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For right, Common Core fight prelude to bigger agenda

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National advocacy groups powered by the Koch brothers and other conservative megadonors have found a new cause ripe with political promise: the fight to bring down the Common Core academic standards.

The groups are stoking populist anger over the standards — then working to channel that energy into a bold campaign to undercut public schools, weaken teachers unions and push the federal government out of education policy.

The Common Core standards, which have been adopted in 45 states plus the District of Columbia, are meant to guide rich and rigorous instruction in math and language arts. They have substantial bipartisan support. But they have also drawn sharp bipartisan criticism as Big Government overreach.

What started as a ragtag opposition led by a handful of angry moms is now a sophisticated national movement supported by top donors and strategists on the right. Conservative groups say their involvement already has paid dividends in the form of new members and troves of email addresses.

But that's just the start.

A [draft action plan](#) by the advocacy group FreedomWorks lays out the effort as a series of stepping stones: 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.

"This is going to be a huge campaign," said Whitney Neal, the group's director of grass-roots activism. She plans to kick it off within weeks with a series of videos that will "connect the dots" between killing Common Core and enacting other conservative priorities.

The campaign will build to a march on Washington this summer, perhaps in partnership with radio host Glenn Beck. "This is definitely an institutional priority for us in 2014," she said. "We're putting a lot of time and resources into it."

[Americans for Prosperity](#), an advocacy group backed by the Koch brothers, is pressing similar themes in town hall meetings across the country.

A key battleground: Missouri, where conservatives are pushing to get measures [promoting vouchers](#) and [ending teacher tenure](#) on the fall ballot. Increasingly, the issues are being linked to Common Core. Concerned Women for America held a conference outside Kansas City, Mo., this weekend that opened with denunciations of Common Core and built to an address by state Sen. Ed Emery, a voucher proponent who has compared the current public education system with slavery because it traps students in government-run schools. Concerned Women, which is part of a Koch-backed network of conservative organizations, will hold additional seminars across the state this month.

The libertarian Show-Me Institute in St. Louis is also fighting Common Core — and sponsoring policy breakfasts in both St. Louis and Kansas City this month on the virtues of expanding school choice. Meanwhile, the institute’s president, retired investment manager Rex Sinquefield, has poured \$850,000 of his personal fortune into promoting the ballot measure to end tenure. Missouri will also host a [two-day conference](#) devoted to attacking Common Core at the end of the month.

Supporters of the Common Core standards have plenty of resources to fight back. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has spent \$170 million to develop and promote the standards. The Obama administration has pushed them hard. Big Labor and Big Business both back them.

Still, supporters have struggled to counter the critics. They have had trouble even understanding the contours of the smoldering opposition.

“We don’t know who’s funding the other side, and to what purpose,” said Michael Cohen, president of [Achieve](#), a nonprofit that helped write the standards. “It’s really murky.”

Such dark suspicions tickle Sean Fieler, the hedge fund manager who chairs the [American Principles Project](#), another conservative think tank on the front lines of Common Core opposition.

“I wish the money stream were more murky here,” Fieler said. At least at APP, he said, “most of the funding is from me.” Fieler, a prominent social conservative who has spent big in the past to fight gay marriage, said he has directed his organization to spend \$500,000 organizing the Common Core opposition and connecting it to his think tank’s long-standing drive for school choice.

“The grass-roots support for this is stronger than for anything else we work on,” Fieler said. “This is an issue with great political promise.”

That same political calculation is evident in [FreedomWorks](#)’ draft plan for an Educational Freedom Campaign. Picking up the mantle of parental rights “casts a passionate and caring light on our activists — different from the image currently portrayed by media,” the draft states. The campaign also offers a rare chance to attract new members from outside the tea party — “especially minority communities.”

Already, the strategy is paying off. FreedomWorks started the year in contact with a few dozen stalwart foes of the standards; it now holds weekly strategy sessions with more than 200. “Common Core is bringing in people who are brand-new to activism. They’re coming out of the woodwork,” Neal said. “That’s huge for us.”

Americans for Prosperity’s state chapters also report membership growing because of the issue, even in states like Texas that have not adopted the standards.

“It’s been exhilarating” to watch momentum gather and allies come aboard, Fieler said. “I would characterize this as a tipping point.”

The opposition movement is even starting to draw in conservative Christian groups that in the past have mostly focused on promoting home schooling.

Parents who teach their children at home aren’t directly affected by the new standards but fear they will face pressure to follow them when most textbooks, not to mention the SAT, are aligned to Common Core. Homeschoolers also sense an opportunity to grow their ranks by fanning anger at the public education system.

The Home School Legal Defense Association is putting the finishing touches on a [documentary](#) painting the Common Core standards in ominous terms. FreedomProject Education, a Christian homeschool group affiliated with the John Birch Society, is promoting an [hourlong video](#) on the “threats to American liberty” posed by the standards. Even the evangelical group Focus on the Family has chimed in with [a video](#) that pivots from the perceived dangers of Common Core to the need to push for expanded school choice.

All of this has left supporters of the standards reeling.

“There’s no doubt it’s going to be a brutal legislative session,” said Michael Petrilli, executive vice president at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

Petrilli has spent the past year traveling from statehouse to statehouse, attempting to shore up support for Common Core. He expects to earn many more frequent-flier miles trying to keep the standards on track as protests mount, especially in wavering states such as Indiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida and Michigan.

The [Common Core State Standards](#) were written by nonprofit education advocacy groups with input from state associations and funding from the Gates Foundation. The Obama administration gave states financial and policy incentives to adopt the standards in 2010; most quickly did, often with little public debate.

In the past year, as the standards have begun rolling out in classrooms nationwide, the opposition has picked up steam.

Tea party activists angry about federal overreach have joined forces with liberals who object to the new standardized tests and worry that Common Core asks too much of some students and too little of others. Conservative organizations — including think tanks connected with the Koch brothers, such as the Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation — have dedicated the most resources to fighting the standards, but liberals have been highly active on social media and at public hearings.

And they’re not happy that conservative political strategists are seeking to harness the opposition to their own ends.

“I would be very concerned if opposition to Common Core became a vehicle to promote vouchers and charters,” said education historian Diane Ravitch, a prominent critic of the standards.

The politics of the debate are so tangled that education policy analyst Frederick Hess said he doubts groups like FreedomWorks would be able to mold the opposition into an effective lobbying force for bold goals like expanding vouchers.

“How do you take a whole bunch of disjointed criticism from left and right and use that to mobilize people for a policy agenda?” said Hess, of the conservative American Enterprise Institute.

But strategists leading the fight are convinced it will work.

The anti-Common Core movement so far has been about saying “no” to the standards, “but at some point soon, we’ll have to define what ‘yes’ is — and school choice is a perfect ‘yes’ for people to galvanize around,” said Jim Stergios, executive director of the [Pioneer Institute](#), a conservative think tank.

Exhibit A: North Carolina, where the wealthy and influential conservative strategist Art Pope funds a think tank that has mobilized strident opposition to Common Core.

That think tank, [Civitas Institute](#), also backed a successful drive in the Legislature last year to eliminate teacher tenure and enact a voucher program to pay private school tuition for low-income students. Lawmakers stipulated that voucher students will not have to take the same state tests as public school students — a huge win for Common Core foes, who want private schools to feel free to teach what they want, without pressure to prepare students for exams aligned to the new standards.

Bob Luebke, education policy analyst for Civitas, said the voucher bill may well have passed in North Carolina even without the Common Core fight stirring up parent demands for school choice. But his colleague Terry Stoops, who works on education for another [Pope-funded advocacy organization](#), said linking the two issues is helpful and would likely give a boost to voucher legislation in other states.

In addition to Missouri, Tennessee and Kansas are likely battlegrounds.

In Kansas, a voucher bill failed to pass in 2012 — but Americans for Prosperity spent the fall holding town halls across the state, in part to prod anti-Common Core activists into pressing the issue anew in the coming months. “It’s one of our key talking points,” said Peggy Venable, AFP’s state policy adviser.

As they take up the fight against Common Core, conservative groups are injecting a dash of professionalism into a scrappy mom-and-pop campaign.

They have the money to fly prominent Common Core foes to testify before state legislatures and speak at public forums. They’ve helped rookie activists set up websites and recruit allies. They’ve drafted model legislation.

Their battle-tested political strategists have even drawn up game plans for key states — including how to secure meetings with key lawmakers and which talking points to stress.

“For a mom like me who has spent the last 14 years raising children, buying groceries and cleaning house, having those type of groups to ask questions of, ... it’s been invaluable,” said Debbie

Higginbotham, a mother of six in Orange Park, Fla., who sees the standards as a federal power grab.
“They’ve been a huge asset.”