

POLITICO

How Common Core quietly won the war

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October 12, 2015

Note to 2016 GOP contenders: The Common Core has won the war.

Republican presidential candidates are still bashing the divisive K-12 standards. Donald Trump recently called the Common Core a “complete disaster,” and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz proclaimed they should be abolished — along with the Education Department.

But it’s too late. Ask most any third grader: Just as Common Core and rigorous standards cheerleader-in-chief, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, prepares to step down, the standards that naysayers love to call “Obamacore” have become the reality on the ground for roughly 40 million students — or about four out of every five public school kids.

The math and English standards designed to develop critical thinking have been guiding classrooms for years now, even as the political fight wages on in statehouses and on the campaign trail: Many of today’s textbooks, workbooks, software and tests are designed to teach the oft-bashed academic standards and measure whether students are meeting them. The federal Education Department gave them a big boost, but never required them, nor can it.

In more than half of all states, millions of students took new standardized tests last spring based on the standards, and the expected uproar over these test scores hasn’t materialized. The conspiracy theories about how Common Core would require monitoring kids via iris scans, force teachers to use porn to help students learn to read or ban teaching cursive have largely quieted.

After years of hand-wringing, very few of the 45 states that fully adopted the standards have attempted a clean break — and those that did found it wasn’t easy to do. In Indiana, where Republican Gov. Mike Pence signed a bill last year to ditch the standards, even Common Core haters have said the new ones are just the same standards by a different name.

“The few states that have rolled it back, when you look at what they’ve actually done, the standards they are using are 95 percent the Core standards. It’s what we know needs to be taught,” Melinda Gates said last week. She’s the wife of Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, whose foundation has been heavily involved in promoting and implementing the standards.

As Common Core becomes more commonplace in public schools (and in many Catholic schools), some prominent Republicans concede they’ve lost their battle. Take former Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer of Arizona. As governor, she signed an executive order banning the use of the

words Common Core by state agencies, though the standards themselves were still firmly in place. She wrote in a recent column on the Fox News website that implementation of the standards is “succeeding.”

Outspoken Common Core critic Neal McCluskey of the Cato Institute agrees that the standards are likely here to stay — though that won’t stop his ongoing assault on the Obama administration using billions in incentives to nudge states to adopt the standards. What might change, he said, is how much states are held accountable for students' mastery of the standards, but “my sense is that most states are going to officially stay with Common Core or something like it.”

Karen Nussle, director of the Collaborative for Student Success, a group that helps lead the public relations charge in support of the standards, said the big fight over the standards is “a bit in the rearview mirror” as the conflict shifts to lesser skirmishes.

Standards have come under reconsideration in many states, yet some reevaluations have had a surprise conclusion — ringing support for the Common Core. That was the case for a public review in the deep red state of Mississippi. Kentucky also found wide support for the standards during a similar review.

In New York, where the uproar has been intense, Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo recently declared the implementation of the standards had failed. But even as he ordered a review and promised reform, he didn’t throw out Common Core.

More than 40 states are sticking with Common Core though several have ditched the tests based on the standards developed for groups of states with the help of \$360 million in federal dollars. The new tests adopted in Ohio, Arkansas, Wisconsin and elsewhere, however, are still designed to measure learning under Common Core. Many states are taking more subtle steps, slipping off the now-toxic Common Core name and giving the standards names like Missouri Learning Standards and, in North Carolina, Standard Course of Study.

Parents in some pockets of the country are joining the so-called opt-out movement: Large numbers of students in New York and Washington skipped exams based on the Common Core this spring. Oregon passed a law expanding parents’ right to keep their kids from taking tests without penalty.

Some states are also tussling over how to set student scores. Ohio spurned the general benchmarks for the PARCC exam being used in about a dozen states, giving students who are “nearing expectations” according to PARCC guidelines a boost and calling them “proficient” instead. In Florida, Common Core supporters are running online ads calling on state officials to set a high bar in interpreting scores — even though that means more students would be labeled as failing this year.

But Louisiana state Superintendent John White, a standards supporter, said progress has been made on the Common Core even if states like his choose new tests, making it more complicated to compare how students in different states are doing. “States have adopted higher standards, states have tests that measure those standards and they are comparable,” White said in August.

Though they are embedded in the classroom, that doesn't mean the Common Core standards are popular, as recent polling shows. One dad had a viral hit on Facebook when he wrote a fake check, full of inscrutable X's and O's and little boxes, to mock Common Core math lessons.

So many politicians continue trying to capitalize on that sentiment. Several GOP governors in the 2016 pack have flipped their positions on Common Core, including Chris Christie of New Jersey, Mike Huckabee of Arkansas and Bobby Jindal of Louisiana. Jindal has been fighting the federal government over the standards in court. He recently lost a second lawsuit when a judge issued an order that says the standards don't represent a federally imposed curriculum. Jindal said he will appeal.

Only Ohio Gov. John Kasich and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush haven't entirely renounced their previous embrace of Common Core. Kasich declared at an education forum in New Hampshire in August that, "I'm not going to change my position because there's four people in the front row yelling at me." Bush has grown increasingly tepid, saying he doesn't believe the federal government should be involved. "If people don't like Common Core, that's fine," Bush said at the same event. "Just make sure your standards are higher than they were before."

Greg Fischer, the Democratic mayor of Louisville, Ky., said the war of words over standards has been a distraction.

"You've got a few political people talking about it but most people just want their kids going to a good school," Fischer said at a recent POLITICO forum.

And the Common Core fits the bill for many principals and teachers. They find big advantages in having shared standards. One popular aspect is the ability to more easily exchange lessons and ideas on sites like ShareMyLesson.com and Pinterest, where tens of thousands of teachers have looked for lesson plans.

Jayne Ellspermann, the principal at West Port High School in Ocala, Fla., said teachers in her school are already seeing an improvement in the writing and analysis abilities of students who have been learning under the standards for about five years. Her own grandson benefited as a first grader, she said, when he wrote a Thanksgiving report about why he wouldn't want to sail on the Mayflower. He built his argument on stories the class read that described rotten food and abysmal sanitary facilities. Before Common Core, she said, he likely would have just memorized the date the ship sailed and made a hat.

Principal Alan Tenreiro at Cumberland High School in Rhode Island said he explains to parents that the goal of Common Core is for their kids to read like detectives and write like investigative reporters. Math, he says, is no longer about just plugging in numbers.

"I find the standards to just be more focused," Tenreiro said. "They are going into greater depth for students."