



# The Conservative Case for Common Core

By William J. Bennett

As the former Secretary of Education for President Ronald Reagan, I have been following the national debate over Common Core standards. The debate is getting hotter, but not always clearer. It's time to get clarity on some things that have been badly and sometimes mischievously muddled.

Let's begin with the ideas and principles behind the Common Core. These educational principles have been debated and refined over decades. First, we can all agree that there is a need for common standards of assessment in K-12 education. And we can all agree that there are common and shared truths in English, literature and math. Think of "We hold these truths to be self evident" as emblematic.

Nearly all Americans agree that to prepare a child for civic responsibility and competition in the modern economy, he or she must be able to read and distill complex sentences, and must be equipped with basic mathematical skills.

When I was chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities in the 1980s, I asked 250 people across the political spectrum what 10 books every student should be familiar with by the time they finish high school. Almost every person agreed on five vital sources: the Bible, Shakespeare, America's founding documents, the

great American novel "Huckleberry Finn" and classical works of mythology and poetry, like the Iliad and the Odyssey.

The same goes for math. Certain abilities—the grasp of fractions, decimals, percentages, ratios and the like—should be the common knowledge of all.

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**Federal intrusion and misleading rumors do a disservice to an effort that started in the states.**

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That's the fundamental idea behind a core curriculum: preserving and emphasizing what's essential, in fields like literature and math, to a worthwhile education. It is also, by the way, a conservative idea.

Governors, state education administrators and teachers used these principles as a guide when they developed a set of common standards that were later presented to the country as Common Core. Forty-five states signed up originally. But the process was contaminated by politics, and that brings us to the debate we have now.

In 2009 the Education Department created Race to the Top grants, federal funding for states that met certain educational benchmarks. To qualify, states

were required, for instance, to demonstrate that they had a common, high-quality set of standards. Common Core standards satisfied the criteria.

Critics accused President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan of dangling federal money to encourage states to adopt the Common Core. The administration never should have done this. It made a voluntary agreement among states look like a top-down directive from the federal government. But remember: The original Common Core standards were separate from the federal government, and they can be separated once again.

Conservatives have reason to be upset by this federal overreach. The Obama administration has run roughshod over individual rights and state sovereignty, on issues ranging from health care to climate change. But the federal intrusion into Common Core, however unwelcome and unhelpful, does not change a basic truth: Common, voluntary standards are a good, conservative policy.

Call it Common Core or call it something else, as Arizona has done by renaming its standards "Arizona's College and Career Ready Standards," but public schools should have high standards based on a core curriculum that is aligned with tests that are comparable across state lines. The U.S. has several types of national exams that assume at least some

common basis of knowledge and understanding. These exams—NAEP, AP, SAT and ACT—work and most of the country agrees that they are useful.

Why then is Common Core drawing such heavy fire? Some of the criticism is legitimate, but much of it is based on myths. For example, a myth persists that Common Core involves a required reading list. Not so. Other than four seminal historical documents—the Declaration of Independence, the preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address—there is no required reading list. Textbook companies have marketed their books disingenuously, leading many parents to believe that under Common Core the government mandates particular textbooks. Also not true.

The standards are designed to invite states to take control and to build upon them further. The standards do not prescribe what is taught in our classrooms or how it's taught. That decision should always rest with local school districts and school boards.

The principles behind the Common Core affirm a great intellectual tradition and inheritance. We should not allow them to be hijacked by the federal government or misguided bureaucrats and politicians.

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