



The Dangers of Common Core

Guest: James 'Duke' Pesta

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WOODS: Give us the basic, short overview of what Common Core actually is. Then I want to know when it was started and who was behind it. Let's do those separately. Let's just start off with having you tell us in a nutshell what Common Core is. Not why we should fear it but just what it is.

PESTA: Common Core is a set of national standards, curriculum standards, right now for English and math, with subjects like science, and history, and social studies on the way. These standards are themselves oddly incomplete. They're just guidelines. The problem is that because this whole thing is being orchestrated at the federal level, all textbook companies have immediately created the curriculums for those standards. So you'll hear some people say that they're just standards, they're not curriculum. But it's utterly impossible to divorce the curriculum standards that emanated out of the federal government and then the textbooks that have now grown up to support that. So you've got to take them both as one, and that is why they're potentially dangerous.

WOODS: Now it seems like just in the past, I don't know, year or two, is when I've started to hear about Common Core, but when did it actually get started and who was the driving force behind it?

PESTA: You know, Tom, before we even talk about the standards themselves, which are full of problems. This is a shocking story. Common Core state standards in English and math were written basically by five people. Two Washington lobbyist groups, the National Governors Association and the CCSSO, the Council of Chief State School Officers. These are basically lobbyist groups. One former governor described the NGA, the National Governors Association, as a networking opportunity for past and future governors. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation paid about \$150 million to these two lobbyist groups to construct these standards, and they were basically written by about five men. Chief among them was David Coleman, who has moved off the Common Core committee and is now director of the SAT school board, and the school board, the SAT tests, are now going Common Core. So there is quite a little bit of crony capitalism going on here. So Bill and Melinda Gates, about three or four years ago, funded these two Washington lobbyist groups to the tune of \$150 million. Those two lobbyist groups produced the standards. Now here's the really insidious part. How, you ask, how could a private billionaire financier, and basically a small cabal of lobbyist groups, produce a curriculum that now is the de facto curriculum in 46 states in the union? How did they get it approved? How did they get it passed? Well, way back in 2009, before the standards were ever written, Barack Obama created the 'Race to the Top' program, in which he doled out billions of dollars in federal taxpayer money to the states. He called it a stimulus for education. And so back in 2009, 2010, states received billions of dollars. New York, for instance: New York state received \$700 million from the federal government for their education budget. The only string attached to that was, if you take the money now, in 2009 your state will have to adopt the Common Core state standards when they are finally written. And that's how 46 states in the union got Common Core without ever seeing what it was, simply by being bribed a number of years ago to take the standards and take the money.

WOODS: Let me play devil's advocate here for a moment. I read an article not too long ago at *The American Conservative* website saying that sometimes conservatives get carried away. They extrapolate from something that, well, may have some problems but is more or less relatively harmless, to these dystopian futures in which, for example, educational centralization will have taken place and there'll be a national curriculum. This article is saying, look, the Common Core standards are just standards. They have no curricular content. You go and devise your own curriculum and the idea is that we just want you to make sure and do a good job. You can use Common Core to measure the difficulty and proficiency of your curriculum but you can't adopt Common Core for curriculum because it doesn't have curricular content. So then what are we worried about?

PESTA: Well the problem with that is, number one, there is not a shred of evidence that suggests that having high national standards, or even state standards, correlates to classroom behavior. This idea that you have this group of outcome-based education standards; there is not a shred of evidence that that has any impact on classroom behavior. Number two, the experts, including the two chief content specialists on the Common Core validation committee in math and English, both voted against it, arguing that the standards aren't that rigorous to begin with, in fact they are a step back in some ways. And number three, the disingenuous part of that, it seems to me, is that you cannot divorce the curriculum that has sprung up from the standards. Once the federal government got behind this through things like Race to the Top, all the curriculum companies, the textbook companies, otherwise free-agent entities, they immediately produced textbooks to support the standard. And so it's almost impossible now to find new textbooks that aren't driven by the Common Core standards. And not surprisingly, the people making the most money off the textbooks, the companies making the most money off the textbooks, are also huge financial donors and backers of Common Core. So as many have pointed out, this is the worst form of crony capitalism. Guess whose computers are going to be used across the country because schools, all schools, are going to need huge technology upgrades to be able to do the national Common Core testing? Guess whose computers are going to be used to do those upgrades? Well yes, it's the Bill and Melinda Gates people, right?

Let me ask you this, Tom, just think about it this way: what if instead of Bill and Melinda Gates it was the evil Koch brothers? What if instead of two small, left-wing lobbyist groups it was two right-wing ones? And what if instead of a very liberal president you've got a very conservative president who bribes states to take a curriculum that they have never seen by handing out billions of taxpayer dollars? The same people who support it now would be adamantly opposed to it, and they should be. This is no way to do public education, to let private financiers and lobbyist groups construct a curriculum behind closed doors that nobody had—no states, no local legislature, no moms and dads.... You said yourself you've just heard about it for about a year. It's been in the works for three years. They let nobody know about it. And so you've got the federal government funding it. You've got certain, very hand-picked, capitalist entrepreneurs who are funding it. And you've got an entire population who are now suffering under it and nobody had any idea that it was coming. No one's ever voted on this anywhere, any way, any form.

WOODS: Now you're a professor of English, so why don't we turn to that subject and have you tell us what kind of standards are being inserted for English and what the problem is with them.

PESTA: Sure. The English language arts standards, and a lot of this we know, because as I mentioned, after Common Core came up with the standard they brought together a committee whose job it was to validate the standard. Mostly activists. But there were two content specialists. There was one English language arts specialist, a professor, and there was one math specialist, a professor. Both refused to vote for them, arguing that these standards were going to set our kids back two to four years from where they're already behind, compared to other high-achieving countries in the world. Sandy Stotsky, Professor Stotsky, the English professor, made a very clear case, and we've seen the research now, that what Common Core English does is it lowers the overall level of reading in English class by 50 percent, and elevates writing by 50 percent. The problem with this is that kids are writing before they learn how to read. If you think about when you go to learn a foreign language, you don't start writing the language. You read it first. You get

vocabulary and grammar and syntax down. They're asking kids to write before they're able to read. The danger of this is that kids don't know what they are writing about. Also Common Core mandates that up to 50 percent of the literature, the stories that kids learn to read, that teach them about American history, about Western culture, 50 percent of the literature is removed from Common Core English classroom, and it is replaced with informational texts that the Common Core selected. These are called exemplar texts that the Common Core committee said were Common Core approved. There's about 450 of them. Many of them are non-literary informational texts and almost all of them are government pamphlets. Kids in third, and fourth, and fifth, and seventh grade now are going to be reading Environmental Protection Agency tracts. They're going to be reading arguments in favor of single-payer healthcare. One ninth grade reading assignment is recommended levels of insulation—how to insulate buildings in English class. And the problem with these informational texts is they are completely, politically one sided. There is no balance. The vast majority of them imprint in kids' minds that America is destroying the planet through global warming. There is nothing that questions that worldview. They are reading executive orders from President Obama in English class. Very contentious ones, with no sense of balance whatsoever.

WOODS: But, on the other hand, couldn't somebody say that it's not as if only just now that leftism is infiltrating the classroom. You can see all across the country that kids are already reading crazy stuff. And even if you were confining them to traditional literary texts, I can cherry-pick particular texts in order to promote my worldview as well. Think about people in the 1980s who probably were having kids read *I, Rigoberta Menchu* about Marxism in Guatemala, and the author turns out to be a total fake, we find out years later. Her brother wasn't killed, he was off at a prestigious private school. The whole story was phony and kids were indoctrinated with that. So if you want to indoctrinate kids you are going to do it one way or another, Common Core or no, am I right?

PESTA: I agree, but let me make a parallel argument to that. "Dr. Pesta, you could say that over the last forty years the federal government has become more and more involved in health care. You can argue, Dr. Pesta, that for years federal regulation and federal interference have driven up the cost of healthcare needlessly. So why, then, should we be afraid of the Affordable Care Act?"

WOODS: Touché.

PESTA: And the same reason you should be afraid of the Affordable Care Act is that Common Core is the most centrally federalized education scheme ever devised. And if it ever gets fully implemented, moms and dads who have kids in school are going to have as much a chance of fighting back against that as now the average citizen does about what's going on with health care. That's why you want to fight back on this. And you're right: even if you kill Common Core tomorrow they're still going to keep trying to do it. They'll still going to be inching this progressive agenda forward.

WOODS: Let's talk about math for a minute, because doesn't it seem like math instruction should be fairly straightforward, should be much less controversial? What would be the problem with establishing some sort of standards for math instruction?

PESTA: Nobody's against standards. By definition education is standards. Even bad education is a standard, there is something you have to do. The idea that somehow this is a zero-sum game—this is what the left does. If you oppose Common Core then you don't want standards. If you oppose Obamacare you want people to die in the street, right? If you oppose feminism it's a war on women. It's a false dichotomy. And by the way, the Common Core math standards are much more controversial than even the English ones. Professor Milgram, the Stanford math professor who did the math computations for the Apollo moon shot back in the late '60s and '70s, a big-time mathematician, points out that under Common Core math, algebra is pushed in many instances into high school. In every high-achieving math country in the world, kids start algebra as young as seventh or sixth grade. In American classrooms before Common Core, algebra was routinely put off until eighth grade. Now it's not going to be until high school, which means that our kids will

not be able to get calculus and higher math in high school. As Professor Milgram says, where are your engineers and your doctors and your architects going to come from if this gets put in place? And one of the reasons why Common Core math is so frustrating is because they've invented a whole new, completely counterintuitive way to do math. Math should be simple and it should be obvious. The whole stacking math way that we used to do math—remember when you added, or subtracted, or multiplied, and divided, you would put numbers in columns on top of each other and you'd go down the column and add them? All that now is utterly displaced. Math is all about drawing now. And they're spending a lot of time in their math class writing about math rather than doing it. The preferred method of Common Core math is the so called pair-and-share method, where teachers don't teach math to kids, they put kids in little groups, groups of two and three, they give them problems, and the purpose of the assignment is not to get the right answer, the purpose of the assignment is to come to consensus in your group as to what you think the right answer is.

WOODS: What about the counter-argument that what we are trying to do in Common Core is to get the kids to understand the math—not just to teach them some kind of rote mechanism for doing it but to understand why that mechanism works, what the logic of it is? Here is my own thinking. From what little of it I've seen, their alternative is not intuitive at all. Secondly, for most people, because most people hate math—as a former math major, every time I'd tell people I was a math major people would hold up a crucifix and step away—what most people can aspire to is precisely just being able to do the calculations. I would love for them to understand why the quadratic formula is such and such. I'd love for them to understand the derivation of the quadratic formula. But I think that's too ambitious for most people. I realize now I'm sounding like exactly the type of evil guy with horns on his head that Common Core wants to banish from society, but I'm just being realistic.

PESTA: No, you're absolutely right. You can't rewrite human nature and you can't rewrite brain chemistry. The bottom line is that most kids need to know how to do math. All of this philosophy of math, all of this writing about math, is counter-productive. To give you an example, I'm the opposite of you: I'm an English professor because I was so lousy at math. And for me, I would have liked Common Core. I was always behind in math. I would have loved it because if you asked me to spend a lot of time in math class sitting in a group of other kids I'm always going to default to the one who knows. I'm not going to learn math. I'm going to default to the one in my group who knows it. And if you allow me to spend math class drawing circles and cubes and squares and all of this absolutely arcane nonsense that you have to do to come up with numbers in Common Core, I'd have loved that, too. But if you had done that to me, what would have happened to the kids who really could do math? The bottom line is, as you know, Tom, most kids aren't going to be excellent in math. So what we're doing in Common Core—and that's where the 'common' comes in in Common Core—rather than encourage and provide a circumstance where those kids who really can excel have an opportunity to do it, we are pulling those kids down so that there is a basic low standard of math that everyone feels comfortable with. In other words, we want kids to feel comfortable with math; we don't necessarily want to reward or single out those kids who could really do it.

WOODS: Now in our final moments I want you to give me the summary version of why people should be concerned. Is it primarily because this could lead to a national curriculum or is it other reasons? What's the quick sound-bite case against Common Core?

PESTA: The simple sound-bite case is this. When you boil it down it's not about education. Education is about teaching kids in ways that work. I've given you examples and if we had three hours I could give you three hours more. This is not about education. If you have to say what Common Core is about in one word, it's about statism. It's about convincing kids that they belong to the government, not the parents. Why are we doing these arcane math assignments, Tom? I've got CPAs and doctors who can't help their kids with fifth-grade math. It's not because they don't understand the math. We're creating a culture where only the schools, and only this curriculum, knows how to teach your kids. Why are they reading government pamphlets? Why are they reading propaganda about the environment in their classes now? It's because the

primary premise of Common Core, when you boil it right down, is that the state owns your kids, not you, and we all should be very worried about that.

WOODS: What can people do and how can they learn more about this?

PESTA: Well, there's lots of ways. There's so much stuff on the Internet now. And I should point out to you, Tom, and your readers that this is not just a right-wing or conservative issue. Just a couple weeks ago the New York state teacher's union, one of the most liberal, largest teachers unions in the country, voted to rescind Common Core. The National Education Association, one of the most liberal teacher group nationally, they voted, they called Common Core completely botched, needs to be scrapped, and started over. This is a huge problem now. There's all sorts of information out there that they can find, just do your homework and get on board. And start calling the state and local legislatures and let them know that we need to put the brakes on this. This was rushed into being, nobody knew about it, let's take our time and look at this. Maybe there is something in Common Core than can be useful, but look at the Byzantine, the arcane way it was put into place in our schools. Nobody knew about it. That can't be a good thing. We've got to put the halt on this and actually create standards state by state that are going to work for our kids.

WOODS: Before I let you go, can you explain to me why those groups would be against Common Core? They're probably reasons that aren't the central ones, but I'm curious.

PESTA: Well, there are a number of states including New York, as a classic example, where Common Core was rolled out early. In Alabama, in my state of Wisconsin, we're just getting started with Common Core. In fact in Wisconsin, I'm sure it's probably the same in Alabama, we haven't even had our first national Common Core test yet. But in states like New York, where they've had it for two years they've done two full years of testing. Percentile scores in math and English in New York dropped from the 79th percentile all the way down to the 39th. This is causing havoc. You have two years' worth of experience in places like New York that shows just how unworkable the math is. How political the English is. How impossible for kids at young ages in particular to adopt and to think the way that Common Core asks them to. And then you've got the hideous test scores. That's why even very liberal administrators, liberal organizations in states where they've had it are backing out, are trying desperately to back out now.