

# EDUCATION WEEK

## Common Core May Persist, Even in Opposition States

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Opponents of the Common Core State Standards got a boost in recent weeks, as Missouri and North Carolina moved to reassess their involvement, while the governors of Utah and Wisconsin distanced themselves from the standards.

Less clear is what exactly those opponents have won. The early pattern suggests that the common standards could undergo some relatively minor changes but still persist in states where opposition has led to high-profile bills and big headlines.

The formal structures that buttress the standards, and the related tests from two federally funded consortia, have eroded somewhat, as states reconsider their adoptions of the standards and reject the common tests. And common-core advocates have other worries—most notably, whether states, districts, and schools have done enough to make sure the standards work well in classrooms.

However, so far there is little sign and not a great deal of precedent that the states backing away from the common core, or considering doing so, will ultimately produce anything that is truly different from those standards.

“The common core is not a yes-no,” said Michael McShane, a research fellow at the Washington-based American Enterprise Institute. “There are shades of gray in there.”

### 'Repeal Lite' Strategy Seen

Florida, where state lawmakers rebuffed legislation to put the brakes on the common core, could end up being an archetype for states moving to re-examine the standards rather than repeal them outright.

After soliciting public input on where the common core in Florida should be changed, the state school board adopted some alterations to the standards in March. But officials did not dump or vastly change the common core. (Adoption guidelines for the standards said that states can supplement the common core with their own specific standards, up to an additional 15 percent worth of standards.)

The language concerning the common core in new laws in Missouri and North Carolina reflects a similar approach. In both states, the laws create groups—with some members appointed by state legislators—that will review the common core and make recommendations about

English/language arts and math standards to their respective state boards. But there's no explicit prohibition on any set of standards, or reversals of those states' prior adoptions of the common core.

And even though board members will likely be under political pressure to seriously consider and adopt recommendations from those advisory groups, nothing obligates the state boards to detach themselves from the common standards.

Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon, a Democrat, and North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory, a Republican, both stressed that the bills they signed into law July 14 and July 22, respectively, constituted reviews of the standards and opportunities to raise academic expectations in general. Gov. Nixon noted in a statement that the relevant bill was originally written to "ban" the standards, while Gov. McCrory stated that he was focused on how the review would deal with "testing issues."

In South Carolina, the state education department has begun drafting new standards based on a measure signed by Gov. Nikki Haley, a Republican, in May. But the executive director of the state's Education Oversight Committee, Melanie Barton, said in June that significant changes to the common core won't be possible by the time the state's new standards are used in the 2015-16 school year.

And despite such moves, Missouri, North Carolina, and South Carolina will all retain the common core in schools for at least the 2014-15 school year. None of those three states has explicitly prohibited the standards, and what exactly a ban on the common core would look like isn't clear.

"It's what I call Repeal Lite. You get to pound your chest and say, 'I threw out the common core,'" said Bob Wise, the president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, a Washington-based group that supports the common core, and a former Democratic governor of West Virginia.

### **Achieving a Broader Goal?**

Political and policy goals based on rejecting the standards also can be quickly mired in legal and bureaucratic maneuvering. Despite the anti-common-core declarations of Gov. Bobby Jindal—a Republican who is widely assumed to be interested in a presidential run—as well as a looming legal fight over tests aligned with the standards, Louisiana has so far kept the common core on the books.

Even for Oklahoma, which decisively dumped the common core by reverting to its prior content standards in June, shifting to new standards has posed problems. The state school board, which adopted the common core in 2010, has twice delayed approving an official plan for replacing it, after groups representing local school boards and administrators raised concerns about the process.

Oklahoma's new standards, which must be approved by the legislature by August 2016, could end up looking very similar to, or completely different from, the common core—or be something in between.

Friends of the common standards are less than thrilled with the political angst surrounding them. But they also argue that part of the common core's mission—to push states to adopt more rigorous standards as a general matter—is working as intended.

“The ideas behind the standards are holding, whether or not there’s a debate about the specifics in the standards,” said Chris Minnich, the executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, which oversaw the common core’s development along with the National Governors Association.

Another possible variation is on display in Indiana, where the common core was largely retained by the state in the new standards it adopted in April, even after officially repealing its 2010 adoption of the common core.

That continuity has angered opponents of the common core within the state and elsewhere. Indiana’s path could illustrate the difficulty for anti-common-core activists of truly rooting out the standards during such a process, even when there is ostensible political support for doing so.

### **Independent Choices**

Some opponents of the common standards say their real concern is not primarily what’s in them, but whether states now make decisions that aren’t tainted, in critics’ view, by pro-common-core financial incentives offered by the federal government in the Obama administration’s Race to the Top grant competitions and waivers from the No Child Left Behind Act. To that extent, the opponents see marked progress.

“If a state really thinks common core is the best thing to do, then they should adopt it. I don’t want them to adopt it because they want to get federal money, or want to get a federal waiver,” said Neal McCluskey, the associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a Washington think tank.

Mr. McCluskey said Mr. Minnich’s espousal of a general push for higher standards is, in fact, an implicit concession that the common core is taking more hits than supporters anticipated it would a few years ago.

And Mr. McCluskey said that he expects opposition to the common core to continue, and to spike at the start of 2015, when many state legislatures start new sessions.

### **Political Distancing**

In July, two Republican state leaders distanced themselves from the common core in distinct ways.

In Utah, Gov. Gary Herbert tasked the state attorney general with reviewing the standards’ connections to the federal government.

And Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin called for the legislature to repeal the common core in 2015, although at least one state GOP lawmaker with power over K-12 policy has criticized the announcement.

But pushback will also be driven by parents and school district officials who reject merely cosmetic overhauls of the common core and demand something better, said Sandra Stotsky, a professor emerita of education reform at the University of Arkansas’ Department of Education Reform in Fayetteville, Ark. She oversaw the development of academic standards in Massachusetts from 1999 to 2003 and is a critic of the common core’s quality.

Ms. Stotsky said that common-core opponents are now smart enough to reject Indiana's approach of largely repackaging the standards. But she said these opponents, in turn, have to push for officials to specify precisely where new standards under development are an improvement.

"If you want to have a common-core floor, label the floor as a floor, and then show us the furniture; ... you've got to show us what's above the floor," Ms. Stotsky said.

Common-core advocates should be happy about states that drop the common core in name only, Mr. McShane of the American Enterprise Institute said. But they still should worry about whether the standards have been wrapped in too much "messianic language" about their transformative power, he said, as well as about the number of states that stick to the common core in all the important ways.

"Maybe that's actually a good thing for the common core that only states that really want to do the common core do it," Mr. McShane said.