

The bogeyman Beck found in Idaho's schools

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho's education reform task force has been swamped by dozens of people challenging the new Common Core academic standards.

As the task force held hearings across the state, these critics described all kinds of bogeymen lurking there. Inspired by right-wing talk show host Glenn Beck, they linked the standards to communist indoctrination, a nefarious assault on Idaho's sovereignty and a dumbing down of Idaho schools.

Sound familiar?

You've heard it before. A generation earlier, Idaho educators and political leaders engaged in what was then called Goals 2000. Critics stopped it cold.

But here's the problem: Without some kind of national standard in place, people in Idaho work in comparative isolation.

For all its top-down mandates, No Child Left Behind never spelled out what American students should know and or how they should be tested. For more than a decade, Idahoans have been designing their own academic standards and their own tests.

Much the same thing happened in other states.

Which leaves just about any American child - who can expect to compete in a global economy - at a disadvantage. How can you decide if Johnny in Boise is keeping up with Susan in Minneapolis? How can you detect if educators in one part of the country have found out how to help third-graders master reading or how to get eighth-graders over the hump in math?

Right now, you can't.

The National Assessment for Educational Progress surveys students in the fourth, eighth and 12th grades - but it's a sample-based statistical study and the information comes a year too late.

ACT and SAT scores compare college-bound students who are on their way out of high school.

If you want to know more, you need a national language. You need some minimal uniformity of curriculum. And you need to reach children early enough to intervene.

Rather than following a federal mandate, individual state leaders, including Idaho schools Superintendent Tom Luna, mapped out a voluntary program. All but five states signed on with relatively little fanfare. Idaho adopted the system two years ago. Full implementation begins next fall and testing will follow in the spring of 2015.

It promises to be a vast improvement over multiple-guess tests. Expectations of student achievement started at the college level and worked back, grade by grade.

There's more rigor. Students will be required to demonstrate what they know about math and English language arts. That means more writing, more critical thinking skills and more practical math demonstrations.

With that will come more disruptions as students and teachers wrestle with more demands.

Under the circumstances, the last thing you need are Beck's paranoid delusions. How about, instead, asking:

- How well do the standards reflect what students should know?
- Are the core standards relevant to what's being taught?
- Is the testing accurate? Does it offer a variety of ways to measure student achievement?
- Can Idaho pull this off on a shoe-string budget? The share of Idaho's personal income devoted to education is down 20 percent since the turn of the century. State spending on schools has not recovered to pre-recession levels.
- Where are the resources to prepare public school teachers for the transition?

In the second decade of the 21st century, wouldn't you rather know how Idaho schools will perform? Or would you rather wait another 20 years? - M.T.