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The Front Burner: Common Core has laundry list of failings at its heart

The big new thing in never-ending attempts to improve America's schools are the Common Core State Standards — lists of what kids are supposed to know and be able to do when they graduate from high school.

The word "core" in the title refers to four fields of knowledge — math, science, language arts, and social studies. Taken together, they're called "the core curriculum."

The conventional wisdom says the core curriculum teaches essential knowledge. School subjects not in the core — physical education, art, music and so on — aren't considered essential. It's nice if they can be worked into kids' schedules, but it's no big deal if they're not.

About 30 years ago, a committee appointed during the Reagan administration wrote a scary little booklet titled "A Nation at Risk." It said American education was a mess and other countries were eating our educational lunch. A second study by Sandia National Laboratories in New Mexico reached a different conclusion, but mainstream media weren't interested. As a consequence, the education-is-a-mess message stuck in the public consciousness.

Enter, eventually, Bill Gates, arguably the most influential "educator" in America. He believes that whatever the problems with schooling, good teachers can fix them. Thus far, he's spent about $5 billion in ways consistent with that belief — much of it to promote nationwide adoption of the Common Core standards. He believes that if what's taught is standardized, the narrowed focus will make it easier to monitor and control teacher performance.

Initially, his sales campaign for the standards went well, and 46 states quickly adopted them. Now, however, criticized by both the political right and left (but for different reasons), the sales campaign pushing the standards has faltered.

In an attempt to restore momentum, high-powered people are being called in for a big push. Two of them — Craig Barrett, former CEO of Intel, and Michael Cohen, president of Achieve Inc. — wrote a guest column that appeared in the Sentinel in June. Titled "Students will go farther faster with Common Core standards," the column addressed "the red herrings and falsehoods made by a small but vocal band … of critics … want[ing] to maintain the status quo."

I'm a member of that band of critics, but have never been accused of wanting to maintain the educational status quo. I oppose the standards for exactly the opposite reason: They reinforce the core curriculum adopted in 1893, thereby perpetuating this deeply flawed teaching tool.

The still-in-use, familiar-to-all curriculum has no agreed-upon overarching aim. It dumps more disorganized information on kids than they can handle. It emphasizes memory work to the

neglect of all other thought processes. It shortchanges the educational value of real-world experience. It doesn't adapt to social change. It's implemented in ways that ignore research on retention in grade, class size, length of school day, homework, and other important issues.

It doesn't stimulate creativity, initiative, imagination, curiosity and motivation. It neglects moral, ethical and other values issues. It doesn't capitalize on the connections among school subjects. It fails to exploit the richness of individual differences. It supports simplistic, machine-scored testing. It's at odds with the seamless way the brain perceives reality. It ignores important new fields of study. It's plagued by cultural, social class and ideological bias.

I'm all for standards, but because the Common Core standards lock in permanent place a curriculum with serious, unaddressed problems, adopting them is a really bad idea.