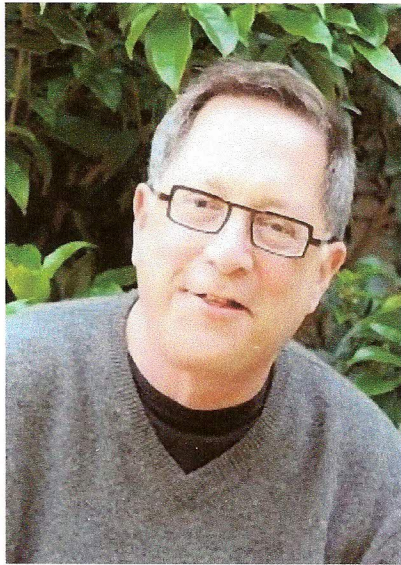


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Rage Against the Common Core

By [DAVID L. KIRP](#) DEC. 27, 2014

STARTING in the mid-1990s, education advocates began [making a simple argument](#): National education standards will level the playing field, assuring that all high school graduates are prepared for first-year college classes or rigorous career training.

While there are reasons to doubt that claim — it's hard to see how Utah, which spends less than one-third as much per student as New York, can offer a comparable education — the movement took off in 2008, when the nation's governors and education commissioners drove a huge effort to devise “world-class standards,” now known as the Common Core.

Although the Obama administration didn't craft the standards, it weighed in heavily, using some of the \$4.35 billion from the [Race to the Top](#) program to encourage states to adopt not only the Common Core (in itself, a good thing) but also frequent, high-stakes testing (which is deeply unpopular). The mishandled rollout turned a conversation about pedagogy into an ideological and partisan debate over high-stakes testing. [The misconception that standards and testing are identical has become widespread.](#)

[At least four states that adopted the Common Core have opted out. Republican governors who initially backed the standards condemn them as “shameless government overreach.”](#)

[Gov. Bobby Jindal of Louisiana, a Republican and a onetime supporter of the Common Core, sued his own state and the United States Department of Education to block the standards from taking effect.](#) When Jeb Bush, the former Florida governor, recently announced his decision to “actively explore” a 2016 run for the White House, he [ran into a buzz saw of opposition](#) because

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of his embrace of the Common Core.

Rebellions have also sprouted in Democratic-leaning states. Last spring, between 55,000 and 65,000 New York State students opted out of taking tests linked to the Common Core. Criticizing these tests as “unproven,” the Chicago schools chief, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, declared that she didn’t want her students to take them.

In a Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll conducted last spring, 57 percent of public school parents opposed “having teachers in your community use the Common Core State Standards to guide what they teach,” nearly double the proportion of those who supported the goals. With the standards, the sheer volume of high-stakes standardized testing has ballooned. “The numbers and consequences of these tests have driven public opinion over the edge,” notes Robert A. Schaeffer of the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, known as FairTest.

Students are terrified by these tests because the results can jeopardize their prospects for advancement and graduation. In New York, the number of students who scored “proficient” plummeted by about 30 percentage points in 2013, the first year of testing. Some 70 percent scored below the cutoff level in math and English; the 2014 results in math were modestly better, but the English language scores didn’t budge.

Many teachers like the standards, because they invite creativity in the classroom — instead of memorization, the Common Core emphasizes critical thinking and problem-solving. But they complain that test prep and test-taking eat away weeks of class time that would be better focused on learning.

A Gallup poll found that while 76 percent of teachers favored nationwide academic standards for reading, writing and math, only 27 percent supported using tests to gauge students’ performance, and 9 percent favored making test scores a basis for evaluating teachers. Such antagonism is well founded — researchers have shown that measurements of the “value” teachers add, as determined by comparing test scores at the beginning and end of the year, are unreliable and biased against those who teach both low- and high-achieving students.

The Obama administration has only itself to blame. Most Democrats expected that equity would be the top education priority, with more money going to the poorest states, better teacher recruitment, more useful training and closer attention to the needs of the surging population of immigrant kids. Instead, the administration has emphasized high-stakes “accountability” and market-driven reforms. The Education Department has invested more than \$370 million to develop the new standards and exams in math, reading and writing.

Questioning those priorities can bring reprisals. During the search earlier this year for a New York City schools chancellor, Education Secretary Arne Duncan lobbied against Joshua P. Starr, the superintendent of schools in Montgomery County, Md., in part because he had proposed a three-year hiatus on high-stakes standardized testing.

Last year, Mr. Duncan said that opposition to the Common Core standards had come from “white suburban moms who realize — all of a sudden — their child isn’t as brilliant as they thought they were, and their school isn’t quite as good as they thought they were.”

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He has only recently changed his cavalier tune, acknowledging, "Too much testing can rob school buildings of joy and cause unnecessary stress."

It's no simple task to figure out what schools ought to teach and how best to teach it — how to link talented teachers with engaged students and a challenging curriculum. Turning around the great gray battleship of American public education is even harder. It requires creating new course materials, devising and field-testing new exams and, because these tests are designed to be taken online, closing the digital divide. It means retraining teachers, reorienting classrooms and explaining to anxious parents why these changes are worthwhile.

Had the public schools been given breathing room, with a moratorium on high-stakes testing that prominent educators urged, resistance to the Common Core would most likely have been less fierce. But in states where the opposition is passionate and powerful, it will take a herculean effort to get the standards back on track.

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