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Summary:

Oregon can begin to escape from the “bigger is better” education reform trap by approving House Bill 2835, which prohibits the Department of Education from imposing standardized curricula and testing regimes on school districts.

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“Mandating Common Core State Standards and their accompanying high-stakes Smarter Balanced tests simply moves us even further down into the ‘bigger is better’ education reform trap.”

Mandating Common Core, High-Stakes Testing Drives Oregon Further into the “Bureaucratic Trap of Good Intentions”

By Steve Buckstein

The Oregon Department of Education currently requires Oregon school districts to align instruction and assessments with the [Common Core State Standards](#). A bill now before the state legislature, [HB 2835](#), would end this requirement, possibly helping to end the latest chapter in nearly [forty years of national education reform failures](#) and what I call Oregon’s decline into our own “bigger is better” top-down education reform trap.

I saw this decline begin here in 1991 when the legislature overwhelmingly enacted the [Education Act for the Twenty-First Century](#). It was full of new committees, new high school [CIM and CAM tests](#) (which were eventually abandoned), and a promise from the legislature that it would produce “the best educated citizens in the nation by the year 2000.” So, how did that work out?

In 1999 the legislature created the Quality Education Commission, which led to adoption of the [Quality Education Model](#). The Model proposed [entirely theoretical](#) prototype elementary, middle, and high schools that, again theoretically and with enough funding, would get 90% of our kids to state standards.

When these last two big reforms didn’t work, Governor John Kitzhaber proposed and the legislature created the [Oregon Education Investment Board](#) (OEIB) in 2011 with the goal of unifying everything from early childhood through graduate school education. Of course, that goal can’t be accomplished without pushing power and control even farther away from the people who should matter most in education—parents, students, and teachers. This accelerated our decline into the “bigger is better” trap.

Why haven’t such revolutionary reform efforts in our K-12 education system achieved their goals? Because, [according to the late John T. Wenders, Ph.D.](#), they...

“...suck power upward and away from parents and students into top down, centralized and inflexible political arrangements, where unions and other special interests have more political clout. This causes accountability to decline and results in higher per pupil costs and lower educational results.”



I'm sure that now-former Governor Kitzhaber and the people he appointed to the OEIB are very smart. But no such group can hope to design a system that meets the needs of all Oregon children and their parents. Mandating Common Core State Standards and their accompanying high-stakes [Smarter Balanced tests](#) simply moves us even further down into the "bigger is better" education reform trap.

Yong Zhao, Ph.D. is the Presidential Chair and Director of the Institute for Global and Online Education in the University of Oregon's College of Education. He gave an [entertaining and provocative presentation](#) to the Senate Education Committee on February 10, 2015 in which he set out some compelling reasons for us to reject both Common Core and high-stakes testing.

One of Dr. Zhao's examples is very relevant when considering the benefits of passing HB 2835. He told the Committee that imposing any "common" educational requirements promotes conformity in our children, when we should be helping them foster their own creativity, diversity, and entrepreneurial inclinations.

He noted that when he was a child in his Chinese village, the Common Core was knowing how to ride a water buffalo. The most important and valued jobs in that time and place revolved around agriculture. He couldn't drive a water buffalo very well, so as he put it, they encouraged him to leave and go to Oregon.

In a 1991 *Wall Street Journal* column, "[Education by Committee in Oregon](#)," Cascade Policy Institute Academic Advisor, former public elementary school teacher, and assistant professor of education Richard Meinhard, Ph.D. explained why the "revolutionary" Oregon Education Act for the Twenty-First Century was no such thing:

"...[T]o be 'revolutionary,' educational change must be systemic. It must reform the system, not just add to it. Oregon's educational reformers are unwittingly legitimizing the very system that needs reform. Well-meaning politicians have once again increased state control over education in order to mandate desirable goals. The Oregon plan provides the nation with an important lesson in reform: how easy it is to fall into the bureaucratic trap of good intentions."

This 1991 critique could just as easily be said about the current "revolutionary" reforms of Common Core and Smarter Balanced high-stakes testing. It's time to stop increasing state control over education and [start moving](#) accountability and control [down](#) toward parents, students, and teachers.

We can start crawling out of Oregon's "bigger is better" trap by prohibiting the Department of Education from imposing any standardized curriculum and testing regime on school districts. This can start by approving HB 2835.

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