

# Closing the Door on Innovation

## Why One National Curriculum Is Bad for America

*A Critical Response to the Shanker Institute Manifesto and  
the U.S. Department of Education's Initiative  
to Develop a National Curriculum and National Assessments  
Based on National Standards*

We, the undersigned, representing viewpoints from across the political and educational spectrum, oppose the call for a nationalized curriculum in the Albert Shanker Institute Manifesto “A Call for Common Content.”<sup>1</sup> We also oppose the ongoing effort by the U.S. Department of Education to have two federally funded testing consortia develop national curriculum guidelines, national curriculum models, national instructional materials, and national assessments using Common Core's national standards as a basis for these efforts.<sup>2</sup>

We agree that our expectations should be high and similar for all children whether they live in Mississippi or Massachusetts, Tennessee or Texas. We also think that curricula should be designed before assessments are developed, not the other way around.

But we do not agree that a one-size-fits-all, centrally controlled curriculum for every K-12 subject makes sense for this country or for any other sizable country. Such an approach threatens to close the door on educational innovation, freezing in place an unacceptable status quo and hindering efforts to develop academically rigorous curricula, assessments, and standards that meet the challenges that lie ahead. Because we are deeply committed to improving this country's schools and increasing all students' academic achievement, we cannot support this effort to undermine control of public school curriculum and instruction at the local and state level—the historic locus for effective innovation and reform in education—and transfer control to an elephantine, inside-the-Beltway bureaucracy.

Moreover, transferring power to Washington, D.C., will only further subordinate educational decisions to political imperatives. All presidential administrations—present and future, Democratic and Republican—are subject to political pressure. Centralized control in the U.S. Department of Education would upset the system of checks and balances between different levels of government, creating greater opportunities for special interests to use their national political leverage to distort policy. Our decentralized fifty-state system provides some limitations on special-interest power, ensuring that other voices can be heard, that wrongheaded reforms don't harm children in every state, and that reforms that effectively serve children's needs can find space to grow and succeed.

The nationalized curriculum the Shanker Manifesto calls for, and whose development the U.S. Department of Education is already supporting, does not meet the criteria for sound public policy for the following reasons.

***First, there is no constitutional or statutory basis for national standards, national assessments, or national curricula.*** The two testing consortia funded by the U.S. Department of Education have already expanded their activities beyond assessment, and are currently developing national curriculum guidelines, models, and frameworks in accordance with their proposals to the Department of Education (see the Appendix). Department of Education officials have so far not

explained the constitutional basis for their procedures or forthcoming products. The U.S. Constitution seeks a healthy balance of power between states and the federal government, and wisely leaves the question of academic standards, curriculum, and instruction up to the states.<sup>3</sup> In fact, action by the U.S. Department of Education to create national standards and curricula is explicitly proscribed by federal law, reflecting the judgment of Congress and the public on this issue.<sup>4</sup>

Even if the development of national curriculum models, frameworks or guidelines were judged lawful, we do not believe Congress or the public supports having them developed by a self-selected group behind closed doors and with no public accountability. Whether curriculum developers are selected by the Shanker Institute or the U.S. Department of Education's testing consortia, they are working on a federally funded project to dramatically transform schools nationwide. They therefore ought to be transparent and accountable to Congress and the public.

***Second, there is no consistent evidence that a national curriculum leads to high academic achievement.*** The Shanker Manifesto suggests that the only possible way to achieve high academic achievement is through a single national curriculum. Yet France and Denmark have centralized national curricula and do not show high average achievement on international tests or a diminishing gap between high- and low-achieving students. Meanwhile, Canada and Australia, both of which have many regional curricula, achieve better results than many affluent single-curriculum nations. The evidence on this question has been exhaustively addressed elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> It does not support the conclusion that national standards are necessary either for high achievement or for narrowing the achievement gap.

Moreover, population mobility does not justify a national curriculum. Only inter-state mobility is relevant to the value of a national curriculum, and inter-state mobility in this country is low. The Census Bureau reports a total annual mobility rate of 12.5% in 2008-9,<sup>6</sup> but only 1.6% of the total rate consists of inter-state moves that a national curriculum may influence. Other data indicate that inter-state mobility among school-age children is even lower, at 0.3%.<sup>7</sup>

***Third, the national standards on which the administration is planning to base a national curriculum are inadequate.*** If there are to be national academic-content standards, we do not agree that Common Core's standards are clear, adequate, or of sufficient quality to warrant being this country's national standards. Its definition of "college readiness" is below what is currently required to enter most four-year state colleges. Independent reviews have found its standards to be below those in the highest-performing countries and below those in states rated as having the best academic standards.<sup>8</sup>

***Fourth, there is no body of evidence for a "best" design for curriculum sequences in any subject.*** The Shanker Manifesto assumes we can use "the best of what is known" about how to structure curriculum. Yet which curriculum would be best is exactly what we do not know, if in fact all high school students should follow one curriculum. Much more innovation and development, and research evaluating it, is needed to address this knowledge gap. This means we should be encouraging—not discouraging—multiple models. Furthermore, the Shanker Manifesto calls for national curricula to encompass English, mathematics, history, geography, the sciences, civics, the arts, foreign languages, technology, health, and physical education. We wonder what is *not* included in its sweeping concept of a national curriculum.

***Fifth, there is no evidence to justify a single high school curriculum for all students.*** A single set of curriculum guidelines, models, or frameworks cannot be justified at the high school level, given the diversity of interests, talents and pedagogical needs among adolescents. American

schools should not be constrained in the diversity of the curricula they offer to students. Other countries offer adolescents a choice of curricula; Finland, for example, offers all students leaving grade 9 the option of attending a three-year general studies high school or a three-year vocational high school, with about 50% of each age cohort enrolling in each type of high school. We worry that the “comprehensive” American high school may have outlived its usefulness, as a recent Harvard report implies.<sup>9</sup> A one-size-fits-all model not only assumes that we already know the one best curriculum for all students; it assumes that one best way for all students exists. We see no grounds for carving that assumption in stone.

### **Conclusion**

The Shanker Manifesto does not make a convincing case for a national curriculum. It manifests serious shortcomings in its discussion of curricular alignment and coherence, the quality of Common Core’s national standards, course sequence and design, academic content, student mobility, sensitivity to pluralism, constitutionality and legality, transparency and accountability, diverse pedagogical needs, and the absence of consensus on all these questions. For these reasons, we the undersigned oppose the Shanker Manifesto’s call for a nationalized curriculum and the U.S. Department of Education’s initiative to develop a national curriculum and national tests based on Common Core’s standards.

## Appendix: Excerpts from the Assessment Consortia's Plans to Develop a National Curriculum

According to the proposal by the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium in its application for a U.S. Department of Education grant in June 2010, it intends to:

*"interpret or translate [Common Core's] standards before they can be used effectively for assessment or instruction" [SMARTER Balanced Proposal, Page 34]*

– *"translate the standards into content/curricular frameworks, test maps, and item/performance event specifications to provide assessment specificity and to clarify the connections between instructional processes and assessment outcomes." [SMARTER Proposal, page 35]*

– *provide "a clear definition of the specific grade-level content skills and knowledge that the assessment is intended to measure" [SMARTER Balanced Proposal, page 48]*

– *"convene key stakeholders and content specialists to develop assessment frameworks that precisely lay out the content and cognitive demands that define college- and career-readiness for each grade level." [SMARTER Balanced Proposal, page 74]*

– *"develop cognitive models for the domains of ELA and mathematics that specify the content elements and relationships reflecting the sequence of learning that students would need to achieve college and career-readiness" [SMARTER Balanced Proposal, page 76]*

Similarly, the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) consortium proposed in its application to the U.S. Department of Education in June 2010 to:

– *"unpack the standards to a finer grain size as necessary to determine which standards are best measured through the various components ... To do this, the Partnership will engage lead members of the CCSS writing teams ... and the content teams from each state, assessment experts and teachers from Partnership states." [PARCC Proposal, page 174]*

– *"develop challenging performance tasks and innovative, computer-enhanced items ... [that] will send a strong, clear signal to educators about the kinds of instruction and types of performances needed for students to demonstrate college and career readiness." [PARCC Proposal, page 7]*

– *"develop model curriculum frameworks that teachers can use to plan instruction and gain a deep understanding of the CCSS, and released items and tasks that teachers can use for ongoing formative assessment." [PARCC Proposal, page 57]*

### End-notes

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<sup>1</sup> "A Call for Common Content," *American Educator* (published by American Federation of Teachers), vol. 35, no. 1 (Spring 2011), pp. 41-45. <http://www.ashankerinst.org/curriculum.html>

<sup>2</sup> For a description of the curriculum and instructional guidance to teachers the consortia are developing, which go beyond even what their application language indicated, see Catherine Gewertz, "Common-Assessment Consortia Add Resources to Plans: Extra Federal Funds Will Go Toward Curricula, Teacher Training," *Education Week*, Feb. 23, 2011. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/02/11/21consortia.h30.html>

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Constitution, Art. I, sec. 8; Amendment X.

<sup>4</sup> See section 438 of the General Education Provisions Act (20 U.S.C. § 1232a) (rule of construction that no education programs of the Department of Education be construed to authorize any federal department, agency, officer or employee to direct, supervise, or control curriculum or any program of instruction); section 103 of the Department of Education Organization Act (20 U.S.C. § 3403) (establishes relationship between federal, state, and local governments as well as public and private institutions, and provides a rule of construction prohibiting the Secretary of Education or any officer from exercising direction, supervision, or control over curriculum or programs of instruction as well as proscribes the direction, supervision, or control over the selection of textbooks and instructional materials); section 9527(a) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (20 U.S.C. § 7907(a)) (rule of construction prohibiting the federal government from mandating, directing, or controlling curriculum or programs of instruction); section 9527(b) of the ESEA (20 U.S.C. § 7907(b)) (prohibits funds under the ESEA from being used to endorse, approve, or sanction curriculum); see also S. REP. NO. 91-634 (1970) reprinted in 1970 U.S.C.C.A.N. 2768, 2826 and 2901 (discussion of prohibition against federal control of education); H.R. REP. NO. 91-937 (1970) (Conf. Rep.) reprinted in 1970 U.S.C.C.A.N. 2939, 2954 (statement of the managers on prohibiting federal control of education); S. REP. NO. 94-882, at 109 (1976) reprinted in 1976 U.S.C.C.A.N. 4713, 4821 (discussion of all programs remaining free of federal control in lieu of specific list); S. REP. NO. 96-49, at 6, 31-33 (1979) reprinted in 1979 U.S.C.C.A.N. 1514, 1545-1547 (discussion of state and local responsibilities for education); S. REP. NO. 96-49 at 65, U.S.C.C.A.N. at 1579 (discussion of limitation upon authority of federal government over education); S. REP. NO. 96-49 at 95-97, U.S.C.C.A.N. at 1607-1609 (Additional Views of Mr. Durenberger); S. REP. NO. 96-49 at 97-99, U.S.C.C.A.N. at 1609-1612 (Minority Views of Mr. Cohen); H.R. REP. NO. 95-1531, at 13 (1978) (discussion of prohibition of federal interference with curriculum, programs of instruction, textbooks, and other educational materials); *id.* at 41-42 (Dissenting Views of Hon. Leo J. Ryan); *id.* at 43-44 (Dissenting Views of Hon. Peter H. Kostmayer); *id.* at 45-47 (Dissenting Views of Hon. John N. Erlenborn, Hon. John W. Wydler, Hon. Clarence J. Brown, Hon. Paul N. McCloskey, Jr., Hon. Dan Quayle, Hon. Robert S. Walker, Hon. Arlan Stangeland, Hon. Jack Cunningham); *id.* at 48-49 (Dissenting Views of Hon. Paul N. McCloskey, Jr.); H.R. REP. NO. 96-459, at 36 (1979) (Conf. Rep.), reprinted in 1979 U.S.C.C.A.N. 1612, 1615-1616 (discussion of limitations upon federal authority over education);

<sup>5</sup> Grover Whitehurst, *Don't Forget Curriculum*, Brookings Institution, 2009. [http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2009/1014\\_curriculum\\_whitehurst.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2009/1014_curriculum_whitehurst.aspx); Neal McCluskey, *Behind the Curtain: Assessing the Case for National Curriculum Standards*, Cato Institute, 2010. [http://www.cato.org/pub\\_display.php?pub\\_id=11217](http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=11217)

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, table A-1. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/migrate.html>

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, table C07001. Geographical Mobility In The Past Year By Age For Current Residence In The United States, 2007-2009 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates. [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTable?\\_bm=y&-state=dt&-ds\\_name=ACS\\_2009\\_3YR\\_G00\\_&-geoSkip=0&-mt\\_name=ACS\\_2009\\_3YR\\_G2000\\_B07001&-redoLog=false&-skip=0&-geo\\_id=01000US&-geo\\_id=NBSP&-showChild=Y&-format=&-lang=en&-toggle=ACS\\_2009\\_3YR\\_G2000\\_B07001](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTable?_bm=y&-state=dt&-ds_name=ACS_2009_3YR_G00_&-geoSkip=0&-mt_name=ACS_2009_3YR_G2000_B07001&-redoLog=false&-skip=0&-geo_id=01000US&-geo_id=NBSP&-showChild=Y&-format=&-lang=en&-toggle=ACS_2009_3YR_G2000_B07001)

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Goodman, *A comparison of proposed US Common Core math standard to standards of selected Asian countries*. July 2010. [http://www.educationnews.org/ed\\_reports/94979.html](http://www.educationnews.org/ed_reports/94979.html); S. Stotsky & Z. Wurman, *Common Core's Standards Still Don't Make the Grade*, Pioneer Institute, 2010, [http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/pdf/common\\_core\\_standards.pdf](http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/pdf/common_core_standards.pdf); see also <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/college-and-career> for a critical review of the research base for Common Core's standards, by Diane Ravitch and William Mathis; see also Appendix B, an analysis by R. James Milgram of the problems in the Common Core's mathematics standards, at [http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/pdf/common\\_core\\_standards.pdf](http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/pdf/common_core_standards.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> William C. Symonds, Robert B. Schwartz and Ronald Ferguson, *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century*, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2011. [http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news\\_events/features/2011/Pathways\\_to\\_Prosperty\\_Feb2011.pdf](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news_events/features/2011/Pathways_to_Prosperty_Feb2011.pdf)