

Common Core goes from unifying standard to divisive hot potato

Ideological opposition to an education policy adopted by 45 states has led some parents to school their children at home

By Nicky Woolf
August 3, 2014

When Jenni White worked in a charter school founded by Janet Barresi, she was impressed by how hard Barresi worked and how well she organised. When Barresi ran for state superintendent of education in Oklahoma in 2010, White wholeheartedly supported her, even staking out pro-Barresi lawn signs.

Less than four years later, White, now president of Restore Oklahoma Public Education (ROPE), was so disillusioned with Barresi that she not only pulled her three children out of the state's school system entirely but also urged ROPE supporters to vote against her in the primary. Barresi was trounced, coming bottom of the field.

What came between them was an education policy that Oklahoma adopted along with 44 other states – Common Core. A set of national standards in English and mathematics, it is a policy states can use to more accurately measure a child's academic progress.

Previously, states were the ultimate arbiter of students' educational level. Now, most have signed up to the national set of standards, and while the standards are not federally mandated, participation does come with a federal sweetener in the form of competitive grant money.

When she first discovered this, White told the Guardian, she was appalled. "Having a set of national standards would be antithetical to what this nation was founded upon," she said. "We have local control of education. That's how it was set up." She said the grants seemed to her "almost like a form of coercion".

The ground had shifted under Barresi. Common Core, which had at first seemed so harmless, had become political poison. Groups from ROPE to the Tea Party started to clamour and states that had accepted Common Core without fuss began hurriedly to reconsider. Indiana formally withdrew from Common Core in March. This June, Oklahoma's governor, Mary Fallin, chair of the National Governors Association – whose initiative Common Core had originally been – signed a bill repealing it. In South Carolina, Governor Nikki Haley did the same; in Louisiana it was announced this week

that the state government is being sued by a group led by a state representative, Brett Geymann, for bringing in Common Core without consultation.

“A lot of the opposition is based on misconceptions about what standards are,” said Robert Rothman, author of *Something in Common: the Common Core Standards and the Next Chapter in American Education*. He told the Guardian that the standards are not a curriculum, and nor do they dictate how schools should teach; they simply aim to set where the baseline is for expectations for all students.

In mathematics, for example, the Common Core standards set a baseline of eight principles to be taught, such as “reason abstractly and quantitatively” and “use appropriate tools strategically”, and then mandate a set of topic areas to be covered at certain ages – algebra, functions, geometry and statistics in high school, for example. They leave states to decide everything else, down to whether the topic areas are covered sequentially, year by year, or all at once in parallel.

Rothman said he finds the misinformation surrounding Common Core “frustrating”.

So what changed? “The Common Core standards became politicised,” said Anne O’Brien of the Learning First Alliance, an overarching body that incorporates the two major teachers’ unions in the US as well as principals’ groups and national parent-teacher groups. “It’s not necessarily related to the content; it’s more about the politics around it.”

For example, the reading section came under heavy fire for its choices of texts – but actually there is no reading list accompanying the standards. The books mentioned were simply examples of texts at a certain level of difficulty.

There was also political resistance to a series of tests in the pipeline for next year, designed to analyse whether the Common Core states are meeting the standards. Several states have already indicated that they will not use them.

“A few states also have said they would use the [Common Core] test for elementary and middle school but will use other tests through high school,” Rothman said, adding: “The concern is we don’t know enough about these other tests, or if they test effectively.”

Common Core, because it was championed by President Barack Obama, has become a rallying point for his opponents, like the Tea Party. It is no coincidence that all the state governors who have signed or promised to sign legislation repealing Common Core in the last month – Fallin in Oklahoma, Haley in South Carolina, Scott Walker in Wisconsin – are Republicans facing tough re-election battles in November and looking to shore up their support among the conservative base.

The anti-Common Core movement is extremely well-funded. Organisations backed by the billionaire Koch Brothers, including the Cato Institute and the behemoth Americans for Prosperity, have major campaigns in action against Common Core. The Kochs are also major donors to, among many others, the campaigns of Walker, Fallin and Haley.

Many of the parents who feel strongest about Common Core have responded by taking their children out of the public schools system. Data from the National Home Education Research Institute show that the number of children being homeschooled has gone up by between 2% and 8% every year since 2010, to around 2.2 million today. This has caused a proliferation of homeschool groups, many of whom deeply distrust Common Core.

“One of the reasons I choose to homeschool is so that I can have a Christian viewpoint, a Christian world-view,” said Kayla Curtis, from Louisiana. She is not alone in this desire. In a survey by the National Centre for Education Statistics in 2011, 64% of parents who chose to homeschool their children said they were doing so for religious reasons.

Curtis and her husband are part of the Christian Home Education Fellowship of Louisiana. Beryl Amadee, the group’s legislative associate, said she was worried that while homeschooled students were not directly affected by Common Core legislation, there would be a knock-on effect when they would be expected to meet the same standards for college admissions. One nationwide college entrance test, the ACT, is already aligned with Common Core standards; another, the SAT, is expected to follow suit soon.

“When people say they are opposed to Common Core, they’re not opposed to challenging standards. No one would be opposed to that,” Amadee said. “But Common Core is more. It’s a huge intrusion; very offensive. And in a state like Louisiana, we’re a conservative, traditional state. None of the Common Core curriculum has been written here. So teachers are left to shop online for curricular materials that are stamped with Common Core seal of approval.”

What they’re often finding is curricular material that has been written elsewhere, in places that are absolutely not traditional; that they are politically progressive, extreme liberal propaganda. That’s horrific.”

Amadee said that her area, Terrebonne Parish on the Louisiana bayou, had seen public schools “haemorrhage” pupils to homeschooling. “Parents were so upset that they simply withdrew,” she said. “They could not see their children continuing in that environment, where their privacy is being intruded on, where they’re being exposed to propaganda. In my area I think the homeschool population doubled.”

The superpower of the homeschool advocacy world, and the only national body representing it, is the Home School Legal Defence Association (HSLDA), founded in 1983. In the last four election cycles it spent \$320,000 (£190,000) on lobbying; its average spending tripled immediately after Common Core was introduced, though HSLDA’s director of federal relations, Will Astrada, denied a link.

HSLDA advertises itself as “a non-profit advocacy organisation established to defend and advance the constitutional right of parents to direct the education of their children and to protect family freedoms”, but its ties are further to the right. Its founder, Michael Farris, is an outspoken campaigner on Christian conservative issues, and its political

action committee donates money exclusively to Republican candidates – its biggest recipient in the recent electoral cycle was the Minnesota representative Michelle Bachmann and it has previously endorsed Todd Akin, the Missouri senatorial candidate who in 2012 made nationally controversial comments about “legitimate rape”.

Astrada describes the HSLDA as “non-partisan,” though he admits that it is Republican candidates who fall within the group’s ideological purview. “We are a Christian organisation,” he said. “Our board is pro-life; our board is for a limited federal government.”

The HSLDA has a sub-organisation called Generation Joshua, which funds volunteers to campaign for favoured political candidates.

“[The HSLDA] was built on the back of a lot of conspiracy nonsense about how the government was trying to indoctrinate children,” said Manny, who requested that his real name not be used in this report. Manny was homeschooled in a family that was heavily involved with, and influenced by, the HSLDA, and whose mother was a “huge fan” of Michael Farris.

“It gave parents a get-out of any responsibility to the quality of their children’s education,” he said. He thought that it was from this same wellspring of mistrust of government that the group’s opposition to Common Core originates.

Manny told the Guardian that he feels he still suffers from gaps in his education thanks to the ideological stance of the HSLDA. “I didn’t get out of the homeschool system until I was 16 years old, and I still can’t do basic algebra,” he said.

Bob Farrace, the public affairs director for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, which supports Common Core, is disappointed with the whole battle. “It’s got a lot to do with ideology, and very little to do with the content,” he said.

Farrace is gloomy about the future. Common Core may, he said, be “doomed”.