

The Battle for National History Standards

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Abstract: The Common Core State Standards has revived the discourse of voluntary national standards, which in the discipline of history has been extremely contentious. What is the relationship between the federal government and the formulation of national history standards? National standards could be the key to raising student achievement.

The recent release of the Common Core State Standards has revived the discourse of voluntary national standards. The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) is a state-led effort that is being coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). Although the CCSSI has only released the math and English standards, it may release history standards eventually. The discourse of national history standards has been extremely contentious in the past. As a result, the CCSSI has distanced itself from the federal government, and it proclaims that the federal government has not had any part in developing the common standards.

Standards are what students need to know and be able to do. Since political ideology influences what one believes students need to know as well as be able to do, then different groups espousing different political ideologies will have a difficult time agreeing on standards for students. This paper will examine the following questions using a historical perspective: (a) What is the relationship between political ideology and national standards? (b) What is the relationship between the federal government and the formulation of national history standards? (c) What is the relationship between the Common Core State Standards and the federal government? Standards in education are influenced by the federal government, and specifically the United States Department of Education. They are also influenced by political ideologies of those charged with their development. This paper will examine the role of political ideologies and the federal government in the development of national history standards and the Common Core State Standards. National standards could be the key to raising student achievement. Examining the role the federal government plays in the creation of national standards may help one understand the aims of the Common Core State Standards.

Method

A literature search was conducted in May 2010. The databases ERIC and Education Full Text were searched. The search terms used were *political ideology*, *national history standards*, and *Common Core State Standards*. In order to find more relevant literature to answer the first research question, the additional search terms *right* and *politics*, and *left* and *politics* were used. No limits were placed on the year of publication. However, limits were placed on peer reviewed and full text. Thirty-one articles were selected to read based on their abstracts and of these thirty one articles, only five were chosen to include in this paper. There were no results for Common Core State Standards. Since no results were found, a Google search using the search term Common Core State Standards was conducted. Two websites with relevant information to the research questions were found. Additionally, previously read books were included that related to the research questions.

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Since *A Nation at Risk* was integral to the standards movement, it was necessary to include it. Therefore, a Google search using the search term *A Nation at Risk* was conducted. Also, after reading the literature, it was determined that it was necessary to find the original article written by Lynne V. Cheney. A Google search using the terms *Lynne Cheney* and the *National History Standards* was conducted.

Political Ideologies

One's political ideology affects one's ideas about education. Postmodernism rejects a monolithic narrative. According to Aronowitz and Giroux (1991), "Lyotard has described postmodernism as a rejection of grand narratives, metaphysical philosophies, and any other form of totalizing thought" (p. 60). Political groups compete for their narrative to dominate education. Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) explain that reforms about what students should know are focused on producing one's culture through education. The political spectrum consists of the Right, which are conservatives, and the Left, which are liberals. One's political ideology depends on how one views personal and economic issues. There are several different political groups that identify as conservative or liberal. Each political group has a different perspective on education. This paper will focus on only a few groups that have been influential in educational policy as it relates to the formation of national standards.

The Conservatives

The Right consists of several groups; however, three groups that have been influential in education are the Far Right, the Religious Right, and the Neoconservatives. Berliner and Biddle (1995) state that the Far Right believes that the problems American schools have are the fault of the federal government. Therefore, the Far Right believes that in order to fix American schools one needs to limit the role of the federal government in the educational system. Berliner and Biddle (1995) expound the Far Right wants to exclude the federal government from education thus the decentralization of education is one of their major goals. The Far Right wants states in control of education, and they do not want the federal government to be involved in education. As a result, the Far Right would be against national standards because they do not believe the federal government should be involved in the creation of standards for education. The Far Right believes that standards should be created at the state or local level of government. The Far Right believes that as the federal government has increased its role in education, it has allowed powerful groups to exercise too much influence on education (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 134). They also believe that minorities constitute powerful groups that are trying to influence education. Additionally, the Far Right believes that federal involvement in education has led to the inclusion of underrepresented groups, like minorities, to the detriment of traditional education. Therefore, the Far Right does not want standards that would include a voice for minorities in the American history narrative.

The Religious Right is another conservative group. They believe that the federal government has excluded religion from public schools, and the federal government should be abolished because it endorses secular humanism (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 136). The Religious Right promulgates federal laws or constitutional amendments to keep the federal government from supporting secular humanism in public schools (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

The Neoconservatives, juxtaposed with the Far Right and the Religious Right, are different in their perspective on the federal government. Neoconservatives strongly believe the federal government should be involved in education (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 137). Therefore, the Neoconservatives want the federal government to be involved in the creation of

national standards. In particular, Neoconservatives want national history standards to promote a common cultural heritage. Berliner and Biddle (1995) state:

In general, Neoconservatives argue that American schools have suffered from two serious problems: a history of social experiments concerned with peripheral issues that made too many demands on schools and diverted them from their basic missions, and excessive federal intervention to promote educational equity. (p. 137)

Neoconservatives believe that the federal government has been too concerned with including minorities in the American history narrative in order to promote equity. They believe that the federal government should focus on the common cultural heritage.

The conservatives have several beliefs in common. Berliner and Biddle (1995) state, “All three are offended by recent changes in public schools and would like to return to mythic ‘golden years,’ when schools were more to their liking. All believe that public education has recently ‘deteriorated’ ” (p. 138). This belief in the golden years of education coincides with the oppression of minorities, and the appearance of deterioration in the educational system coincides with the inclusion of minorities in the curriculum. Berliner and Biddle (1995) expound that the conservatives are intolerant of the inclusion of minorities. They believe that the inclusion of minorities is a detriment to the perpetuation of the common cultural heritage.

Different conservative groups do have some common beliefs on education, but there are some important differences. Conservatives do have diverse perspectives on education (Ramsey, 2009, p. 578). Neoliberals believe in individualism (Ramsey, 2009, p. 578). Therefore, neoliberals would have a strong belief in choice in education. Neoliberals juxtaposed with neoconservatives believe in individualism while neoconservatives believe in communal bonds (Ramsey, 2009, p. 579). These divergent beliefs effect which political groups are advocating for national standards.

The Liberals

The liberals consist of several groups. Some of the groups want the federal government involved in creating national standards. Some believe that the federal government will create equity and diversity. However, some groups do not want the federal government involved in creating national standards because they feel that the states are better able to include issues of equity and diversity in the standards. Advocates who opposed national standards believed that schools did not need an extensive fix (Evans, 2004, p. 169). Many liberals espouse the point of view that schools are not damaged, therefore they are against national standards.

Liberals are concerned that minorities are left out of standards. A postmodernist perspective is that there is no grand narrative, and thus the inclusion of minorities is essential to the explanation that culture is a contested area. Apple (1986) states, “The knowledge that is taught is always someone’s knowledge and debates over it sponsor certain groups’ visions of legitimate culture and disenfranchise others” (p. 130). History standards become contentious because liberals perceive that minorities are excluded from the standards. Buras and Apple (2008) state, “It is through history that we might re-educate desire, initiate the infinite process of rethinking schools and ignite a renewed confidence in the possibilities of imagination, an imagination that is marginalized by the neoconservative movement” (p. 299). The exclusion of minorities from the history standards marginalizes the valuable perspective that minorities have on history. According to Keller (1997), conservatives criticized the national history standards because it:

(1) presented a negative view of American history; (2) omitted references to important historical figures while including numerous references to lesser figures for purposes of

fostering a non-sexist/multicultural or politically correct agenda on the schools; (3) omitted references to important historical documents; (4) left out important events in order to present a socially and politically correct history; (5) neglected important economic contributions; and (6) fostered a liberal view of American history. (p. 310)

Liberals want standards that are inclusive of minorities and their narrative. Otherwise, liberals cannot achieve the equity in society that they desire.

Historical Overview of the National History Standards

Social studies has transformed over the years. The changes in the content of social studies have been shaped by the differing political ideologies of different political groups. Educational policy is inherently political (Apple, 1986, p. 130). In the 19th century, history dominated social studies in the United States (Evans, 2004, p. 18). However, soon different disciplines began advocating for a larger role in the curriculum. In addition, although there were still advocates for a history dominant paradigm, the era of the new social studies concentrated on inquiry and issues (Evans, 2004, p. 154). Historians opposed diminishing the role of history in the curriculum. Evans (2004) explains that historians in the mid-1970s were shocked that history was not being taught as much in schools. Historians began to advocate for an increased role for history in the curriculum. As Conservatives began to rise in politics in the mid-1970s, the progressive social studies education began to decline (Evans, 2004, p. 149). The rise of conservatives juxtaposed with the advocating of history by historians resulted in the examination of state history standards.

The creation of national standards became an educational policy objective. The national standards movement began during a time of conservative restoration (Evans, 2004, p. 162). At the same time that conservatives were on the rise politically, reports were released on the status of education. The conservatives received support from various reports on the declining status of education in the United States (Evans, 2004, p. 152). However, the definitive report on the declining status of education was *A Nation at Risk* published in 1983. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) warned that there was a crisis in education, and student achievement in the United States was falling behind other countries. *A Nation at Risk* is a predecessor of the standards movement because it emphasized a coherent curriculum (Ravitch, 2010, p. 29). Therefore, *A Nation at Risk* shaped the standards movement significantly. Even professional organizations were caught up in the standards movement. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) chose to create standards for social studies (Evans, 2004, p. 164). However, since the NCSS is a professional organization, no state was obligated to adopt the history standards.

The federal government stepped into the creation of standards, and unlike the professional organizations, the federal government could institute standards nationally that states would have to follow. However, the federal government was focused on creating voluntary national standards. America 2000 and Goals 2000 were federal government programs that pushed for national standards from the federal government (Evans, 2004, p. 163). America 2000 did not mention social studies; instead it mentioned history and geography (Evans, 2004, p. 163). Ravitch (2010) explains that the federal government gave states money to write standards through the Goals 2000 program, but the standards were vague. In the early 1990s, voluntary national standards were developed. Ravitch (2010) explains that grants were awarded, by the United States Department of Education, to develop voluntary national history standards. The history standards were divided into two categories historical thinking skills and historical understandings, and the National Center for History at the University of California, Los Angeles

created the standards (Evans, 2004, p. 167). However, *The National Standards for United States History* was soon steeped in controversy. Lynne V. Cheney, the former Director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, criticized the history standards before they were released, claiming they were politically biased (Ravitch, 2010, p. 17; Cheney, 1994, para. 14). According to Evans (2004), the standards were criticized for describing Europeans and Americans as oppressive. Historians also differed on what should be included in the national history standards. Some historians diverged with Cheney about the importance of different elements of the past and about historical research (Harlan, 1990, p. 805). Some historians believed that minorities should be included in the national history standards. However, the conservatives believed the national standards were politically biased in liberals' favor, and they argued vehemently to discard them. The United States Senate rejected *The National Standards for United States History* 99 to 1 (Evans, 2004, p. 167). The rejection of *The National Standards for United States History* marked the last time the federal government was directly involved in the creation of national history standards. The controversy over the national history standards effectively ended the standards movement in 1995 (Ravitch, 2010, p. 20). However, the standards movement has changed from being led by the federal government to being led by the state governments.

Common Core State Standards and the Federal Government

The state governments have decided to work together toward adopting a common set of standards. The NGA Center and CCSSO have clearly stated that the CCSSI is a state-led effort ("Common Core State Standards Initiative," n.d.). Our country is currently in a recession, and many local and state governments are reducing funding for education. Teachers are being laid off across the country. Since this initiative is being led by state leaders, without the inclusion of the federal government, then it has a better chance for being adopted by the states. However, despite the assurances of the NGA Center and CCSSO to the contrary, the federal government has not completely been cut out of the common standards adoption process. According to the United States Department of Education (2010):

The Department plans to support state implementation efforts by providing federal funds for high quality assessments, professional development to help teachers enhance the knowledge and skills needed to help students master the standards, and research to support continual improvement of the standards and assessments over time (para. 4).

Since the federal government will provide federal funds to states that need money to implement the common standards, the federal funds become a lure to get states to adopt common standards. Additionally, the incentive federal money comes during a time when state and local governments are struggling financially because of the recession. It will be extremely difficult for states to give up access to additional federal funding for education during a recession. As a result, even though the NGA Center and CCSSO maintain that the Common Core State Standards are a state-led effort and that the federal government is not involved, it is clear that the federal government is involved in the political process to adopt the common state standards, which is effectively another name for national standards. In addition, the adoption of the Common Core State Standards by the states will mean that the United States may have national standards in history, as it has in mathematics and English.

Different political groups with different political ideologies have influenced both the federal government and the common core state standards. The process by which common standards were formed was approved by different groups, which included educators and "prominent education, business, and state leaders' organizations" ("Common Core State Standards Initiative," n.d.). These groups have differing political ideologies. In addition, the

federal government is influenced by these same political ideologies to support the CCSS. This explains why the federal government would support the implementation of the standards by providing funding.

Conclusion

The federal government has tried to promote voluntary national standards. In particular, the battle over national history standards has been particularly contentious. One has to ask whose history is covered by national history standards. The focus on one common heritage, the foundation of which is Western civilization, inevitably leaves out the minority voices as well as the contributions of those who participated in the founding and transformation of the United States. Political groups will influence whose history is covered by national history standards. The differing ideologies of these political groups will shape the discourse of national history standards. Since the federal government has failed to get the states to adopt voluntary national history standards by having the federal government directly involved in formulating the standards, then the federal government has decided to use an indirect method to achieve national standards across the states. The federal government is using federal funding as an incentive, during a recession, to get states to adopt common standards developed by state leaders that would effectively achieve national standards for the country. Many political groups believe that national standards could be the key to raising student achievement. The use of federal funding as a tactic to achieve national standards is extremely influential. As a result, the federal government may be able to achieve national standards because of the current financial crisis over funding for education that the states currently face. If the federal government is going to be successful in getting national standards established in the United States, then the implications are whose history will be included in the national history standards as well as how competing views of history will be reconciled. The recent rise of the right, and its role in influencing public education, will shape any national standards into a common heritage based on Western civilization. However, there are many different groups within the United States, and the demographics of the United States is changing. The focus of a common heritage with the exclusion of minority groups will be detrimental to the United States.

National standards can be dangerous if conservative ideologies perpetuate the idea of Western civilization as the foundation of a common cultural heritage, without the inclusion of minorities. However, one should be suspicious of state-led efforts for common, or national, history standards, because the federal government will be involved in the process. The federal government can use federal funding as a tool to coerce states to adopt national standards. Therefore, the states should be free to create their own history standards without the lure of federal funding, which would allow their people to have more voice in the development of history standards and increase the likelihood that consensus can be reached.

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