



Why Common Core? How the controversial program came to NY

By Ashley Hirtzel

The Common Core Learning Standards in New York state have caused a great deal of confusion and controversy. But where did Common Core come from and why was it implemented?

State Education Commissioner John King faced a huge public outcry when he tried to address Common Core at a parent forum in Poughkeepsie last fall. The Poughkeepsie crowd was relentless -- heckling, shouting and booing King. The public meeting was cut short. The difficult reception forced King to cancel other scheduled townhall-style meetings. But to put in perspective how Common Core was created, we need to rewind back more than a decade.

“We’ll go back to 2002. That’s when the federal government passed the No Child Left Behind Act and it had the federal government, for the first time, tell states that if you want to get part of your Elementary and Secondary Act money, and that the basic federal elementary and secondary education law, that states had to have standards in mathematics, reading, and science,” said Associate Director of the CATO Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom Neal McClusky.

McClusky says 2002 was the year the federal government also mandated states test students in math, reading, and science.

“And then they had to get all kids to something called 'proficiency' by 2014 in math and reading. In addition, you had to get all kids making progress on an annual trajectory toward this full proficiency every year,” said McClusky.

Who developed Common Core?

McClusky says Common Core further evolved with the Obama administration’s introduction of Race to The Top, a competition designed to further reform education across the country.

New York State Regents Chancellor Emeritus Robert Bennett says states worked to create common standards for students in Kindergarten through 12th grade that all states could adopt. He says that’s when the Common Core was born.

“It got the name Common Core because 45 states developed these standards over a period of two-and-a-half years. And the people from those states were the chief state school officers, the

commissioners of education, a group of teachers, a group of higher education professors, a group of business people,” said Bennett.

New York state voted to adopt the Common Core standards in 2010 with the intention to phase them in over a period of seven years. Bennett says the state Board of Regents presented the standards to the 700 school districts across the state as a way to foster critical thinking for students in pre-K through 12th grade.

“They’re more demanding, because it’s going to require more reading, more writing, and more problem solving in mathematics, but that’s a good thing because we want our kids to be better prepared for careers and college,” said Bennett.

Why was Common Core created?

“They were created so that our students, when they finish 12th grade, get into colleges and not be put into remedial programs, which in some cases was as high as 40 or 50 percent, particularly in junior colleges, and be ready for a career and whatever training that required,” said Bennett.

New York State Education Commissioner John King says schools across the state have followed a set of standards since the late '90s, but the Common Core standards provide more rigorous guidelines.

“It’s important that students are prepared to meet the higher challenges of the 21st century. It’s not an indictment of the past work in schools, but it is to say that to succeed in the 21st century requires more skills and more preparation,” said King,



New York State Education Commissioner John King
Credit Ryan Delaney / WRVO/file photo

King says stricter learning standards are the key for United States students to compete with other countries.

“What you see is, unfortunately, the United States in the middle of the pack and lagging behind our international competitors. We know we need to do better and Common Core is the path to get there,” said King.

Is Common Core really the answer?

The federal government also expected that uniform standards would allow students across the country to be taught the same things, making it easier for students to stay on track if they move. The plan would also save districts money by sharing materials. But many disagree that Common Core will better prepare students for the future.

“They never did any pilot studies to identify the problems. The costs are skyrocketing as school districts have to create new curriculum. It, frankly, is a disaster across the board and it’s pretty rare when you get parents, you get students, you get school boards, and you get government officials lining up with teachers unions and others to say, ‘we just need to admit this is a abject failure,’” said Rep. Chris Collins, a Republican from western New York.

Collins says the state exams based on the Common Core standards are causing confusion for students taking tests that don’t affect their grades. They’ve been causing anxiety for teachers whose Annual Professional Performance Reviews, or APPRs, are based in part off those tests. But regent Bennett says teacher evaluations, testing, and the Common Core standards are all separate issues.

“The more questions that can be raised, the greater the debate as long as we understand what the conclusion is, and the prize a well-informed student who can compete with students from around the globe and around other states that are equally rigorous about this. We have a core belief that students, if taught properly, can achieve more than they’ve been achieving over the past decade,” said Bennett.

Still the implementation process of the learning standards continues to cause turmoil.