

New US education standards beset by politics

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In this July 21, 2014 file photo, students at a summer reading academy at Buchanan elementary school work in the computer lab at the school in Oklahoma City. The Oklahoma Supreme Court has confirmed the Legislature was well within its authority to repeal a set of education standards in math and English known as Common Core. But what's still uncertain is whether reverting back to the old academic standards will put Oklahoma students at a disadvantage when competing against those in more than 40 other states who are moving ahead with the more advanced and rigorous new ones developed under Common Core. A much-needed overhaul of American public education _ new methods of teaching English and math and redesigned testing _ was sponsored by U.S. state governors five years ago and has been adopted in nearly every state. Now the program to make U.S. students more competitive with global counterparts is caught in bitter partisan divisions in the country where some politicians are trying to win support from voters who are mad at Washington. (AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki, File)

Even America's classrooms have been caught up in the bitter partisan divisions of the era.

A major overhaul of American public education, intended to make U.S. students more competitive with their global counterparts, seemed designed for widespread acceptance not long ago. Common Core, which prescribes new methods of teaching math, reading and writing, was sponsored by state governors five years ago and it was adopted in nearly all the 50 states.

Now, a growing backlash has made the program a hot issue in the run-up to the November congressional and gubernatorial elections, and among politicians already jockeying for a presidential run in two years. The debate goes to the core of America's long-simmering political feuds over how big a role the [federal government](#) should play in people's lives.

President Barack Obama did not have a hand in the creating the [standards](#), but his government has offered financial incentives for states to support them. Still, some Republicans see the standards, like Obama's signature health care overhaul, as a sign of too much federal interference in their lives and in educational policies traditionally handled by local governments.

Louisiana's Republican Gov. Bobby Jindal, who is contemplating a 2016 presidential run, recently did an about-face over Common Core. Initially a supporter, Jindal is now suing the Obama administration, claiming Washington was manipulating federal grant money and regulations to force states to adopt the program.

"Common Core is the latest effort by big government disciples to strip away state rights and put Washington, D.C. in control of everything,"

said Jindal, whose campaign against the program has put him in a deep feud with a former ally, state Education Superintendent John White.

The standards, which also redesigned testing, do not set curricula but instead establish levels of knowledge students should have grade by grade. They are designed, backers say, to give students a deeper knowledge and greater ability to think critically in math and English language and literature.

Chris Minnich, executive director of the Council of Chief State School officers, said the standards were also conceived to make transitions smoother for students whose families move between states. Minnich said he believes the standards, with some modifications on implementation and teacher assessment, will sink lasting roots.

But the standards were thrown out this year in Indiana and Oklahoma, both with Republican governors. Governors in North Carolina, South Carolina and Missouri have signed in to law measures to reconsider Common Core standards, though they are still in use this school year.

"There's been a complete breakdown in our constitutional structure. The constitutional structure is supposed to protect the rights of the citizen to direct government, particularly in education," said Emmett McGroarty, director of education for the American Principles Project, a conservative group opposing Common Core. He said there was little or no public participation in developing the standards, which received major funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

McGroarty also argued that the math standards will put students behind their peers in high-performing foreign countries, while the English language arts standards fail to prepare children for university-level work.

"It dictates that children spend more time on reading informational texts

as opposed to the classic imaginative literature that children usually read," he said.

Not all the criticism of Common Core is drawn along party lines. Teachers' unions—traditionally a powerful force in Democratic politics—have argued that implementation of the standards has been haphazard, making it unfair to use Common Core-based assessments in new teacher evaluation systems taking effect in much of the country. The uproar has prompted U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan to allow states to delay using students' test scores to rate teachers.

But some worry that the political nature of the controversy is sidelining more thoughtful debate about the actual merits of the standards.

"When I hear the advocates of standards talk, I hear the language of policy, which is very rational," said Jonathan Supovitz, associate professor in the University of Pennsylvania graduate school of education. "But the opposition is not talking in policy language. They're talking in the language of politics which is much more about passionate, about how this will influence time-honored constitutionally protected rights. So it's much rawer."

The clash, he said, is providing "the battlefield for something that's been going on for a long time, which is disagreement between different opinions about the role of education in society and how to solve these problems."

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