



The History of Common Core State Standards

What some see as a surprise attack on states' rights, others know as a carefully thought out education reform.



What seems like straight-forward educational reform has sparked plenty of controversy.

By Allie Bidwell

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A GUIDE TO COMMON CORE

For some, the [Common Core State Standards](#) seemed to come from nowhere, and appeared to be a sneaky attack on states' rights to control local education. But for those involved in writing the standards, it was nothing short of an exhaustive and collaborative years-long effort aimed at raising the achievement levels of students across the country.

Although they only recently captured national attention, the Common Core standards – which lay out what students should know and be able to do by each grade – have been in the works since at least 2008. It all started with former Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, who was the 2006-07 chair of the National Governors Association and now leads the University of California system, says Dane Linn, a vice president of the Business Roundtable who oversees its Education and Workforce Committee.

While serving as chair, Napolitano wrote [an initiative for the year](#), as every past chair had done and as every chair has since. According to Linn, who at the time was serving as director of the NGA's Educational Policy Division, Napolitano's initiative had a strong focus on improving math and science education, as well as the workforce.

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"The more she thought about it, she came to the conclusion that America couldn't lead the world in innovation and remain being competitive if we didn't have an internationally competitive education system," Linn says.

So Napolitano created a task force – composed of commissioners of education, governors, corporate chief executive officers and recognized experts in higher education – which in December 2008 [released a report](#) that Linn says would eventually serve as the building blocks of what became known as the Common Core State Standards, now adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia.

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Rick Hess, a resident scholar and director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, says the Common Core standards also have roots in [No Child Left Behind](#). Under the President George W. Bush-era education law, the federal government required states to test, disaggregate and report data on student performance, but allowed states to continue deciding on their own which standards and tests to use.

"The problem with that is if you had hard tests or hard standards you made your schools look bad. So there was a real, kind of perverse incentive baked into NCLB," Hess says. The desire to correct that mistake, Hess says, led to the creation of what became the Common Core.

But the controversy over standards-based education reform is nothing new. Ever since the early 1990s, when the U.S. Senate voted 99 to 1 against a set of national history standards supported and funded by the federal government under President George H.W. Bush, the idea of federal intrusion into the public education system has become a rallying cry for opponents of common standards.

That's why proponents of the Common Core say they had to tread lightly and ensure that the effort was an absolutely state-led initiative.

Following the task force report, the NGA – along with the Council of Chief State School Officers and the nonprofit education reform group Achieve – came together to make sure the goals of the report became a reality. It was decided that "the key to advancing any of these recommendations was to start with the standards," Linn says.

Then came the arduous task of deciding what exactly should be included in the English Language Arts and mathematics standards. The entire purpose of the standards, Linn says, was to determine what students need to know and demonstrate the ability to do in order to be prepared for an entry-level college course.

For some states, that task would prove more difficult than others because academic standards varied widely from state to state. For Massachusetts, which historically has had very high academic standards, Linn says, it was important that the Common Core was equal to or greater than the current state standards. But in other states, like Tennessee, standards were much lower.

"What's more important?" Linn asks. "To tell the truth to parents about where their kids are really performing? Or to continue to make them believe they're doing really well, only until they get into the workforce or they go to college and they're finding out they need to be put in a remedial English class?"

While the effort was spearheaded by the NGA, CCSSO and Achieve, representatives from other national organizations were also enlisted for their input, such as the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and members of both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association – the two largest teachers' unions in the country.

Linn says one moment that stands out in his memory is of the way in which mathematics teachers from the AFT gave their feedback on the standards.

"I walked in on a Monday morning and the math teachers had literally cut up all the standards," Linn says. "They revamped, in some cases, the progression, the order in which we listed the standards. And in some cases they wrote new standards they thought were missing. That type of input was taken very seriously in helping inform our revision of the standards."

Still, opponents have criticized the quality of the standards, claiming they haven't been field tested, that they aren't grounded in research and that it's unclear if they have been appropriately benchmarked against [international standards](#).

Linn says those who wrote the standards used the best evidence and research that was available at the time, and also looked to states that either had very high standards, as determined by their performance on international assessments, or had gone through a similar process as the Common Core in recent years. Minnesota and Massachusetts were two high-performing states Linn named, while Georgia and Colorado served as examples of states that had recently developed internationally benchmarked standards.

And each draft of the standards was posted online for the public to view. After the final draft was published, Linn says, the organizations allowed "anyone and everyone" to submit comments, questions and concerns. They received more than 10,000 responses.

"Every one of them was reviewed and helped inform our revision of the standards," Linn says.

While there remains no clear-cut party-line divide on the standards, as both Democrats and Republicans have expressed concern with them, backlash and cries of government overreach bubbled to the surface when the Obama administration slowly pumped up its support for Common Core.

While proponents of the standards staunchly maintain the federal government had absolutely no involvement in the development of the standards, and that it will play no role in the implementation, they also admit that the support from the White House hasn't actually helped the cause.

Many assumed the [Democratic National Platform](#) in 2012 referenced the Common Core when it credited President Barack Obama with encouraging states "to raise their standards so students graduate ready for college or career and can succeed in a dynamic global economy." Likewise, Obama also tip-toed around the plan in his [2013 State of the Union address](#), during which he took credit for using Race to the Top funds to persuade "almost every state to develop smarter curricula and higher standards."

Those conditions, and events since then, served as fodder for the federal-overreach debate.

"Historically, we should have been forewarned about the debates of the past," Linn says. "But we never envisioned that it would become the political football that it has become over time."

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