

Think & Act
Education as a Unifying Force

By Brian P. Cory

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What do Indiana, Oklahoma, and South Carolina have in common?

Each of the three states was committed to the Common Core State Standards Initiative but recently chose to opt out.

Time will tell if they made the right decision for their students but the trio has probably already benefited other states by at least opening the door. They have indirectly given fellow states license to think about what is best for their respective students and to act accordingly. The license to think is a good one as time is of the essence and students are in the balance. I predict additional current Common Core states will join the trio in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, whether through political posturing or through thoughtful decision-making (hopefully the latter, regardless of decision.)

Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia were early dissenters of the initiative, a small group that rejected the Common Core from the beginning. Minnesota was unique as it only adopted half of the Common Core by sticking with their home-grown math standards.

Most of the states that joined the Common Core chose between two groups, the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, for the assessment component of the initiative. Seventeen states belong to the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and nine states plus the District of Columbia are PARCC members.

Education Week published a report, [The National K-12 Testing Landscape](#), which reflects states' testing plans for 2014-2015. Although most of the Common Core states are in one of the assessment consortia, the report includes a graphic illustrating that eighteen of the Common Core states will use neither PARCC nor Smarter Balanced assessments. Four states are using one of the consortia tests for grades 3-8 and non-consortia tests for high school as opposed to the all or nothing approach. For example, Rhode Island will administer PARCC in grades 3-8 and the New England Common Assessment Program at the high school level. Wisconsin will administer Smarter Balanced assessments in grades 3-8 and the ACT at the high school level. Kentucky and Wyoming will also utilize the ACT at the high school level in 2014-2015. Eight states remain undecided about which 3-8 tests or high school tests or both they will administer in 2014-2015.

The Truth in American Education website lists states that were in one of the two assessment consortia but have since pulled out of the accompanying testing. In addition to Alaska, Indiana and Oklahoma – who either did not board or have since jumped the Common Core ship – the list includes Utah, Georgia, Alabama, Kansas, Pennsylvania, and Florida. The website also indicates that Michigan, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Iowa are actively considering withdrawing from their respective assessment consortia. It is difficult for anyone to keep track of the scorecard as states are moving on Common Core business in a fast and furious manner. Update alert: Arizona, not yet listed on the website, will continue to participate in PARCC but withdrew from its testing.

According to *USA Today*'s article, State Lawmakers Push Common Core Agenda with 340 Bills: “As of May 15, lawmakers introduced over 340 bills in 46 states – every state that had had a regular legislative session this year – that addressed college- and career-readiness education standards, including the Common Core. Of those, 30 would slow down or delay college- and career- readiness standards and 35 would halt or revoke implementation altogether.”

The Assembly in New Jersey passed some of the most recent legislation (June 16.) The NJ bill would establish a taskforce to examine the impact of the implementation of the Common Core and PARCC assessments and would delay the use of the assessments as a basis for student performance in educator evaluation and student graduation. The NJ Senate is scheduled to hear the companion legislation on June 19. A similar dance is taking place in various states. It is a little overdue but the states have taken some time to think and have acted accordingly.

Casual observers would be well-advised not to blink. The scorecard is getting more complicated by the day. The aforementioned *USA Today* article reported, “In Missouri, Democratic Gov. Jay Nixon has until July 14 to decide the fate of a bill from his Republican-controlled legislature that would create work groups to decide new education standards.”

Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal issued an executive order just yesterday seeking to withdraw the state from PARCC. As described in the *Wall Street Journal* article, Common Core Split: Bobby Jindal vs. Jeb Bush, the move by Jindal puts him “on a collision course with a potential 2016 rival former: Florida Governor Jeb Bush.” Once again it is difficult to keep the scorecard straight and websites updated. The *WSJ* article sheds light on the growing problem: “And as of Wednesday afternoon, Mr. Jindal was still listed in a group of supporters on a website for Conservatives for Higher Standards, a project of Mr. Bush’s foundation and the pro-Common Core Thomas B. Fordham Institute.” I predict this will not be the only political jockeying we will see in the run-up to 2016 with the Common Core. I predict more splits will emerge within parties. Maybe this move by Jindal will open the door and give fellow politicians license to think about the Common Core and to act accordingly.

Politicians are not the only ones taking positions on the Common Core. Several prominent groups have released Common Core-related reports. The American Association of School

Administrators (AASA) released a new report, Common Core and Other State Standards: Superintendents Feel Optimism, Concern, and Lack of Support. The report calls for a slowdown in the implementation of the Common Core and the corresponding testing. In the conclusion section of the report the group recommends: “Before requiring states to attach high stakes to the assessments, districts and schools should be given the time to properly implement the standards and ensure sufficient bandwidth and proper equipment for the assessments.”

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) issued a policy brief titled Policy Recommendations for College and Career Ready Standards in Secondary Schools. The recommendations for federal policy makers include: "Delay for two years the use of new assessment results for high-stakes accountability purposes" and "Continue to fund ongoing, job-embedded professional development and updated preservice training to build the capacity of school leaders and teachers to implement college and career ready standards and administer assessments aligned with those standards."

A joint statement – representing the AASA, NAESP (National Association of Elementary Principals), NASSP, and NSBA (National School Boards Association) – titled School Leadership Groups Urge “Adequate Time” to Implement Common Core Standards calls for similar. The following appears in the statement: “While assessment has an important role to play as one of multiple measures for evaluating student learning and achievement, the continued reliance on one-time testing diverts attention away from content and the substance of what is being taught.” The statement also includes: “If we have learned anything from NCLB, it’s that while assessments and the related data have the potential to be powerful tools in an educator’s toolkit, they easily can be reduced to a simple mechanism of punishment that bears no meaningful impact on student learning.” The groups have obviously had some time to think.

Parents and parent groups are becoming more vocal and more organized as they increasingly raise concerns about the implementation of the Common Core. Demonstrations have filled board rooms and campuses across the country regarding privacy issues surrounding test data as well as stress and emotional well-being of children. *The Truth in American Education* website provides a form for parents to download, print, Facebook, tweet, etc. to opt out. As the upcoming school year will involve the PARCC and Smarter Balanced Assessments being fully implemented in most participating states, the parental outcry is bound to get louder. Parents and parent groups are thinking.

As a nation, we need to take some time to think. Think about what is best for our students. And act accordingly.

Education should be a unifying force in this country. It doesn’t feel that way right now. We are literally all over the map. Time – as it always does – will indeed tell but I’m really unsure what we will have to show for it if we continue in this direction. Right now it certainly does not feel like what is being done is what is best for students.

Education must be a unifying force. We have allowed it to become something else.

So, cheap advice for the 2016 presidential candidates and their campaigns: *take some time to think about education; put party lines and affiliations aside; listen to educators, parents, and students; determine what is best for our students; act accordingly.*

He/She will have my vote.