



FEDERALISM ISSUE: DO THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS TAKE AWAY TOO MUCH LOCAL AUTONOMY?

BY ELLEN LEMPRES '18 & CAROLINE PECK '18

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The Common Core Standards originated from an initiative written by former Arizona Governor and former chair of the National Governors Association Janet Napolitano.¹ Napolitano, as director of the NGA's Educational Policy Division, wrote an initiative that emphasized the need to better the workforce through improved math and science education.² From this initiative, Napolitano set up a task force which issued a report in 2008 with "international benchmarking" to "help states take the next steps towards ensuring that American students receive a world-class education that positions them to compete and innovate in the 21st century."³ In order to do so, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), comprised of state school chiefs, governors and state commissioners from 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia, aimed to create standards which would "ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live."⁴ With major funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, other foundations, as well as from state membership dues from the CCSSO and the NGA, education consultants Jason Zimba and David Coleman began writing a series of "fewer, clearer, higher" standards based on a plan from the nonprofit, Achieve, and testing groups like the College Board and the ACT.⁵ Furthermore, several organizations, such as the National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), organized teachers to provide advice for the standards.⁶ States that adopted the standards would test on uniform standards in math and English.

Overall, the Obama administration has claimed that it played no role in creating or requiring Common Core curriculum. In fact, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has contended that "Not a word, not a single semi-colon of curriculum will be created, encouraged, or prescribed by the

federal government. We haven't done so--and we won't be doing so."⁷ Furthermore, it did not require that states adopt the Common Core Standards upon their creation in 2009.⁸

However, critics have argued that the process that brought Common Core about was less consistent with federalism than first appears, and was actually dominated by quasi-official groups like NGA and CCSSO and Gates Foundation money rather than robust debate at the state level by elected state officials.⁹ Moreover, after creation of the standards in June 2009, the Education Department strongly encouraged adoption through tangible incentives.¹⁰ Three months later, in September, 51 states and territories expressed their support for the standards, with only Virginia, Texas, Nebraska, and Alaska never adopting the standards.¹¹ Each of the states that did not adopt the standards has implemented its own comprehensive state standards.¹² In July 2009, the Education Department designed the competition, "Race to the Top," which promoted \$3.4 billion in grants for educational success within that year.¹³ States that implemented the Common Core standards increased their eligibility for the award, incentivizing Common Core adoption, and the deadline of the race catalyzed faster movement towards Common Core curricula and also Common Core-aligned testing.¹⁴ After the conclusion of this "Race to the Top" in September 2010, the federal government awarded further grants "to two state consortiums in a separate Race to the Top Assessment competition to develop new and better assessments aligned to the Common Core standards."¹⁵ Obama went on to advocate support for this "Race to the Top," which further entangled the federal government in the Common Core standards.

Along with the Race, the federal government began to provide No Child Left Behind waivers, relieving states from some NCLB requirements, in exchange for positive action on Common Core.¹⁶ Kentucky's state education commissioner complained that "the rush to implement the

standards has also led to inadequate support for teachers, inadequate communication with our public and a major pushback from teachers who have connected Common Core with standardized testing.¹⁷

This federal entanglement spurred great criticism, especially from conservatives.¹⁸ The 2012 and 2013 Republican National Committee Platform, emphasized "the need to repeal the numerous federal regulations which interfere with State and local control of public schools."¹⁹ Furthermore, these documents denounce the Common Core as "an inappropriate overreach to standardize and control the education of our children."²⁰ Following these statements as well as further backlash, many Republican-majority states considered repealing the Common Core Standards, and Oklahoma, Indiana, South Carolina actually did pull out of the standards.²¹ After repealing these standards, Indiana Governor Mike Pence stated, "I believe when we reach the end of this process there are going to be many other states around the country that will take a hard look at the way Indiana has taken a step back, designed our own standards and done it in a way where we drew on educators, we drew on citizens, we drew on parents and developed standards that meet the needs of our people," demonstrating Indiana's support for a more localized education system.²² Similarly, Oklahoma Republican Jason Nelson co-authored the original Common Core repeal bill, explaining that Oklahoma citizens universally, "don't like the idea of having to go to somebody outside the state to do what we think is in the best interest of the kids in our school system"²³ In South Carolina, members of the state Board of Education were unhappy with the "federal takeover" of Common Core and have moved to a system where "the teachers, the administrators, the school districts...make the decision about the curriculum material they use" to pass the new South Carolina-specific standards.²⁴

Aside from the federalism issues, the Common Core Standards have been criticized for their content across the political spectrum by sources including the conservative journal *National Review*, the liberal journal *The New Republic*, key teachers unions, and the raunchy comedian Louis C.K.²⁵ After several state repeals and despite great controversy, forty-two states, the District of Columbia, and four territories are implementing these federal standards in their schools today.²⁶

THE CANDIDATES

As one might expect, given the diverse sources of national criticism, the Common Core Standards face opposi-

tion from both Republicans and Democrats. Republicans tend to criticize the lack of state autonomy, arguing that education policy should be set at the state and local level and are discontent with the extension of the Department of Education's power over K-12 curricula. Republican candidate Donald Trump criticized the Common Core Standards as "a disaster" in his announcement speech, maintaining, "education has to be local."²⁷ In fact, Trump has considered the eradication of the entire Department of Education, contending, "I may cut the Department of Education. I believe Common Core is a very bad thing" in an interview with "Fox News Sunday."²⁸ The Republican Party Platform stands clear that the federal government should have a very limited role in education, and parents should play the primary role in their children's education. To this end, the Platform states, "We support a constitutional amendment to protect that right from interference by states, the federal government, or international bodies such as the United Nations."²⁹ Moreover, the Platform declares that Republicans oppose "the imposition of national standards and assessments, encourage the parents and educators who are implementing alternatives to Common Core, and congratulate the states which have successfully repealed it."³⁰ Thus, the Republican Party stands united in its hopes to move away from Common Core Standards and move towards more localized education.

On the Democratic side, there appears to be more support for Common Core, although Democrats still see fault in the policy. Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton has spoken in favor of a "common core" that each community can determine the best way to reach.³¹ She explained in an interview with *Newsday* in April that despite problems with Common Core's implementation in schools around the country, she has "always believed that we need to have some basis on which to determine whether we're making progress, vis-à-vis other countries who all have standards."³² As a New York senator, Clinton voted for No Child Left Behind, and she advocates for "a core of learning that we might expect students to achieve across our country, no matter what kind of school district they were in, no matter how poor their family was."³³ She has also denounced the politicization of Common Core as "very painful" and "really unfortunate." In this year's Democratic Party Platform, Democrats do not explicitly make reference to Common Core standards, although they explain, "We are also deeply committed to ensuring that we strike a better balance on testing so that it informs, but does not drive, instruction."³⁴ The platform also highlights that, "Democrats know the federal government must play a critical role in making sure every child has access to a world-class education" and states, "We will hold schools, districts, communities, and states

accountable for raising achievement levels for all students."³⁵ Altogether, the Democratic Party argues for the importance of federal oversight in education, but it also calls for improving our national testing system. ■

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² Bidwell, Allie. "The History of Common Core State Standards." *US News*. U.S.News & World Report, 27 Feb. 2014. Web. 27 Jan. 2016.

³ "Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education." *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education*. N.p., 19 Dec. 2008. Web. 27 Jan. 2016.

⁴ "Preparing America's Students for Success." *Common Core State Standards Initiative*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Jan. 2016.

⁵ Garland, Sarah. "The Man Behind Common Core Math." *NPR*. NPR, 5 Jan. 2015. Web. 27 Jan. 2016.

⁶ "Development Process." | *Common Core State Standards Initiative*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Jan. 2016.

⁷ United States. Department of Education. *Seize the Day: Change in the Classroom and the Core of Schooling*. By Arne Duncan. U.S. Department of Education, 27 Jan. 2014. Web. 27 Jan. 2016.

⁸ "The Common Core FAQ." *NPR*. June 6, 2014. Accessed January 27, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2014/05/27/307755798/the-common-core-faq#q4>.

⁹ Stanley Kurtz, Jeb's Misleading Talk on Common Core," *National Review*, August 10, 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/422323/jeb-misleading-talk-common-core-stanley-kurtz>

¹⁰ "The Common Core FAQ." *NPR*. June 6, 2014. Accessed January 27, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2014/05/27/307755798/the-common-core-faq#q4>.

¹¹ Bidwell, Allie. "Common Core Support in Free Fall." *US News*, August 20, 2014. Accessed January 27, 2016. <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/08/20/common-core-support-waning-most-now-oppose-standards-national-surveys-show>.

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¹³ "The Common Core FAQ." *NPR*. June 6, 2014. Accessed January 27, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2014/05/27/307755798/the-common-core-faq#q4>.

¹⁴ "The Common Core FAQ." *NPR*. June 6, 2014. Accessed January 27, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2014/05/27/307755798/the-common-core-faq#q4>.

¹⁵ Whitman, David. "The Surprising Roots of the Common Core: How Conservatives Gave Rise to 'Obamacore'." *Brown Center on Education Policy*, September 2015. Accessed January 27, 2016. http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/09/08-conservative-roots-of-the-common-core-whitman/surprising-conservative-roots-of-the-common-core_final.pdf.

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¹⁷ Bidwell, Allie. "Common Core Support in Free Fall." *US News*, August 20, 2014. Accessed January 27, 2016. <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/08/20/common-core-support-waning-most-now-oppose-standards-national-surveys-show>.

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