Local Control and Vetting Instructional Materials

From the earliest days of the United States Constitution, there has been concern about federal disregard of states' rights. The argument has been ongoing and essential to the preservation of our democratic republic.[i] Members of congress take on the roles of protectors of the various states in which they reside, in hopes of preserving the freedom and rights of individual citizens, as well as promoting local industry and economic ventures. Citizens of individual states and communities are highly protective of their values, and the rights necessary to guarantee their freedom to construct lifestyles aligned to them. In current jargon, people are extremely concerned about maintaining "local control."

The significant public reaction in opposition the Common Core Standards is less about the actual content of the standards than it is about federal encroachment into local community educational practices. Opponents have been very vocal in stating their fears that such standards are the first steps to establishing a national curriculum that ignores local culture. The prevailing belief is that localities are much better equipped to meet the needs of the students who reside in them than is the federal Department of Education. State residents want "local control" of the standards, delivery methods, and assessments of public education.

So what exactly is meant by "local control"? Here is a post from the International Debate Education Association:

> According to Oxford Dictionaries Online, the term local is defined as "belonging to or relating to a particular area or neighbourhood." Control refers to "the power to influence or direct people's behaviour or course of events". As there is no definition given for the term local control, those terms are combined in common usage and could refer to a municipal government, to a province, regional, or state government. Although not stated as a comparison, the motion implies a comparison to something, probably a federal government or national ministry. Education is "the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction especially at a school or university." System is defined as "a set of things working together as parts of a mechanism or an interconnecting network." There are many components to an educational system so this term is also broad. Since the term local control could be interpreted in a wide variety of legitimate ways, to better focus the debate, it would be valuable to indicate the expanse of the term "local". Local control could legitimately mean municipalities or the regional government structure. The ability to influence does not state what type of influence exactly. Influence could refer to all aspects of an educational system or simply influence/control over certain parts of the system. Even though dictionary definitions are useful, the terms set forth by the proposition require careful thought and consideration when defining them for use in a debate.[ii]

"Local control" may be exerted by a home school, charter school, public school, school district, or state education agency. Indeed, with the advent of technology, a locality could take in a range of municipalities from different countries. Shared values, rather than geographical limits, may establish the boundaries of the locality. Education today must prepare children to succeed in the global economy and do business with worldwide partners. Determining the limits to a neighborhood is increasingly difficult. It all depends on agreements reached by the clientele being served.

The real issue is to what extent educational agencies, whatever their size or makeup, wish to be independent or collaborative. Certainly there should be a balance between preserving the values and traditions of a community and taking advantage of collaboration with other like entities. There must be

a way to investigate and benefit from the world's resources without sacrificing the virtues of the community.

Many state education agencies have extended local control to districts and schools in the selection of instructional materials.[iii] These resources are being produced and made available everywhere. They come in both printed and digital formats and can consist of student editions, online curriculum, simulations, applications, instructor materials, manipulatives, games, videos, ancillary materials, and a wide variety of other media. Locating and then evaluating such materials is an extremely time-consuming task. The smaller the locality, the larger the issue becomes without the help of larger communities. Small districts and schools, left to find their own resources, face a gargantuan task, and risk becoming overloaded and isolated.

There is always a selection process in the acquisition of instructional materials. The doctrine of No Child Left Behind required every state to have standards for student learning. [iv] Curriculum is evaluated based on its alignment to those standards, especially as it affects student achievement. The real question is, who checks the alignment, conducts the evaluation, and makes the selection of materials? Who is the agent of local control? How does the agent guarantee fair and objective review of the available resources?

Commercial entities have begun to appear to provide instructional materials review services to educational agencies.[v] They have taken measures to try to ensure that provided evaluations are free of any political or commercial interest. Such services have the difficult task of supplying unbiased information about national curriculum resources that is tailored to the values and standards of local education agencies. Funding for such work has been based on annual subscription fees from the school, district, or state organization, or from donations from private organizations.

All of this assumes that high quality reviews are fundamental to the selection process. Such reviews need to provide information about (1) alignment of content to core standards and objectives; (2) guarantees of accessibility to all students without bias toward ethnicity, race, religion, age, or ability; and (3) resources that encourage the highest levels of pedagogy.[vi] There are numerous high quality review tools available, many of which are listed on the web[vii]. State and local education agencies should spend time selecting the tools that work best for them. Credentials of reviewers should be thoroughly vetted, and processes clearly described to promote transparency to publishers, educators, and the general public. Additionally, provisions should be made to allow public representation and input into the review process. This is best handled through an organizational structure that oversees a logical sequence of procedures that include public input.

Twenty-two states have formed an organization knows as the State Instructional Materials Review Association (SIMRA). Originally formed in 1947 as a group that favored adoption of curriculum items from mandated lists provided by its member states, SIMRA has since broadened its bylaws to include local control agencies. Members participate in ongoing collaboration regarding the tools and criteria involved in the evaluation of instructional materials. Monthly webinars and a yearly conference allow SIMRA members to compare reviews available in "localities" (including schools, districts, states, and the nation). Many SIMRA states profess allegiance to local control by providing free access to the reviews as well as the rubrics, criteria and structures used to create them.

The conversation regarding local control ends up being nothing more than the old arguments regarding states' rights versus federalism. It is a balancing act between the preservation of values and cultures of states and communities and the risks and benefits of collaborative action that exceed imposed boundaries, be they geographical or social. SIMRA endeavors to allow for the advantages of both points of view by allowing free participation for educational agencies big and small, to sample each other's resources without required mandates regarding adopted instructional materials. Official membership in the organization is gained by simply paying a nominal fee (currently $100) which covers registration for the annual conference.

Whatever the definition of "local control" as it relates to curriculum evaluation, the following list provides justification for the review process.

17 Reasons for Reviewing Instructional Materials

1. It helps educators by providing lists of vetted materials for specific subject areas.
2. It assists publishers in providing a conduit to potential adoptees of instructional materials.
3. It secures economical pricing through the Favored Nation Clause, which guarantees the lowest price as contracted by any state.
4. It provides accurate information about the alignment of content to core standards and objectives.
5. It provides information about the structural quality of the book or resource.
6. It enhances the awareness and expertise of those who participate in the review, as well as those who are considering materials for adoption.
7. It provides tools and resources that can be used at the community or state level, thus supporting local control of the curriculum.
8. It provides sharable data about instructional resources that can be compared and shared with other agencies or organizations involved in the review process.
9. It provides recommendations to help educators select the very best materials for instruction.
10. It assists in protecting educators and students from encountering materials that may be of poor quality, or which may violate community standards and law.
11. It provides publishers with valuable information about the quality of their products, and allows them to compare their materials with others available in the industry.
12. It encourages authors and publishers to keep materials current and relevant to the needs of students.
13. It provides an organized process for evaluating curriculum materials that saves time and money for local education institutions.
14. It provides information freely available to the public about instructional resources used in education.
15. It helps categorize resources and target them to meet specific objectives in instruction.
16. It encourages participation from credentialed reviewers to produce high quality reviews.
17. It provides unbiased reviews from educators that are not influenced by political, special or commercial interests.

Vetting processes for the review of instructional materials are not going away. Neither are standards and benchmarks to measure effective instruction. Quality content is, and always has been, a paramount concern in education. The selection of such content is best handled through

processes that mirror our government structure. Knowledgeable experts from educational institutions should work closely with representatives from communities to verify curriculum alignment with agreed upon standards in the same way that elected officials work with their constituencies to guarantee the establishment of, and compliance with, just laws. Society without government is anarchy. Education without vetted curriculum carefully aligned to standards is directionless and irrelevant. Local control in the vetting of instructional materials does not mean abandonment of collaboration, but rather concentrated efforts to insure that curriculum reflects agreed upon standards and values of educational communities, whether defined by geographical, philosophical, or virtual boundaries. Quality vetting facilitates quality instruction.

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[i] "Issues - States' Rights." *National Constitution Center – Constitutioncenter.org*. United States Congress, n.d. Web. 03 Feb. 2015. <http://constitutioncenter.org/constitution/issues/states-rights>.

[ii] "This House Believes in Local Control of the Education System." *Idebate.org*. International Idea Debate Association, n.d. Web. 04 Feb. 2015. <http://idebate.org/debatabase/debates/education/house-believes-local-control-education-system>.

[iii] Climek, Cheryl C. "Florida Senate Bill Gives Local Control over Textbooks, Instructional Materials." *BizPac Review*. BizPac Review, 06 Feb. 2014. Web. 04 Feb. 2015. <http://www.bizpacreview.com/2014/02/06/florida-senate-bill-gives-local-control-over-textbooks-instructional-materials-99029>.

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[iv] "Archived: The Facts About...State Standards." *Archived: The Facts About...State Standards*. U. S. Department of Education, 28 Jan. 2005. Web. 04 Feb. 2015. <http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/standards/standards.html>.

[v] "LearningList | Instructional Material Reviews for Teachers, Parents." *LearningList | Instructional Material Reviews for Teachers, Parents*. Learning List, 2014. Web. 04 Feb. 2015. https://learninglist.com/

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[vi] "State Instructional Materials Review Association." *SIMRA*. State Instructional Materials Review Association, 2012. Web. 4 Feb. 2015. <http%3A%2F%2Fsimra.us>.

[vii] "SIMRA." *SIMRA*. State Instructional Materials Review Association, 2012. Web. 04 Feb. 2015. <http://simra.us/wp/references/documents>.