



Who Wins With a Common Core 'Review' Bill?

Revising Common Core could calm many concerns and still lead to high standards, one expert says.

By Allie Bidwell
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More states are taking middle-of-the-road approaches toward the Common Core State Standards, and both opponents and supporters say it's a good thing.

During the last few weeks, governors in Missouri, North Carolina, New Jersey and Utah have all taken actions to allow for a review of the standards, which have had a meteoric rise to the forefront of political controversy in recent years. Even the American Federation of Teachers, the second largest teachers union in the nation, is providing funds for local affiliates to revise the standards.

Legislatures in several states – including Indiana, Oklahoma and South Carolina – have passed measures calling for an outright repeal of the academic benchmarks, but more states appear to be opting for a review and revision process that could yield completely reworked standards, or Common Core under another name.

But who really wins when a team comes together to review the standards?

"It's a relief on a pressure valve in states where there's been increasing pressure to get rid of Common Core," says Andy Smarick, a partner at Bellwether Education Partners and a senior policy fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in Washington. "It scratches a bunch of itches."

These types of bills, Smarick says, could lead to the best outcome for the Common Core initiative in the long-run.

While some supporters could see the review and revision processes as a setback, it opens up a discussion about exactly what high academic standards look like, Smarick says. At the same time, those who feel the standards were forced on them, rather than developed with them, can take more ownership in the process this time around, and possibly subdue concerns of federal overreach.

"Lots of states adopted the standards without doing their due diligence, without taking the time to understand how it would affect all these other systems," says Michael McShane, a research fellow in education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. "In that case, it's better late than never to get folks together to evaluate the standards and evaluate the capacity within the state to implement the standards."

The content of any changes to current standards or new standards to be developed, though, will depend on the composition of the committees tasked with the process and the language of the bills. In New Jersey, for example, Gov. Chris Christie will appoint the committee. Others may be selected by legislators or through another process. Specifications as to whether the bills allow for tweaks to current standards or for a complete rewrite could also have a noticeable impact, Smarick says.

"Once you give the right to reexamine, you've opened a door to just about anything unless the legislation is very specific," Smarick says. "We don't know where this is going to lead, and that scares a lot of people. I think it's going to lead to a buy-in, which will be good for everyone involved."

But some Common Core opponents think it's a step toward completely cutting ties with the initiative.

North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory on Tuesday signed legislation that calls for a review and revision of the English and math standards, based on recommendations from an advisory commission to be formed.

Kristen Blair, a fellow at the North Carolina Education Alliance and a member of the group StopCommonCoreNC, says the decision is a step in the right direction.

"It puts the standards back in the hands of the state Board of Education," Blair says. "It's too early to say if the product will be a new set of standards that are rigorous, developmentally appropriate and really easily understood by parents and teachers. It's going to be critical in the coming months to see who's appointed to the commission, how they respond to public, parental and teacher input and how transparent their work is."

After Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon signed a bill that allows parent and teacher groups to submit recommendations to revise the standards, the Missouri Coalition Against Common Core hesitantly applauded the move as a step toward enabling "Missourians to direct and develop education for Missouri students."

"We believe this is an important step forward that applies the appropriate caution when implementing a new and untried system to protect our teachers, districts and students from consequences that are not supported by valid data," the group said in a statement.

Emmett McGroarty, director of education at the American Principles Project, which has led an opposition movement to Common Core, took a stronger stance, saying Missouri's

revision bill is the "first and crucial step to end Common Core" and replace it with new standards.

"Politicians are becoming more aware of the issues with the Common Core and the reasons for the pushback against it," McGroarty said in a statement. "The issue of Common Core is rapidly gaining momentum and is becoming a larger political issue. It has already become a theme in the 2014 election cycle, but will only continue to gain momentum – until it becomes a make or break issue for those running in 2016."

Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, says it's likely legislators have undertaken review efforts more to temporarily quell Common Core opponents than to ultimately replace the standards.

It's still uncertain whether such moves will really cause opposition to die down, he says, but if the firestorm continues for the next year or two, measures allowing groups to review and revise the standards could still provide an opening to eliminate Common Core.

"My guess is it's going to remain pretty big, in which case these will become vehicles to largely, at least symbolically and publicly, move away from the Common Core, even if ultimately they keep a lot of Common Core-type content," McCluskey says.

But it also depends on the atmosphere, demographics and leadership of the state, McCluskey adds. In a state like New Jersey where there has not been as extreme of a pushback toward the standards, there might need to be more of an outcry against Common Core to use Christie's review order to eliminate Common Core, he says. But in states like North Carolina and Missouri, which tend to be more conservative, there could be more chance for a break.

"This is really going to be an important upcoming year. If you see as much opposition this coming year as you did in the previous school year, you're going to see a lot of the more red states use these sorts of things to pull out of Common Core," McCluskey says. "And if it gets even worse, which is quite possible when the test scores start coming out, then I think in blue states you'll see the same thing."