



The Kochs' war on Common Core

By Steven Elbow
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When Gov. Scott Walker first spoke against Common Core educational standards last fall, his remarks coincided with a flurry of anti-Common Core activity across the nation, including a similar repudiation of the standards by Florida Gov. Rick Scott, who, like Walker, had previously backed them.

So when Walker called for Common Core's repeal on Thursday, it wasn't surprising that other Republican governors, too, were initiating processes to roll it back in their respective states.

Here's the lead to a story Thursday in Utah's Desert News: "Gov. Gary Herbert on Thursday announced that he is directing the Utah Attorney General's Office to review the state's adoption of the Common Core State Standards."

From a story in Thursday's Citizen-Times in Asheville, N.C.: "The Common Core curriculum standards that dictate what's taught in grade school classrooms across the state are on their way out. The House approved a compromise bill, 71-34, Wednesday to rewrite the statewide curriculum to better tailor it for North Carolina students. The legislation now heads to Gov. Pat McCrory, who promised minutes after its passage that he would sign the bill."

From a Fox News story Thursday out of Baton Rouge, La.: "After weeks of public disagreement, Gov. Bobby Jindal and Education Superintendent John White are sitting down to talk about standardized testing for the upcoming school year ... Jindal, a one-time Common Core supporter, now opposes the standards as a federal intrusion into local education."

Another battle is raging in New Jersey, where Gov. Chris Christie on Monday issued an executive order to review the standards.

It's all part of a state-by-state assault on the standards in states that have already spent millions putting them into place. In Indiana, Gov. Mike Pence signed a law in April revoking Common Core. Republican governors in Oklahoma and South Carolina have since followed suit.

In all, reports New Jersey's Star-Ledger, lawmakers in 27 states have proposed rolling back Common Core standards.

For a system designed to standardize educational standards and improve America's educational standing internationally — quietly put in place, in one form or another, in 45 states and the District of Columbia in 2010 with little opposition — the coordinated fury of the opposition is perplexing.

Until you look at who's behind it.

While some on the left have opposed Common Core, primarily because of its focus on standardized testing, obliterating the standards has become a defining focus of the right. And most influential among right-wing opponents are Charles and David Koch, arguably among the most formidable non-elected political players in the history of American politics.

Among Koch-connected groups working to eliminate Common Core is the Boston-based Pioneer Institute, which has been working against Common Core standards since 2009. The group provides research papers showing how adoption of the standards "weakens the quality of academic content in Massachusetts' classrooms, and raising serious questions about the legality and the costs of Common Core," according to the group's website.

The Institute receives funding from several conservative groups, including the David H. Koch Charitable Foundation and the Koch brothers-funded Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund.

"For decades, the independent, libertarian-leaning Pioneer Institute has loomed large in Massachusetts policy debate," writes the Boston Globe's Joanna Weiss in a column on Friday. "Now, it has a national profile as the brains of the Common Core opposition."

While Charles and David Koch haven't been vocal in their opposition to Common Core, the billionaire brothers learned a long time ago that money speaks louder than words.

"A spokeswoman for the Charles Koch Foundation said it hasn't made any grants specifically aimed at the Common Core," says a Politico story from last fall. "But tax documents show the Koch brothers have supported many of the advocacy groups working against the standards."

Those groups include Americans for Prosperity, founded by David Koch. AFP has roused activists to pack town hall meetings and rallies to attack the educational standards.

FreedomWorks, which started out as the Koch-funded Citizens for a Sound Economy, has targeted Common Core as the first step of a broad educational agenda, reported Politico earlier this year. Here's Politico's synopsis:

“First, mobilize to strike down the Common Core. Then push to expand school choice by offering parents tax credits or vouchers to help pay tuition at private and religious schools. Next, rally the troops to abolish the U.S. Department of Education. Then it’s on to eliminating teacher tenure.”

Koch money also goes to groups like the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute, which have made considerable efforts to undermine Common Core.

Meanwhile, the Kochs are working to infiltrate public schools with their own agenda, write Christina Wilkie and Joy Resmovits in the Huffington Post on Thursday. Through a program created and funded by the Kochs called Youth Entrepreneurs, the brothers have worked to insert their pro-free market, anti-regulation agenda into curricula.

The program is ostensibly a high school business course.

"The underlying goal of the program, however, is to impart Koch's radical free-market ideology to teenagers," write Wilkie and Resmovits. "In the last school year, the class reached more than 1,000 students across Kansas and Missouri. Lesson plans and class materials obtained by The Huffington Post make the course's message clear: The minimum wage hurts workers and slows economic growth. Low taxes and less regulation allow people to prosper. Public assistance harms the poor. Government, in short, is the enemy of liberty."

It's all consistent with David Koch's nearly forgotten 1980 vice presidential run on the Libertarian Party ticket on a platform that included the “complete separation of education and state.”

“Government schools lead to the indoctrination of children and interfere with the free choice of individuals," the platform read. "Government ownership, operation, regulation, and subsidy of schools and colleges should be ended.”

Now we know what they want to replace it with.