

Turesky and Chieppo: ‘Trickle-down mandate’ hurts ed standards

By Jason Turesky and Charles Chieppo/Guest columnists

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The website of Common Core, the new K-12 national education standards, claim “adoption of the standards is in no way mandatory.” That depends on your definition of mandatory.

As part of the 2009 stimulus legislation, the federal government created the Race to the Top (RttT) Fund, \$4.35 billion in competitive educational grants available only to states that adopt Common Core. With money being dangled in front of them in the midst of severe fiscal crisis, 45 states and Washington, D.C., have adopted.

Massachusetts is one of them. In 2010, the Bay State submitted an RttT application requesting \$250 million and detailing how the state would adopt the new standards. Common Core was adopted, the application approved, and Massachusetts got the \$250 million.

Massachusetts Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester assured Bay State residents that he would only adopt Common Core “after conducting a comprehensive review of the final drafts to ensure they are as strong as - or stronger than - our current standards.” The sufficiency of his standards review will long be a matter of debate, but Chester clearly missed an important detail: the cost of implementing the new standards.

To shine a light on the decision-making process, Pioneer Institute, under Massachusetts Public Records Law, requested documents pertaining to any cost-analysis prepared prior to the adoption of Common Core. Sadly, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education admitted that none existed.

You wouldn’t build a house without costing out the labor and materials. But, unfortunately, that is exactly what Massachusetts did when education officials and Governor Patrick adopted Common Core without estimating the cost of implementing the standards. That means the expense of assessments, textbooks, instructional materials and technology weren’t projected, or, more likely, even considered in the decision.

Alabama, on the other hand, got it right. That state analyzed costs before taking on such a massive effort. California did, too.

If Alabama, California and other states could do it, why couldn’t Massachusetts? When the RttT money is long spent, the public will be rightfully indignant to find that the cost of implementing the standards will exceed the \$250 million grant.

To put the cost component in perspective, consider the national Common Core cost analysis performed by Pioneer Institute. Pioneer researchers examined the details of Common Core and found that total costs to states and localities would amount to \$16 billion. Time will tell how much of this “voluntary” burden falls on Massachusetts and its financially strapped local school districts.

Because of parameters set by the federal government, states that opt out of Common Core are out of the running for both federal grants and the coveted waivers from the federal No Child Left Behind law. From there, states exert the same kind of influence on local school districts. The districts don't have to implement Common Core, but the standards are the basis for state-designed standardized testing. Ultimately, districts and teachers are held accountable for students' performance on the tests.

Regardless of how proponents defined it, Common Core is in anything but voluntary. In actuality, it's a \$16 billion trickle-down mandate, the vast majority of which is unfunded.

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