Common Core backers mount a counterattack

Reforms a hot topic in Republican primaries

By Ben Wolfgang

May 5, 2014

Facing increasingly vocal criticism, supporters of the Common Core package of school reforms launched a counter-assault Monday, seeking to reassure wavering Republicans that supporting the controversial new educational standards doesn't necessarily spell political doom in primary elections.

A new survey commissioned by the pro-Common Core organization Collaborative for Student Success and conducted by veteran Republican pollster John McLaughlin, found that among all voters, 35 percent approve of Common Core, 33 percent disapprove and 32 percent know very little about the standards. Among Republican primary voters, the negatives were slightly higher — 33 percent approve, 41 percent disapprove and 26 percent don't know.

Backers of the Common Core standards — which have been wholeheartedly endorsed by the Obama administration and promoted by prominent Republicans such as former Florida Gov. and possible 2016 GOP presidential candidate Jeb Bush — argue those results, while still showing sharp divisions, prove that conservative Republicans as a whole aren't as violently opposed to the system of national math and English standards as widely believed.

Furthermore, they say, the study demonstrates that support for Common Core can be an asset in a general election. Among swing voters, 32 percent approve of the reforms, 30 percent disapprove and 37 percent don't know.

"Based on the relentless drumbeat of opposition coming from the political right, a Republican candidate could be forgiven for assuming conservatives don't support Common Core standards. But, in fact, the view of Common Core among Republicans isn't nearly as clear-cut as many conservative activists think," Mr. McLaughlin said.

While it's undeniable the issue is becoming a bigger deal within the Republican Party, some Common Core critics concede that the issue at this point is unlikely to be the single driving force for many voters this fall.

Still, candidates' and elected Republicans' positions on Common Core steadily have come into the spotlight, and much of the intensity appears to be on the anti-Common Core side.

Thom Tillis, the front-runner in Tuesday's Republican Senate primary in North Carolina, is facing harsh attacks from FreedomWorks and other conservative groups for accepting the endorsement of Mr. Bush, who remains one of the GOP's most notable Common Core advocates.

Mr. Tillis recently said in a primary debate he supports repealing the system, which was developed by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers and promoted by the Obama administration through federal grants and other means.

The issue also has reared its head in Republican Senate primaries in Nebraska and Mississippi, and in other races across the nation.

Over the weekend, Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead barely escaped a censure resolution at the state GOP's convention, with critics specifically citing the fact he "supported Common Core education standards against party policies."

Last week, Indiana's State Board of Education formally adopted new, state-written math and English standards, putting the final nail in Common Core's coffin in the Hoosier State.

Like Mr. Bush, Indiana's former governor, Mitch Daniels, has been an outspoken Common Core supporter, but now his state has become the first to officially ditch the system entirely after previously voting to implement it.

With Indiana's withdrawal, 44 states and D.C. now use Common Core, though movements to exit the system have gained steam in a number of states.

The reason for that is parents, politicians and others are just now learning about the system, even though it was developed years ago and already has begun to be implemented, said Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the libertarian Cato Institute and an outspoken Common Core critic.

"It was all under the radar, how it was created," he said. "...Implementation finally hit districts and hit schools, and people said, 'What is this thing?'"

The standards were not designed to establish a uniform curriculum to be used in all schools nationwide. Instead, they set benchmarks and lay out specific facts, concepts and skills students are to have mastered by the end of each grade level.

How students meet those goals can be determined at the state, local or even individual school level.

While some conservative candidates are using Common Core as a punching bag, other Republicans argue the system aligns perfectly with the party's most central values.

"As a Republican, I think Common Core fits with who we are. It's outcomes-focused. It's helping prepare students for a very competitive economy," Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam said Monday.