



## What happened when one state tried to rewrite the Common Core

### Inside Louisiana's painful struggle over standards

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Carla and Carl Hebert, with two daughters and a granddaughter in tow, made the hourlong drive from their home in Lake Charles in October to watch a panel of Louisiana educators transform the controversial national Common Core standards into “Louisiana standards.”

Like many, the Heberts' anger over Common Core began with homework assignments. Carla Hebert remembers days when the whole family grew frustrated trying to help her granddaughter with the new, Common Core-aligned homework questions.

“When you have two teachers and a dad who has four college degrees all struggling to help out with elementary school homework, something's wrong,” she said.

The two teachers she's referring to are her daughters, Shawna Dufrene and Tiffany Guidry. Dufrene, a fourth-grade teacher at Moss Bluff Elementary School in the Lake Charles suburb of Moss Bluff, was serving on the review panel. Guidry, a former teacher and mother of three, sat in the audience with their parents.

They all had come looking for big changes to the standards. But by the end of the long day, the Heberts were divided on whether the review was living up to its promise.

Their frustration speaks to a tension felt across the country; with nearly two dozen states revising the Common Core standards, policymakers are grappling with what role, if any, parents should have in tweaking those standards.

Can teams of educators in states like Louisiana improve standards that were years in the making? And can the revision process serve both an educational and a political purpose — generating more buy-in for the standards while simultaneously improving them?

As in many states, Louisiana's Common Core review is the result of years of pressure from parents and politicians. Last year, lawmakers — in an effort to neutralize the issue in the months leading up to November's gubernatorial election — charged a committee with coming up with “Louisiana standards” to take effect next August. But, as in other states, opponents say the process has been rushed and doesn't allow for much meaningful input from parents.

The goal of the committee meeting that Carla and Carl Hebert turned up for was to draft a new set of math standards for grades three through 12 by the end of the day. Small groups of teachers divided by grade level spent two hours coming up with proposed changes, then reconvened to

debate the proposed alterations. Members of the public who had come to provide input had to sit and wait. Public comment was not scheduled until after the debate.

This was only the first step of a long, arcane process. The proposed changes were to head next to a “standards committee,” a second group of educators who would hold public hearings and then send notes back to the original committee.

Separate sets of committees would do the same for English standards in grades three to 12 and those for kindergarten through the second grade.

Finally, when all of the committees have wrapped up their work, the changes will go before the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education for a final vote in March.

Given the breadth of material to cover, the process can be unwieldy. At the math committee meeting, Dufrene suggested changes to most of the fourth-grade standards, leaving the committee no time to debate the other grades. The meeting broke up after 7 p.m. without taking much public comment, though only about two dozen members of the public showed up.

Dufrene’s changes focused on areas in which she felt the standards had crossed the line from telling teachers what they needed to teach to dictating how they needed to teach.

For example, she called for removing language from a fourth-grade multiplication standard that suggested teachers should ask students to explain answers by using equations, arrays or area models. Arrays, where students use dots to represent numbers, and area models, in which students shade in parts of a rectangle, are visual tools used to show their work.

While some of the educators agreed with Dufrene, others felt the language was necessary to ensure teachers go beyond teaching the procedure and use techniques that encourage deeper, more conceptual learning. Those who opposed cutting the language eventually won out.

Carla Hebert, meanwhile, felt completely shut out by the process. “If they really wanted to include us, they would have started with public comment,” she said late in the afternoon. “It’s after 3 o’clock; we’ve been just sitting here for six hours.”

As in other states, an online survey was designed to be the primary vehicle for parents to weigh in on potential changes. But in state after state, this has proven to be a highly imperfect and fraught way of soliciting parent feedback.

A New York survey, for instance, generated about a quarter of a million responses — 70 percent of which were positive — with parents contributing about a third of the responses. In Kentucky, which also got mostly positive feedback, about 20 percent of the respondents were parents. West Virginia received about 250,000 comments, over 96 percent of which were positive. Nearly 90 percent of the respondents were educators or administrators; just 5 percent were parents.

The results in Louisiana mirror the national trend: While public opinion polling has shown that the majority of Louisianians say they dislike Common Core overall, the online survey was much more positive. Over 80 percent of the comments received were favorable. About a quarter of the 720 reviewers — who collectively contributed 30,000 comments through the online portal — were parents.

Carla Hebert said a lot more parents would have used the portal if it provided laypeople like her with the kind of information they needed to really evaluate the standards.

The portal was essentially just a link to all of the standards. Participants were given four options: keep any particular standard as is; move it to another grade; break it into multiple standards; or remove or rewrite it.

Carla Hebert said the site's bare-bones nature made it difficult for most parents to really engage. To make a judgment on each standard, she felt she needed to know what the old Louisiana standards looked like and how the different standards affect tests and homework.

"We want to participate; give us the knowledge," she said. "If they really wanted us to have a part in this, they would be giving us all the information we needed."

Her daughter, Guidry, said she felt the survey was designed with the intent of keeping Common Core largely intact.

"I'm an experienced educator, and it took me two hours to comment on just one of the subject areas," Guidry said. "They made the process so difficult that it was like you were getting penalized if you wanted to make a change to the standards."

A team from the Southern Regional Education Board, an Atlanta-based nonprofit, reviewed the public comments and presented findings to the standards committee. Comments also were made available to committee members.

Holly Boffy, who represents Guidry's corner of southwest Louisiana on BESE, argues that the surveys were never intended to let parents weigh in on every single aspect of the standards.

"The advice I gave to parents was to pick the area they were most concerned about," said Boffy, who supports Common Core. "If (your) main complaint is that the Common Core is federal intrusion into local schools, the portal isn't of use to you."

Others say it's disingenuous to suggest that parents have any real voice in the Common Core state rewrites.

"With many of these reviews, parents have to specifically say each and every component of the Common Core they don't like," said Neal McCluskey, the director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, which opposes the standards. "It's unrealistic to think you are going to have a huge groundswell of parents with lists of what they want changed and how they want it changed. What parents want is for it to feel like the Common Core wasn't forced on them."

That kind of public debate was definitely not taking place in Crowley, where the technical nature of standards writing was on full display. Dufrene recommended nearly 20 changes to the fourth-grade math standards alone.

Phil Daro, one of the three lead writers of the Common Core math standards, is worried all this tinkering will do more harm than good.

"The Common Core standards are not perfect; there are things that could be done to improve or tweak them, but it's not likely the process that many of the states are going through is going to address the real issues," Daro said. "I'm not saying they can't be improved, but you would have to go through the same painstaking process that we did. Just having politically engineered meetings of mathematicians and teachers for three days is not going to fix anything and will probably instead make things worse."

The committee ultimately adopted some substantial changes, like adding a standard calling for teachers to instruct kids in the earlier grades how to count money. By the end of the night, Dufrene felt they were making headway in creating more teacher-friendly standards.

Heading to her car after a marathon 10-hour meeting, she said, “If the process continues like this ... I’m happy.”

But it all seemed like small tweaks to the other members of the Hebert family in the audience.

“I am very impressed with how hard all you educators are working on this, and my comments are not directed at you but the people above you,” Guidry said during the public comment period.

“But you can’t do this kind of work in just two or three meetings.”