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State school systems rethink Common Core standards

By: Ben Wolfgang – May 6, 2013

The growing backlash against the nationwide K-12 school standards known as Common Core, bubbling to the surface in Indiana, Michigan and elsewhere, has become the hottest story in education.

But for a handful of holdouts — including Virginia — it's old news.

The commonwealth is one of four states to resist the system, billed as a state-led reform movement but seen by many critics as a death knell for local control over classrooms. A fifth state, Minnesota, has adopted half of the Common Core system by agreeing to implement the English language arts standards but rejecting the mathematics portion.

In Virginia, state education leaders have long believed that their standards are better.

"We're already in the process of implementing college- and career-ready standards, not only in the instruction that's provided but also the assessments that students take," said Charles Pyle, spokesman for the Virginia Department of Education. He added that the department incorporated some pieces of the Common Core mathematics system into Virginia's standards, which strengthened what already was in place.

For critics, Virginia has had the right idea all along. Conservative pundits such as Glenn Beck criticize the standards as a backdoor way for the federal government to take over education — a notion that Common Core supporters vehemently dispute.

Some forces from the left — most notably, teachers' unions — also are calling for caution. In a speech last week, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten reiterated her support for the standards but said it is unfair to tie high-stakes tests to those standards until teachers and school administrators have had time to truly understand and implement them.

"We aren't saying teachers shouldn't be evaluated. We are not saying that there shouldn't be standardized tests. We're talking about a moratorium on consequences in these transitional years" as Common Core is put into place, Ms. Weingarten said.

Kentucky and New York have begun to tie testing to Common Core learning benchmarks, which are divided into two main categories: mathematics and English language arts. The standards are the result of a collaborative effort of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

The system gives instructors great leeway in how they run their classes. But in an effort to better prepare students for college and career, it does lay out specific facts, concepts and skills that students must master by the end of each grade level.

Supporters argue that the standards will produce a better-trained American workforce and that education disparities from state to state will disappear gradually.

In early grades, students in each of the 45 participating states and the District of Columbia will, for example, focus on learning basic sentence structure, phonics, word recognition, fluency and other foundational concepts.

Seventh-grade math students will study proportional relations and rational numbers while working with shapes to learn about surface area and volume. In high school, algebra, geometry, statistics and more advanced concepts come into play.

Aside from the resistance in Virginia and in a few other states, Common Core was rolling toward implementation smoothly until now.

Groups opposed to Common Core are emerging across the nation as lawmakers take a second look at the system. Michigan is considering legislation to defund Common Core, and Indiana has advanced a bill to "pause" implementation while the concept is studied further.

Nebraska, one of the four states that hasn't adopted Common Core, has launched an "alignment study" to determine whether its existing standards fall short. No such movement has appeared in Alaska or Texas, which have dismissed the standards entirely.

The Republican National Committee has adopted a resolution calling on states to abandon Common Core, highlighting how the issue has divided the GOP. High-profile Republican figures such as Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush strongly support the standards.

When the dust settles, many analysts say, Common Core will survive in theory, but the heart of the system — the assessments directly linked to the standards — may fall by the wayside.

"Most states will adopt Common Core at least in the name. But they will not use the tests, at least many states won't. And then the whole purpose of Common Core is going to kind of fall apart," said Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute.

By refusing the standards, states have paid a price. Texas Gov. Rick Perry, a Republican, once said, "The academic standards of Texas are not for sale." It was a dig at the Obama administration's attempt to push states into the system by linking Race to the Top grants and other incentives to adopt the system.

Virginia also understood that saying "no" to Common Core meant no dollars from Race

to the Top, the White House's signature education initiative that has doled out billions of dollars to winning states. It awards points if a state puts into place college- and career-ready academic standards. Critics argue that only Common Core would satisfy the administration's criteria and that refusing to adopt it meant little to no chance at grant money.

"It's clear that Virginia's decision [not to pursue Common Core] was a factor in the commonwealth not getting a Race to the Top grant a couple of years ago," Mr. Pyle said.