excellent chance of receiving both grants.^{xxiv} Wyoming was in a race to receive large sums of federal dollars, which seemed to prompt the state into accelerating its own Common Core adoption timeline.

At the April 16, 2010, SBE board meeting, according to the meeting minutes, McBride stressed that Wyoming would "need to figure out how we can work with common core standards by 2015; otherwise, it could affect the federal dollars we receive."^{xxv}

On June 16, 2010, the SBE voted to approve the adoption of the Common Core state standards in what can only be interpreted as a premature vote to adopt standards that were not fully vetted across the state.

With that vote, the die was cast for the state to comply with the MOA and establish a farce of "reviewing" the standards over the next year. The vote ensured Wyoming would move forward with final adoption in 2011, despite the Board receiving (at the very same meeting) reviews from Wyoming content standard review teams as well as reviews by Wyoming teachers who participated in an online survey of the standards – both stressing areas of deep concern and a lot of unanswered questions such as:

"Still too many unknowns,"

"I would not accept the Common Core Standards as now written. Knowing there are changes coming, I would want to see them first before I could recommend the standards."

"I think there are too many questions about them. I think the developmental questions that need to be answered to accept them as is."

"Concept Development is not stressed enough."

"I hate it that Language Arts has been reduced to a set of skills. Literature does so much more in connecting us with the world and each other. Some of the skills (theme) are not developmentally attainable even in 9th grade without guidance. OUR KIDS ARE MORE THAN TEST SCORES."

"The research is not new from TIMSS [Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study] for years. We need to refine and streamline the curriculum and stop letting textbook companies dictate educational practices."

"From what source did these standards come? What are the ESSENTIAL standards that all regularly placed students must meet in order to make academic progress? How do these proposed standards apply learning opportunities that meet the needs of the students AND provide the essential knowledge the students must achieve? I know that I was never contacted to engage in this composition process. Who was?"

"You have to be kidding me. These standards are so poorly written that adopting them would be a joke. Nothing in them supports research based learning for grade levels. They are vague, untestable, and show no understanding of brain based research. Wyoming would be better off to adopt the NCTM math standards and have something that actually has some thought behind them. (Not to mention that Pearson Publishing is a sponsor – they looking to take more Wyoming money on poorly developed tests?)"^{xxvi}

Despite the board and the WDE continuing for the next year with an open comment period and meetings around the state to get public input, the timeline for adoption of the Common Core standards in Wyoming clearly show that the standards were adopted for compliance reasons and not in the interest of promoting quality education. In the process of adopting the standards, Wyoming did not compare the standards to other states high-quality standards. The idea of looking elsewhere for standards "fewer, clearer and higher" than those being pushed in the Common Core was never even entertained. Wyoming, like all of the other states, has had a half-century of learning how to swallow every federal hook, no questions asked.

In the second, final and identical vote by SBE at their September 23, 2011, meeting, the standards were approved with absolutely no changes made to the ELA and Mathematics content areas, which were copied and pasted verbatim from the original copyrighted Common Core State Standards into Wyoming's final approved standards. ^{xxvii} Despite what has been billed by proponents of the Common Core as a lengthy and open three-year process where parents and teachers were afforded the opportunity to comment, not one single change was made to the Common Core Standards in ELA and Math. Not one.

Wyoming's path to the Common Core is yet another loss for Wyoming's families. Parents, students and teachers who participate in the educational system on a daily basis were simply not allowed to participate in the process in any meaningful way. The die had already been cast.

The Race to the Bottom: Losses in the Classroom.

Through the past half century of political posturing for control over education, it is families and teachers who have come out the clear losers. Test scores remain flat, education spending continues to skyrocket and the once bedrock principle of local control is all but extinct and now merely given lip service by state and federal politicians. Bureaucrats far removed from American families and their children's classrooms are doubling down on control. Implementation of the Common Core is just another in a long line of government's empty, failed promises.

Ellie Rubenstein is one of the countless teachers and parents who have witnessed these losses firsthand. Rubenstein entered her career in education at the end of the Goals 2000 era and the beginning of No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top and the Common Core State Standards Initiative. She described the startling changes she has seen in the classroom over those years.

Curriculum is mandated, minutes spent teaching subjects are audited, and schedules are dictated by administrators. The classroom teacher is no longer trusted or in control of what, when or how she

teaches.... More and more we are being forced to administer paper and pencil tasks, multiple-choice tests that can be graded by a computer and skill and drill assignments that don't require or reflect higher level thinking. Authentic literature has been replaced with dry, uninteresting text and teachers are being forced to do away with constructive projects in order to fit in all those mandated instructional minutes and assessments.


Christy Hooley, a sixth-grade teacher from Green River, Wyo., has also witnessed the loss of creativity and freedom in the classroom. Hooley went into teaching because of a love for school and literature, and has been teaching for six years.

Hooley began her teaching career in Utah after NCLB had been put into place. At first, she didn't really notice any effects in her classroom. However Hooley admits that she, like many other teachers, did not always understand the federal and state programs that were being enacted in her classroom. For her, it was about focusing on her kids and getting through the busy days. But when she moved to Wyoming, she noticed a huge difference.

I was floored by how much testing was happening in our school and it wasn't me doing the testing, it was outside sources. Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) are given three times a year, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) also three times a year and Proficiency Assessment for Wyoming Students (PAWS) at the end of the year, along with other tests. I was floored at how much time was taken away from my teaching.

This past year things began to change for Hooley after she and other teachers were told about the Common Core and its development in the Green River school in which they taught. Hooley began to see that this new curriculum was much more than just *fewer, clearer, higher* standards. She quickly realized that something big was happening and that teachers were losing their local control and their local voice.

One of the people I really respect said, "let's just do it, that's what we have to do, do what they well us." That's where I came up with - look at us, we're like sheep. Do we really agree with this policy? Instead



we are given videos, propaganda to fire us up about how great this is.... Administrators showed us three videos, but we were never allowed to sit down and hash out if we think this is really good for our kids.

For Hooley, she couldn't just "do it" and instead started doing her own homework. When the Proficiency Assessment for Wyoming Students (PAWS) test was being put into place across the state several years ago, according to Hooley, teachers in her building sat down and "hashed out" what was wrong with PAWS. Hooley said the process was difficult, but teachers were able to sit down and make those changes and do what they knew was best for their students. It was a collaborative process in which every teacher participated.

But as Hooley learned more about the Common Core and the subsequent assessments that were coming after the implementation of the Core, she began to see a big problem with the complete lack of teacher input. The Common Core was clearly an edict not to be questioned or changed.

How is this going to increase the collaborating for our kids if there is no amendment process? When we are told they (teacher's lesson plans) all have to be common core and yet supposedly we have 15% we can add, yeah right, but that 15% is not going to be tested so that's the first thing that's going to go. And those are the things that are dear to most teachers, the things that bring out the citizenship of our students, Wyoming's history, and the geology of our state....that stuff's going to go away.

Hooley sent an email to colleagues she knew and had worked with, stating her concerns. A fellow coworker she admired sent back a reply that stunned her. It said, "Common core is going to be the law and the law is what we have to follow." Other colleagues, however, thanked Hooley for the information, and raised many of the same concerns. Hooley sat down with her administrator to talk about the email.

I left the meeting feeling that we would just have to agree to disagree. My administrator didn't tell me I couldn't share my views. A few of my colleagues said I should share my information with others, so I shared it in a staff meeting. That's when my administrator got up and said we were done. We

could not talk about the Common Core again.

For Hooley, it was the beginning of the end. "That was a part of what led me to not going back. I loved teaching. But I also want to get my kids out of the public schools right now." Hooley will not be returning to her building this fall; she has chosen to leave teaching for the time being and is working fulltime to remove Wyoming from the Common Core.

A teacher from Southeast Wyoming with 11 years of experience has also seen the loss of teaching freedom firsthand. She agreed to be interviewed for this work under the conditions of anonymity, as she does not feel free to speak openly about her concerns. She began her career teaching middle-school and high-school English, and went into teaching because she wanted to have a positive educational impact on students.

"I think the changes have been most difficult in the English classroom because when I first started I could choose any novel, any text. I had far more of a choice and I was only limited to what my colleagues were doing. As a working group, what we all decided, even within that I had free range."

The ability for this teacher to have a real impact (the original reason she got into teaching) on her students has continued to diminish. New "innovations" in the classroom have led to a loss in the personal one-on-one relationship between her as a teacher and her students.

"Guided reading is where we all discuss a book, after agreeing on what they want to read. Comprehension comes because they like the book and like discussing it. So when I do guided reading their test scores skyrocket. But now we have this computer system. We went away from the relationship part in guided reading to going to a computer and every teacher I know hates them. Teachers get into teaching because they like the relationships."

Just as discussed by Ellie Rubenstein, a teacher from Illinois, this Wyoming teacher also notes the detrimental effects on teacher-student relationships she has seen in teaching in her 11 years in the classroom – and adds she would make an important change to improve education:

"I just want to be able to have my creativity back. If I were to pick one thing- that would be it, allow me to teach like I know how it should be done."

Her thoughts on the implementation of the Common Core also sound very similar to those of Christy Hooley, the teacher from Green River. She noticed in late 2009 that staff development meetings were suddenly being centered on the Common Core.

Once you've been in the field, you come to realize that every few years there comes the "thing" that is going to chance everything – it's like the cure for cancer. And we all know it isn't going to work and this (Common Core) isn't going to work either. Anyone who has been in the field for longer than 5 years is skeptical, because you've seen the huge dump of resources and training and then you see all the stuff down the hall in a box covered in dust that once was "the greatest thing."

Judy Helmick, a 16-year veteran of teaching who ended her career in Dubois, Wyo., can also testify to the changes in public education. From 1973 to 1981, Judy took a hiatus from teaching. When she returned to the classroom in the fall of 1981, she was amazed at what she found:

"What I noticed was the programs – I was in a farm community – and there was all this special education stuff and special reading programs, there was so many programs. And kids were being pulled out of the classroom. Everything became about labels. Everyone was getting labeled, and the more labeling that happened, the more federal money the districts would get."

Helmick also has very strong feelings about the Common Core Standards, and what they will mean for children in the classroom.

"First I first heard about the Common Core there was all this talk about how it would make everyone college and career ready and that is was rigorous. I don't like the word rigorous; it's a pretty ugly word if you look it up. Everyone would be "common," the same. That just sent up real red flags because every child is different and learns at a different rate.

I don't like the idea of assuming the same format for every child. You have to make changes based on the child."

Through the past half century of political posturing for control over education, it is Wyoming families and teachers like Judy Helmick, Christy Hooley and others that have come out the clear losers. Test scores remain flat, education spending continues to skyrocket and the once bedrock principle of local control is all but extinct or merely given lip service by state and federal politicians (or openly denounced by progressives.) More and more control is being gained by bureaucrats far removed from Wyoming families and their children's classrooms. Implementation of the Common Core is just another in a long line of government's empty, failed promises. And through it all, parents and teachers are held captive in a system they can neither get out of nor work to change.

"Common Core is another expensive, out-of-touch and abstract educational notion foisted on parents, teachers and students."

Wyoming's Pathway Out

Common Core is another expensive, out-of-touch and abstract educational notion foisted on parents, teachers and students. But like mules stuck in the mud, those doing the foisting refuse to open their minds to the very facts and problems that occur when these abstract notions hit the reality of kids and teachers in the classroom.

Outraged Wyoming parents want release from a bureaucratic grip that squeezes the joy and achievement out of their children's education. The idea that a single elite group can get away with presuming to decide the educational fate of every one of the unique families across Wyoming enrages them. Our families, our culture and our faith are already with us, here in our communities in Wyoming, and they are under attack.

Regulation interferes with the simplest of initiatives. For example, if one home-school family should get together with another home-school family and hire a teacher, they would incur so many rules that they are in effect prevented from this commonsense means of advancing the education of their children in the way

they deem best. An educational monopoly managed by those who “know better” and enforced by police should have no place in Wyoming.

In our free society, competition must not be deemed illegal, nor must government actors be the sole voice in defining educational quality. Let public education and non-regulated private education exist side-by-side; let them cooperate and create; let them compete; and above all, let responsible leaders endorse the principle that parents together with teachers best determine what is right for their children.

The path to educational freedom for Wyoming invites fresh thinking. Here are a few action suggestions (this is not an exhaustive list) for restoring excellence to public and non-regulated private education:

1. State-Level: Deregulate private schools and homeschooling, allowing for a free and innovative private school system.
2. State-Level: Repeal the Common Core Standards in ELA and Mathematics. Remove Wyoming from the Smarter Balance Consortium.
3. State-Level: Wyoming’s application for a waiver under the U.S. Department of Education’s Conditional NCLB Waiver Plan should be amended to delete the Department’s four non-statutory conditions and include only the statutory requirements of 20 U.S.C. § 7861. ^{xxviii}
4. State-Level: Restructure the State Board of Education, making it an elected board. This would allow parents and teachers more representation statewide, not less – diffusing power over education rather than consolidating it.
5. State-Level: Recalibrate the state education-funding model to one that does not focus money at the district level, but rather serves as a model that creates an individual child-focused “backpack” for every education dollar spent. The money should be focused on the child, not the district. ^{xxix}
6. District-Level: Incentivize districts to support student/weighted “backpack” budgeting.

7. State-Level: Decrease the amount of required testing in the classroom.

8. State and District Level: Establish a separate charter-school authorizer independent of the district.

After half a century of failing to “fix” a system that is not subject to fixing via mistaken edicts, we understand better how to restore and promote excellence. First Principles recognize that educational guidance of children is properly the responsibility of parents and the teachers of their choice. We need to have the faith and humility to let the true experts, those closest to the children, implement love of learning.

The Wyoming Liberty Group’s next education policy brief will detail steps needed to move Wyoming off the road to educational serfdom and onto the road to educational freedom. ■

Endnotes

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