

# Common Core standards drive wedge in education circles

By Greg Toppo, USA TODAY

Updated 13h 56m ago

WASHINGTON – When did fractions and non-fiction become so controversial?

A high-profile effort by a pair of national education groups to strengthen, simplify and focus the building blocks of elementary and secondary education is finally making its way into schools. But two years ahead of its planned implementation, critics on both the right and left are seizing upon it. A few educators say the new standards, supported by the U.S. Department of Education, are untested, and one Republican governor wants to block the measure, saying it's a federal intrusion into local decisions.

How did something so simple become so fraught?

The story begins in 2009, when the [National Governors Association](#) and the [Council of Chief State School Officers](#) announced an effort to create voluntary national standards in math and reading. All but four states — Arkansas, Nebraska, Texas and Virginia — quickly signed on to the standards, known as the [Common Core](#), agreeing to help create then implement them by 2014. Their decision was helped partly by [President Obama](#), who has tied "college and career-ready standards" to billions in federal grants. Last September, he all but required adoption of the Common Core if states want to receive federal waivers from the 2002 No Child Left Behind law.

That angered conservatives, who point out that even though adopting the Common Core is voluntary, Obama's moves make it all but obligatory. In February, Republican South Carolina Gov. [Nikki Haley](#) said she'd support a state legislative effort to block Common Core implementation — her predecessor had adopted the standards in 2010.

"Just as we should not relinquish control of education to the Federal government," she wrote in a letter to a state lawmaker, "neither should we cede it to the consensus of other states." U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan shot back with unusual candor, saying in a statement that Haley's fear of losing control is "a conspiracy theory in search of a conspiracy."

Also in February, [Brookings Institution](#) scholar Tom Loveless issued research calling into question whether the Common Core would have much of an effect. He noted that state standards have done little to equalize academic achievement within states. The reaction, he says, was "like putting my hand in a hornet's nest — people do have a strong reaction to the Common Core."

Last month, [New York University](#) education historian [Diane Ravitch](#), a vocal Duncan critic, blasted the standards, writing in *The New York Review of Books* that they've never been field-tested. "No one knows whether these standards are good or bad, whether they will improve academic achievement or widen the achievement gap," she said.

Neal McCluskey of the libertarian [Cato Institute](#), said concerns of lawmakers like Haley may have seemed far-fetched a few years ago — states voluntarily signed on to the standards, after all — but Obama's insistence on tying the Common Core to No Child waivers and billions in federal grants shows that "it is not the least bit paranoid" to say the federal government wants a national curriculum.

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten called those fears "ridiculous." Guidelines around core subjects don't constitute a national curriculum, she said, but are a simple way to boost skills. "We do our kids a disservice when we do not teach (them) to compete in a global economy," she said.

Weingarten said many teachers approve of the new standards, which "offer students the ability to think and persuade and communicate" rather than just fill in blanks on standardized tests. She and others point to recent surveys that show nearly two-thirds of teachers say it's better for states to have common math and English standards. But she frets that teachers won't get adequate training — and that they'll be judged harshly if their students don't measure up at first. "It has to be implemented with integrity so teachers can get their arms around it," she said.

[David Coleman](#), one of the standards' authors, admits that they'll be "a major shift," requiring more history, arts and science in English and reading classes, for instance, and less fiction. But he says it's needed to correct a decade of watered-down lessons. The biggest problem with No Child's requirement that schools raise test scores each year was that it was "content-free," he said. The law "was merely saying, 'Test whatever you got.'"

[Chester Finn](#), a former Reagan administration education official who now leads the [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#), a Washington education think tank, said Common Core "sets a worthy destination for kids and teachers, which most states have failed to do on their own for many years." He actually thinks it could ease conservatives' fears of federal intrusion, because common goals and tests might prompt Washington to "back off on telling people how to run their schools."

But he said it's "a pity" that Obama insisted upon the Common Core, especially leading up to the 2012 elections. "The best thing the administration, or the Congress, for that matter, could do is to pretend that the Common Core doesn't exist."

Barbara Dzwonek, an elementary school English coach in [Daly City](#), Calif., said the standards are "a step in the right direction because they are state-driven and based on the highest-quality research the field of education has to offer."

David Riesenfeld, a history teacher who has been using the standards since 2010, said they've "pretty significantly pushed me to think about how much I cover" each school year. Because they require more depth in just a few areas, he said, they've forced him to focus more on teaching students to read and write about a handful of "significant topics" in world history.

Riesenfeld, who teaches 10th-grade world history at Robert F. Wagner Jr. Secondary School for Art and Technology in Long Island City, N.Y., said he often relies on shorter passages and pushes students to read more closely and analytically — occasionally a class will spend an entire period breaking down a single paragraph. "In effect, they're learning how to use materials rather than just answer question a, b, c and d," he said.

As a result, Riesenfeld said, his history students often look and sound as if they're in an English class.

"What they're starting to do is begin to think, 'Well, he's really not going to give me the answer, so I've really got to figure out what's going on here.' "