

**Testimony before the
United States House of Representatives
Education and Workforce Committee
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education**

By

**Jay P. Greene
21st Century Professor of Education Reform
University of Arkansas
September 21, 2011**

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for having me here to testify today. My name is Jay P. Greene and I am the 21st Century Professor of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas. I am also a fellow at the George W. Bush Institute located at Southern Methodist University.

I am here today to talk with you about how we can best achieve high standards and improve outcomes in education. There is a large effort underway to change educational standards, curriculum, and assessments by centralizing the process. This effort is based on the belief that we will get more rigorous standards and better student outcomes if standards, curriculum, and assessments are determined, or at least coordinated, at the national level. It began with the use of Race to the Top to push states to adopt the Common Core standards, but will also require national curriculum and assessments to be fully implemented.

I believe this centralized approach is mistaken. The best way to produce high academic standards and better student learning is by decentralizing the process of determining standards, curriculum, and assessments. When we have choice and competition among different sets of standards, curricula, and assessments, they tend to improve in quality to better suit student needs and result in better outcomes.

One thing that should be understood with respect to nationalized approaches is that there is no evidence that countries that have nationalized systems get better results. Advocates for nationalization will point to other countries, such as Singapore, with higher achievement that also have a nationalized system as proof that we should do the same. But they fail to acknowledge that many countries that do worse than the United States on international tests also have nationalized systems. Conversely, many of the countries that do better than the United States, such as Canada, Australia, and Belgium, have decentralized systems. The research shows little or no relationship between nationalized approaches and student achievement.

In addition, there is no evidence that the Common Core standards are rigorous or will help produce better results. The only evidence in support of Common Core consists of projects funded directly or indirectly by the Gates Foundation in which panels of selected experts are asked to offer their opinion on the quality of Common Core standards. Not surprisingly, panels organized by the backers of Common Core believe that Common Core is good. This is not research; this is just advocates of Common Core re-stating their support. The few independent evaluations of Common Core that exist suggest that its standards are mediocre and represent little change from what most states already have.

If that's true, what's the harm in pursuing a nationalized approach? First, nationalized approaches lack a mechanism for continual improvement. Given how difficult it is to agree upon them, once we set national standards, curriculum, and assessments, they are nearly impossible to change. If we discover a mistake or wish to try a new and possibly better approach, we can't switch. We are stuck with whatever national choices we make for a very long time. And if we make a mistake we will impose it on the entire country.

Second, to the extent that there will be change in a nationalized system of standards, curriculum, and assessments, it will be directed by the most powerful organized interests in education, and

probably not by reformers. Making standards more rigorous and setting cut scores on assessments higher would show the education system in a more negative light, so teachers unions and other organized interests in education may attempt to steer the nationalized system in a less rigorous direction. In general, it is unwise to build a national church if you are a minority religion. Reformers should recognize that they are the political minority and should avoid building a nationalized system that the unions and other forces of the status quo will likely control.

Third, we are a large and diverse country. Teaching everyone the same material at the same time and in the same way may work in small homogenous countries, like Finland, but it cannot work in the United States. There is no single best way that would be appropriate for all students in all circumstances.

I do not mean to suggest that math is different in one place than it is in another, but the way in which we can best approach math, the age and sequence in which we introduce material, may vary significantly. As a concrete example, California currently introduces algebra in 8th grade but Common Core calls for this to be done in 9th grade. We don't really know the best way for all students and it is dangerous to decide this at the national level and impose it on everyone.

I understand that there is great frustration with the weak standards, low cut-scores, and abysmal achievement in many states. But this problem was not caused by a lack of centralization and cannot be fixed by nationalizing standards, curriculum, and assessments. Instead, the solution to weak state results is to decentralize further so that we increase choice and competition in education. If school systems have to earn students and the revenue they generate, they will gravitate toward more effective standards, curriculum, and assessments.

This decentralized system I am describing of choice and competition producing improvement is not purely theoretical. It actually existed in the United States and helped build an education system that was the envy of the world. Remember that public education was not created by the order of the national government. Local communities built their own schools, set their own standards, devised their own curriculum, and evaluated their own efforts. At one time there were nearly 100,000 local school districts operating almost entirely autonomously.

When people became convinced that students needed a secondary education, these districts started consolidating to be large enough to build high schools. No one ordered them to consolidate and build high schools. They did it because they recognized that people would be reluctant to move into their community unless it offered a secondary education. That is, in our highly mobile society people had choices about where to live and communities had to compete for residents and tax base by offering an education system that people would want. Standards were raised and outcomes improved through this decentralized system of choice and competition among local school districts.

The progress we were making in education, however, stalled when we started significantly centralizing education and reducing the extent of choice and competition among districts. The policies, practices, and funding of schools has increasingly shifted to the state and national governments and greater uniformity has been imposed by unionization. The enemy of high standards and improving outcomes is centralization.

We can see this same process of setting better standards through a decentralized system in other domains. For example, in the video cassette industry there were competing standards: Betamax and VHS. If we had simply imposed a national standard through the government or by a committee of experts, we almost certainly would have ended up with Betamax. Sony, the producer of Betamax, was larger and more politically powerful than the consortium backing VHS. And experts were enamored with the superior picture quality offered by Betamax. But instead we had a decentralized system of determining the standard, where consumers could choose which standard they preferred rather than have it imposed by the government or a committee of experts. As it turns out, consumers overwhelmingly preferred VHS. It was cheaper and the tapes could play longer videos. Consumers were willing to trade-off a reduction in picture quality for the ability to watch an entire movie without having to get up in the middle to change tapes. Centralized standards-setters can't know the best way and impose it on everyone. It takes a decentralized system of choice and competition for us to learn about the better standard and gravitate toward it.

In addition, if Betamax had been imposed by a centralized authority, we almost certainly would have been stuck with that technology for a long time. We would have stifled the innovation that produced DVDs and now Blu-Ray. Choice and competition not only allows us to figure out the best standard for today, but leave open the possibility that new standards will be introduced that are even better and that consumers may prefer those in the future.

There is an unfortunate tendency in public policy to stifle this decentralized process of setting standards. Policymakers are often tempted to identify the best approach, often through a panel of experts, and then impose that approach on everyone. After all, if something is the best, why would we want to allow people to do something else? This is a temptation I urge you to resist in education. Even the best-intentioned experts have a hard time recognizing what the best approach would be. And once it is set by experts, there is no mechanism like the one we get from choice and competition for improving upon that whatever "best" standards, curriculum, and assessments are identified. Essentially, what we are talking about is the danger of central planning. It doesn't work in running the economy any more than it would in running our education system.

Fortunately, the nationalization effort is still in its early stages and there is time for Congress to exercise its authority and preserve a decentralized system for setting standards, curriculum, and assessments. I should emphasize that the movement toward a nationalized system has not been voluntary on the part of the states. It was coerced by the U.S. Department of Education as a condition for receiving Race to the Top funds and I fear that coercion may be continued with the offer of selective waivers from No Child Left Behind requirements.

I hope that you will help restore our decentralized system of setting standards, curriculum, and assessments, which is a far more effective way of producing progress in student learning.