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Commentary

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Leadership and Crisis in Education

In the fight over Common Core, Louisiana state government is failing its citizens and the governor is chiefly responsible

Louisiana state government is failing its duty to provide leadership and accountability for public school education in the upcoming academic year. The situation has reached a crisis level with serious potential consequences for students, parents, teachers and all of us as stakeholders in the future of Louisiana. This was a crisis of choice and the clearest responsibility for it lies with the governor.

The current dispute between the governor on one side and the state education board on the other is on the verge of rendering a dysfunctional process to administer accountability tests to students this school year. This mess is potentially significant enough to damage the national profile of the state.

The dispute is centered on differing views of whether the state should implement the Common Core standards, a path decided by laws signed by the governor as well as policy set by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. The governor's actions so far appear to be an attempt to thwart the law and the Common Core implementation by creating a bureaucratic contest over state procurement practices and contracting law.

Fortunately, many solutions are available to address the immediate concerns of implementing accountability tests, which have been central to the state's progress on key educational measures in recent years. The assessments could be handled in-house by the education agency, by adjusting the current contract for the next year or by a new contract competitively bid. Members of the state education board have proposed several worthwhile solutions.

Though time is short, competitive contracting is a good policy principle that still could be employed in the current circumstance. The administration and its bureaucrats should carry on their role to review state contracts to ensure public confidence in the integrity of the procurement process and to meet the state's legal requirements. But those bureaucrats, with the governor influencing their every move, should not be in the business of using that process to determine the state's education policy and academic standards. That domain belongs to BESE and the Department of Education.

The governor and his administration have been inconsistent on public contracting. After years of reviewing and approving Department of Education testing contracts, only now has the administration raised serious concerns about them. If the past contracting methods were faulty, the administration as well as the education agencies bear a responsibility. Although the governor now insists that competitive bids be used for

a testing contract, he has endorsed no-bid contracts for major initiatives he has favored. His sudden zeal for competitive bidding is welcome but apparently is selective.

From cutting-edge supporter to virulent enemy of Common Core, the governor's inconsistent path on educational standards is becoming the defining issue of his gubernatorial and leadership legacy. The governor's change in stance began with ambiguous statements about his commitment to the new standards, which he helped birth. Only a year ago he was pushing hard for faster implementation of Common Core, and yet now he shows intolerance for those who want to proceed with Common Core even slowly. When he decided to oppose the standards, he made a limp effort during the recent legislative session and proved to be a weak ally of his fellow Common Core critics. The Legislature rebuffed efforts to change the law in the direction he wanted it to go. Now the governor is on the presidential campaign trail loudly attacking Louisiana and its consensus implementation of Common Core.

Anyone can change his mind, but Jindal's oscillation on this issue combined with his apparent political calculations are affecting his image as a sincere and reliable leader here in Louisiana. Years of work brought us to the point where the state is ready to start a new set of standards, a process the governor until recently sought to accelerate. The current problem – finding a way to conduct assessments for the next academic year – was in no way created by the federal government. This is a fully state-created crisis. The governor has the main responsibility for creating this crisis and a failure of the system would be on his shoulders.

The governor should not use his bureaucracies for harassment and ultimately allow bureaucrats to make policy decisions that are clearly and rightly delegated to state education leaders and the Legislature under Louisiana's constitution and statutes. The governor regularly criticizes the federal government for this type of executive over-reach.

The governor's new opinion on Common Core is his business and his right, even though his opinion is not consistent with the laws he endorsed and signed into effect. It is unfortunate that the governor is traveling the nation criticizing his state on this issue. But his potential use of executive over-reach and bureaucratic interference to stop Common Core is a more serious matter and would be damaging and punitive to schools and taxpayers.

If the governor wants to persuade the state to take a new direction on educational standards, then he should use a good, foundational democratic decision-making process to do that. If he forces the state in that direction with disruption and interference, then he lets slip the state's steep climb out of its past era of autocratic rule. Is this demonstration of leadership an indication what kind of president he would be?

For now, the governor has the opportunity to address the immediate problem of student academic assessments by demonstrating he has the skills to work with others and to allow Louisiana's government to proceed with implementing state law and policy in a proper legal manner. In doing so, he could more likely be seen as a leader worthy of high office and not just a political candidate who blows with the latest wind.

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