



PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THE CROSSHAIRS

Far-Right Propaganda and the Common Core State Standards



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The Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Montgomery, Ala., is a nonprofit civil rights organization founded in 1971 and dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of our society. Using litigation, education, and other forms of advocacy, the SPLC works toward the day when the ideals of equal justice and equal opportunity will be a reality.



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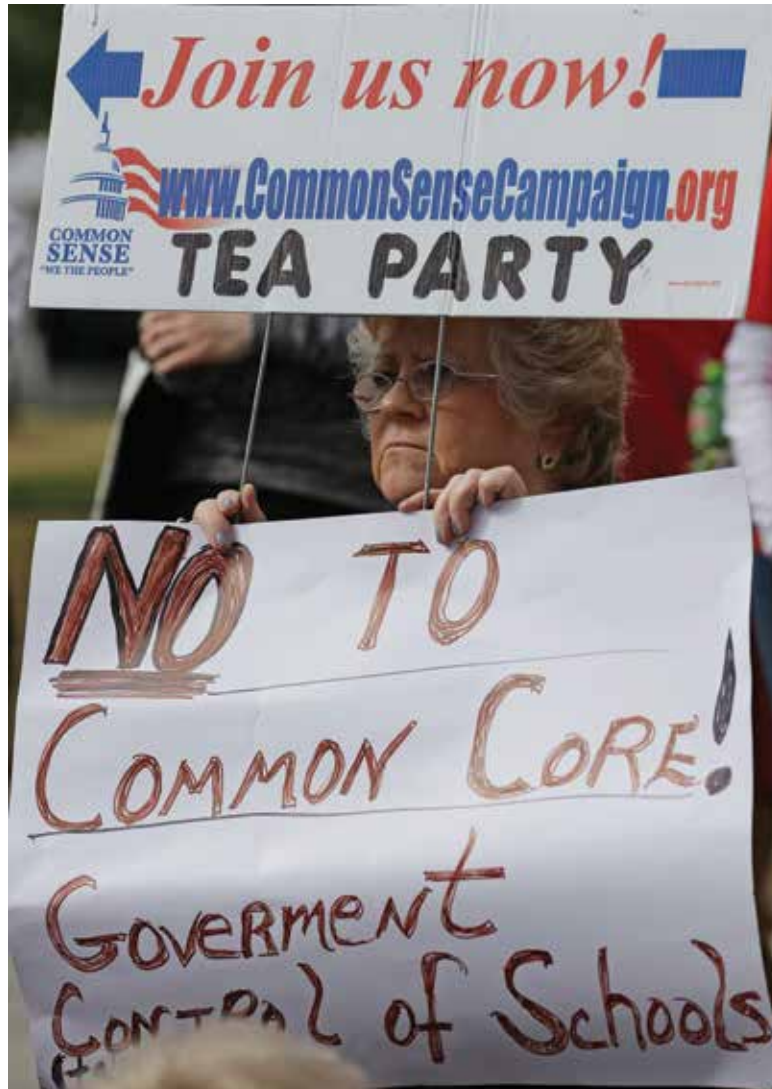
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Members of the Alabama Tea Party gather outside the Alabama Statehouse in January 2014 to protest the state's adoption of the Common Core State Standards. Tea Party factions across the country have been among the most vocal grassroots critics of the standards, dubbed "Obamacore" by many opponents on the right.

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By raising the specter of “Obamacore,” activists on the radical right hope to gain leverage against their real target—public education itself.



Mississippi state Sen. Angela Burks Hill joins Tea Party activists in a January rally calling on state lawmakers to rescind the state's participation in the Common Core. The legislature adjourned without taking such action.

Executive Summary

Across the United States, a fierce wave of resistance is engulfing the Common Core State Standards, threatening to derail this ambitious effort to lift student achievement and, more fundamentally, to undermine the very idea of public education.

Developed by the National Governors Association and an association of state school superintendents, the standards were conceived as a way to promote U.S. competitiveness, increase educational equity, and resolve problems created by the No Child Left Behind Act.

Now being implemented in 44 states, the standards do not mandate the use of any particular book or course of study. Instead, they identify the literacy and math skills that children in every public school should master at each grade level.

But to the most extreme critics of the Common Core, the standards are something quite different—a plan to indoctrinate young children into “the homosexual lifestyle,” a conspiracy to turn children into “green serfs” who will serve a totalitarian “New World Order.”

To the propaganda machine on the right, the Common Core—an effort driven by the states—is actually “Obamacore,” a nefarious federal plot to wrest control of education from local school systems and parents. Instead of the “death panels” of “Obamacare,” the fear is now “government indoctrination camps.”

The disinformation campaign is being driven by the likes of Fox News, the John Birch Society, Tea Party factions, and the Christian Right. National think tanks and advocacy groups associated with the Koch brothers, whose father was a founding Birch member, have taken up the cause.

By raising the specter of “Obamacore,” activists on the radical right hope to gain leverage against their real target—public education itself.

The Christian Right is reprising themes from earlier battles over the teaching of evolution, school prayer, sex education, and more recent efforts to stop the bullying of LGBT students. Their moneyed allies seek to privatize the education landscape.

To be sure, education experts of all political stripes have raised important questions about the Common Core. Are the standards too rigorous? Are they rigorous enough? Should children and teachers be evaluated on standardized testing? Has there been ample time for implementation and teacher training?

These and other issues should be the focus of robust debate—one rooted in the facts. Unfortunately, the issues are being obscured by a cloud of overheated hyperbole, misinformation and far-right propaganda.

We must do better.

America’s 50 million schoolchildren and the dedicated educators who teach them deserve a sober, well-informed discussion that will help determine the richness of the education afforded children in public schools—as well as what kind of country we become.

Political leaders and policymakers at all levels must reject the extremism that has polluted the debate and focus on the real issues.

Equally important, they must stand up for public education, one of our nation’s greatest accomplishments and a linchpin not only of our prosperity but of the American ideal of equality for all.



Introduction

One evening in January, hundreds of people eagerly crowded into the pews of the Calvary Baptist Church in Dothan, Ala., to hear about a new threat to America: the Common Core State Standards.

The star attraction was David Barton, one of the evangelical right's leading luminaries and a self-taught "historian" who promotes the view that the United States was founded as a Christian nation that should be ruled by biblical principles. Joined by figures from the state's Republican Party, the state school board and Tea Party groups, Barton rattled off a litany of criticisms of the Common Core—complaints that are stirring outrage among the conservative grassroots and threatening to derail the bipartisan, business-backed effort to create a single set of standards for what children in America's public schools should be able to do at each grade level.

To hear Barton tell it, the Common Core is another move by "progressives" to ruin public education. He traces the beginning of education's downhill trajectory to U.S. Supreme Court rulings in the early 1960s that outlawed school-sanctioned prayer and Bible readings. Now, through the Common Core, he claims, progressives want to force-feed liberal dogma to children, taking schools even further away from teaching through the lens of Christian fundamentalism. Progressives, he contends, want "the kids to rely on the government for their knowledge and help." Even homeschooled children will suffer, because they won't be able to perform well on new college entrance exams aligned with the Common Core. "This is not education, it's political indoctrination," Barton said.

Troy Towns, the minority outreach director for the Alabama Republican Party and a panelist at the church meeting, was blunter. "When I heard the word 'common' [as in Common Core], the first thing I thought of was communism," he said to a roar of approval. "It's the government taking over everything, controlling the way you think, what you do, education, health care."

Even personal religious beliefs are under attack by the Common Core—at least according to a high school student at the meeting, who claimed she was required to read a book that "talks about how you should be a Buddhist instead of a Christian." (In reality, nothing in the Common Core promotes any particular religion over any other.)

Hundreds gather at a church in Dothan, Ala., to hear speakers savage the Common Core. Evangelical leader David Barton called it "political indoctrination."

JOSH GLASSETTER

Scenes like this are playing out in hundreds of churches, statehouse hearing rooms and other venues across the country as the Christian Right and other conservative activists attack the Common Core as a liberal plot to turn public schools into anti-American, anti-God indoctrination camps that churn out submissive automatons who will unquestioningly serve the interests of the government and big business. The irony of the anti-America charge is that the only required texts named in the Common Core standards are the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.

Until recently, few outside the education community had ever heard of the Common Core, a set of standards for English language arts/literacy and math. Developed under the auspices of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, they were adopted voluntarily by 45 states, although Indiana recently pulled out. Teachers have begun to adjust their instruction accordingly.

Now, thanks to a committed group of activists and the backing of powerful conservative advocacy groups, the Common Core has become a political touchstone—a rallying cry for the Christian Right and many activists associated with the radical right.

This fight comes at a time when the public school system has already been weakened by deep funding cuts, vitriolic political attacks on teachers and their unions, and state efforts to privatize schools through vouchers, charter schools and other “school choice” measures.

Legitimate issues obscured

To be sure, criticism of the Common Core—which is backed by the Obama administration and funded, in part, by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—is coming from all points on the political spectrum and from some leading education experts. Critics have raised important issues that should be thoroughly debated, such as: whether the standards were adequately tested; whether we can have great education that isn't simply “teaching to the test”; whether there has been ample time for implementation and teacher training; and, significantly, whether it's wise to evaluate teachers on the results of Common Core-aligned tests.

But these and other issues are being obscured by a cloud of fear-mongering propaganda and extremist hyperbole. The attacks from the far right stand apart from the legitimate criticism because of their incendiary language, their apocalyptic warnings, and their reliance on distortions, outright falsehoods and antigovernment conspiracy theories.

Eagle Forum founder Phyllis Schlafly, for example, blasts the Common Core for its supposed “active promotion of gay marriage.” Glenn Beck calls it “communism” and “evil.” The John Birch Society claims the standards are the work of globalists “working quietly but fiendishly” to produce “green global serfs” to serve a looming New World Order. The Birch-affiliated Freedom Project calls the Common Core an “absolute appropriation of Soviet ideology and propaganda” and says it is “mainstreaming ... homosexuality, promiscuity and other practices.” An Eagle Forum leader links the

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Common Core to Nazism, communism and to the “ultimate goal” of setting up “internment or re-education camps.”

Politicians associated with the Tea Party are weighing in, too. U.S. Rep. Jim Bridenstine of Oklahoma says the standards are “much like socialism.” Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul has called it “a dangerous curriculum,” though it’s not a curriculum at all.

As outlandish as these claims sound, they are part and parcel of the campaign against what some opponents call “Obamacore.” And they’re gaining widespread exposure and acceptance, even in mainstream media.

“This is a war,” said Towns, the Alabama GOP operative. “This is a battle for control of our children.”

The latest bogeyman

From a historical perspective, the Common Core is just the latest bogeyman in a fierce propaganda and political war being waged against the very concept of providing a publicly funded, secular education to every child. In some ways, it’s a proxy for the broader fight against the institution itself.

The Christian Right’s disdain for public education has been growing since the movement began its rise as a political power beginning in the 1970s. Prior to that, the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision to desegregate public schools led to a decades-long flight of white children away from public schools and into private Christian academies, particularly in the South and urban areas with large concentrations of African Americans. Subsequent decisions outlawing school prayer and further ensuring the secular nature of public schools only deepened the animosity, helping to catalyze the massive homeschooling movement. As early as 1979, the Rev. Jerry Falwell said he hoped to see the day when “we won’t have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over and Christians will be running them.” More recently, school-based efforts to protect children from anti-gay bullying and to promote the acceptance of LGBT students have further inflamed Christian Right activists.

Like Barton, many of these activists contend that instead of teaching correct Christian principles, today’s schools corrupt children by, among other things, teaching them to be gay or sexually promiscuous. Hence, no conscientious parent would send children there. Homeschooling and private religious schools are seen as the only moral choices. Though no one knows for sure, it’s estimated that somewhere between 2 and 3 million U.S. children are being homeschooled, most of them by parents who identify themselves as evangelical Christians.

Now, with the Common Core as a sort of unified field theory for everything the Christian Right despises about public education and with the federal government as the villain, its cause has been infused with energy from various Tea Party factions, antigovernment “Patriot” groups like the John Birch Society, and other far-right extremists not



usually linked to education issues but with ideological views that fit comfortably with opposition to public schools.

Public schools under fire

As the attacks on the Common Core mount, so do the more general attacks on public schools themselves.

Liberty Counsel President Anita Staver, for example, has called public schools “dangerous anti-God indoctrination camps” that “threaten our nation’s very survival.” Televangelist Rod Parsley says Satan has “turned our public schools into cesspools of godless propaganda where God is publicly mocked and reviled.”

The drumbeat against public education has intensified with libertarian books, online videos and a recent, attention-getting documentary called *IndoctrinNation*. The film blasts U.S. public education as an evil enterprise beyond redemption. Among other places, its director has promoted the film on the Alex Jones Show, which is hosted by a florid conspiracist who is arguably the nation’s most vocal promoter of the extremist Patriot movement. Warning that parents are turning their children over to “a bunch of perverts and weirdoes” who “use our tax money ... to destroy our youth,” Jones heartily endorsed the *IndoctrinNation* documentary and aired excerpts from it in 2012.

The uproar is having a political impact, not only threatening to unravel state support for the standards and becoming an issue in upcoming elections but opening a new rift between the Republican Party establishment—including potential presidential candidate Jeb Bush, who supports the standards—and the party’s social conservatives.

Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative education think tank in Washington, D.C., that supports the standards, sees deeper issues than education at play. “Common Core is the current kickball in a bigger game,” Finn told the Southern Poverty Law Center. “If you want to bump off your local legislator and replace him with someone more to your taste, Common Core is a convenient issue to grab and use politically.”

An opponent of the Common Core listens to legislative debate in Nashville in March 2014. The Tennessee House passed a bill to delay implementation by two years.

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS Events that have sha



1948

The Supreme Court rules that direct religious instruction provided by outside groups, like churches, in public schools during the school day is unconstitutional. (*McCullum v. Board of Education*)



1954

The Supreme Court unanimously declares that racially segregated schools are "inherently unequal." This leads to a decades-long flight of white students to private Christian academies. (*Brown v. Board of Education*)



1962

The Supreme Court forbids schools from having students recite a government-sponsored non-denominational "Regents" prayer. (*Engel v. Vitale*)

1963

The Supreme Court rules that schools may not mandate Bible verse recitations by students. (*Murray v. Curlett; Abington Township School District v. Schempp*)



1971

The Supreme Court approves busing, magnet schools, compensatory education and other tools as appropriate remedies to overcome the role of residential segregation in perpetuating racially segregated schools. (*Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*)

1972

The Supreme Court refuses to allow public school systems to avoid desegregation by creating new, mostly or all-white "splinter districts." (*Wright v. Council of the City of Emporia; United States v. Scotland Neck City Board of Education*)



1973

The Supreme Court rules that states cannot provide textbooks to racially segregated private schools. (*Norwood v. Harrison*)



1980s

Raymond Moore emerges as the leader of the religious, conservative home-based education movement. By the end of the decade, 27 states have passed laws permitting homeschooling.

1982

The Supreme Court rejects tax exemptions for private religious schools that discriminate. (*Bob Jones University v. U.S.; Goldsboro Christian Schools v. U.S.*)



1995

Teacher Kevin Jennings starts the first Gay-Straight Alliance at Concord Academy in Massachusetts.



1996

The Supreme Court upholds a lower court decision forbidding students or teachers from leading organized prayer sessions at school assemblies, over the intercom, at sports events, or in the classroom.



1999

Home-schooling is now legal in all 50 states.

A federal court in Utah rules that students have a right, under the 1984 Equal Access Act, to form a Gay-Straight Alliance at any school that receives public funding.

2002

At least 1 million children are being homeschooled.

ped the Christian Right's uneasy relationship with public schools



1964

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 is enacted. Title IV authorizes the federal government to file school desegregation cases. Title VI prohibits discrimination in programs and activities, including schools, receiving federal financial assistance.

Progressives Paul Goodman and John Holt independently publish books that propose homeschooling as a leftist alternative to schools that stifle learning.



1965

Ultra-fundamentalist theologian R.J. Rushdoony, a Holocaust denier and supporter of school segregation, founds the Chalcedon Foundation to advance Christian Reconstructionism, the notion of a Christian-led theocratic government and libertarian economy. Rushdoony, who advocates homeschooling as a way to combat secular teaching in public schools, is today considered the father of the evangelical homeschooling movement.



1968

The Supreme Court overturns an Arkansas law prohibiting the teaching of evolution in public schools. (*Epperson v. Arkansas*)

1970s

Homeschooling is illegal in most states because of compulsory education laws. Researchers estimate that the total number of homeschooled children in this decade is between 10,000 and 15,000.



1983

The Homeschool Legal Defense Association is founded to use litigation and advocacy to make homeschooling legal in every state and to keep it as unregulated as possible. Today, it is almost completely unregulated.

1984

The federal Equal Access Act is passed, allowing student-run religious clubs in public schools if other noncurricular clubs are allowed. The law will later be used to protect the formation of Gay-Straight Alliances in schools.



1985

The Supreme Court declares an Alabama law that provides for a moment of silence to be an unconstitutional endorsement of prayer. (*Wallace v. Jaffree*)



1985

Somewhere between 50,000 and 244,000 children are being homeschooled, but there is no precise data. The homeschool movement is not yet dominated by Christian fundamentalists.



1988

School integration reaches its zenith; almost 45% of black students in the United States are attending majority-white schools.



2011

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan writes a "Dear Colleague" letter reminding local school officials that Gay-Straight Alliances are protected.



2006

Sources estimate that between 1.9 million and 2.4 million students are being homeschooled.

California passes the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful Education Act (FAIR Education Act), which compels the inclusion of the contributions of LGBT people into social studies curricula in the state.

2012

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan makes a public service announcement for YouTube endorsing Gay-Straight Alliances.



2013

California passes the country's first law protecting transgender students. The School Success and Opportunity Act provides that students may participate in activities and use bathrooms consistent with their gender identity.

What is the Common Core?

The vitriol surrounding the Common Core State Standards should come as no surprise in light of the false starts and previous tempests that have punctuated education reform efforts over the last 30 years.

But a careful look at the standards themselves, the problems they were designed to solve, and how they relate to previous reforms—in particular, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) promoted by President George W. Bush in 2002—shows clearly that many of the most inflammatory criticisms are falsehoods and distortions.

In fact, as for the alleged federal intrusion into local and state affairs, the Common Core pales in comparison to NCLB, which despite harsh criticism from both the left and the right, didn't generate anything approaching the uproar over the Common Core. In many ways, the Common Core embodies a traditional conservative reform agenda, particularly with its emphasis on standardized testing. In part, it tendered a solution to some of the problems created by NCLB.

Whenever efforts to standardize education in the United States have sprung up, controversy has followed.

Stall-outs of note at the federal level include President George H.W. Bush's failed attempt to develop national curricular standards, and President Bill Clinton's failure to establish a regulatory body that would oversee individual state standards. Both efforts ran afoul of ideological and practical concerns voiced by schools, religious activists, policymakers, pundits and members of the private sector. Put plainly, while the Common Core may be new, the debate is not.

The standards-based movement

The standards-based reform movement has its roots in outcome-based education, a model popularized in the 1980s and 1990s and based in the belief that the empirical evaluation of student performance improves both individual achievement and the success of the education system at large. Standards were needed to establish the goals against which student performance would be measured.

States steadily developed and adopted standards with encouragement from every administration beginning with that of George H.W. Bush. By the time his son became president, nearly every state had its own separate set of standards specifying what students should know in each grade.

Many of the most contentious debates surrounding the Common Core today date back to the 1990s. Concerns about rigor (standards being too rigorous or not rigorous enough), content, alignment to global workforce skills, promotion of secularism, implementation burdens, and the impact on students of high-stakes testing have all been central to the decades-long dialogue about how to (a) measure what students know and are able to do and (b) determine what students should know and be able to do.



NCLB, which expanded federal oversight of public education by linking federal funds to standardized results, notably failed to address question “b.” While the law placed enormous emphasis on student evaluation and the collection of performance data (enforced by strict Title I financial penalties when the numbers weren’t satisfactory), it offered no national achievement standards. That was left to the states. The law created a huge incentive to game the system: Some states evaded accountability for poor schools by simply weakening both their standards and the tests designed to assess students’ mastery of them.

A decade later, the achievement levels of high school seniors varied alarmingly from state to state. Graduating from high school did not necessarily mean a student had the skills to go further—in fact, 60 percent of those entering two-year colleges needed remedial courses. Even more alarming, college and career success often depended on variables like language, race and ZIP code.

Common Core goals

The stated goal of the Common Core is to ensure that all students—regardless of where they live—graduate from high school prepared to succeed in entry-level college courses or enter the workforce. Underlying that goal was the desire to increase global competitiveness.

Although adoption occurs at the discretion of the individual states (and Washington, D.C.), the Common Core has the potential to replace 51 disparate sets of English language arts/literacy and mathematics standards of uneven quality with a nationally benchmarked and validated single set (although some highly respected education experts question the standards’ validity). Not only do common standards ostensibly make it easier to measure students’ progress, they encourage collaboration and continuity among states regarding textbooks, teaching materials, assessments and other tools, leading to an overall raising of the bar.

Common Core standards are posted on a bulletin board in a second-grade classroom in Indianapolis. They’re being implemented in 44 states, the District of Columbia, four U.S. territories and in Defense Department schools. Indiana has dropped the Common Core.

In addition to equity and continuity, the Common Core architects also had global competitiveness firmly in mind. The academic performance of U.S. students, particularly in math and science, is not on par with many industrialized countries. Worse, in most of these countries, the population entering the workforce is at least as well-educated as the population retiring, while in the United States new workers are less well-educated. These educational shortcomings could profoundly impede the nation's ability to remain globally competitive—presumably a primary reason many private sector organizations like the Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce endorse the Common Core.

Whether the Common Core can actually help improve college and career readiness, make the U.S. education system more equitable, or help the country become more competitive globally remains to be seen. However, being clear about its goals and the landscape in which they emerged can help guard against the type of inflammatory rhetoric currently distracting from legitimate debate.

Developing the Common Core

The seeds of the Common Core State Standards were planted in 2007 when members of the National Governors Association (NGA) began discussing the possibility of aligning the diverse standards of their respective states to ensure educational equity across states and geographic regions. This alignment effort would address the widening achievement gaps by closing what are, in essence, opportunity gaps for children living in areas where access to college-aligned education is limited.

The NGA workgroup soon expanded to include the Council of Chief State School Officers, an association of state school superintendents. The two state-based organizations partnered with Achieve, a nonprofit organization specializing in college and career readiness, and appointed teams that included teachers, school administrators and education researchers to draft the new standards, with input from teachers and the public.

Several high-profile names are linked to development of the Common Core, including David Coleman (Student Achievement Partners and the College Board), William McCallum (University of Arizona), Phil Daro (Strategic Education Research Partnership), Jason Zimba and Susan Pimentel (Student Achievement Partners). The private sector was heavily involved in funding the effort. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the largest single private funder, has poured more than \$170 million so far into developing and implementing the standards. Other contributors include the Pearson Foundation—established and partly funded by the Pearson Publishing Company—and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

The standards—for English language arts/literacy and mathematics—were released in June of 2010. That month, the NGA Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers released a report outlining the findings of the 25-member Validation Committee. The committee found the standards to be “[r]eflective of the core knowledge and skills in ELA [English language arts] and mathematics that students need to be

In many ways, the Common Core embodies a traditional conservative reform agenda, particularly with its emphasis on standardized testing. In part, it tendered a solution to some of the problems created by No Child Left Behind.

Salient Features of the Common Core

Just as many of the critiques of the Common Core do not represent concerns unique to this set of standards, neither does the content represent a radical departure from educational benchmarks of the past. In fact, many of the features reflect a rather conservative approach to education, emphasizing basic skills and the methodical building of content knowledge in carefully measured increments. The ways in which the standards do differ from previous efforts are most accurately described as shifts in emphasis, as illustrated below.

English Language Arts/Literacy Standards

- Emphasize the acquisition of academic vocabulary, reading, writing, speaking and listening skills.
- Call for students to read complex texts at increasing levels of rigor. K-12 students are expected to ascend a staircase of increasing text complexity that will prepare them for college- and career-level reading.
- Require students to support arguments using evidence gathered from what they read. This emphasis is a reaction to the common pedagogical practice of only asking students to write about how something makes them feel or to reflect on their own experiences, and represents a return to a more traditional approach to academic writing.
- Encourage the use of content-rich nonfiction to build a rich store of student knowledge and to exercise informational reading skills in all grades and across subjects (not just in English class). This is an idea often associated with E.D. Hirsch and his call for cultural literacy.
- Include an appendix that contains exemplar texts selected to show what appropriate complexity looks like at each grade level. The texts include classic stories and poems, Shakespeare and foundational documents from American history.

Mathematics Standards

- Focus on deeper learning of fewer topics to build foundational knowledge.
- Emphasize eight mathematical practices across topics and grade levels to encourage critical thinking and other 21st century skills. The practices are:
 1. Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them.
 2. Reason abstractly and quantitatively.
 3. Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others.
 4. Model with mathematics.
 5. Use appropriate tools strategically.
 6. Attend to precision.
 7. Look for and make use of structure.
 8. Look for and express regularity in repeated reasoning.
- Link topics and thinking across grades to build knowledge and competence.
- Encourage not only depth but also rigor. Every topic is approached from three different perspectives: conceptual understanding, application, and procedural skills and fluency. This increases understanding (rather than simply learning how to do something, students know why a mathematical action works), speed and accuracy in calculation, and the ability to apply math in real situations.
- Include an appendix with implementation suggestions for how high schools could align courses to the content standards and the eight mathematical practices.

Reading Standards: Foundational Skills (K-5)

RF

Grade 3 students:	Grade 4 students:	Grade 5 students:
Phonics and Word Recognition		
<p>3. Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.</p> <p>a. Identify and know the meaning of the most common prefixes and derivational suffixes.</p> <p>b. Decode words with common Latin suffixes.</p> <p>c. Decode multisyllable words.</p> <p>d. Read grade-appropriate irregularly spelled words.</p>	<p>3. Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.</p> <p>a. Use combined knowledge of all letter-sound correspondences, syllabication patterns, and morphology (e.g., roots and affixes) to read accurately unfamiliar multisyllabic words in context and out of context.</p>	<p>3. Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.</p> <p>a. Use combined knowledge of all letter-sound correspondences, syllabication patterns, and morphology (e.g., roots and affixes) to read accurately unfamiliar multisyllabic words in context and out of context.</p>
Fluency		
<p>4. Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.</p>	<p>4. Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.</p>	<p>4. Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.</p>

The Common Core State Standards identify the literacy and math skills that students in public schools should master at each grade level. They do not mandate the use of any particular text or curriculum.

college- and career-ready.” The Common Core also underwent external validation testing, with funding from the Gates Foundation, to determine whether the standards include content knowledge considered necessary for success in entry-level higher education courses. This study found the ELA/literacy standards to be generally applicable to postsecondary courses and gave high marks to the Speaking and Listening and Language strands. Ratings for the mathematics standards varied more by course category, although those for Mathematical Practice were consistently rated as highly applicable across the board.

After the standards were completed and released in 2010, 45 states, the District of Columbia and four territories quickly adopted them, with Department of Defense-operated schools soon following. States adopting them are free to continue to teach their own state standards, as long as the Common Core comprises at least 85 percent of the standards covered.

Also in 2010, two state-led consortia funded by grants from the U.S. Department of Education—Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium—began developing Common Core-aligned assessments. Most of the 45 states (Indiana has since opted out of the standards) signed on to become members of one or, in some cases, both consortia. Both consortia agreed to deliver the tests in time for the 2014-15 school year. These common assessments will, ultimately, fulfill the states’ NCLB testing and reporting requirements, although states are still at liberty to use other tests.

Despite the claims of critics, the Common Core itself does not mandate data-gathering or the use of a particular standardized test or curriculum. Instead, local entities—teachers, schools and districts—are responsible for creating local implementation plans. With short timelines, many have made quick decisions and, in some cases, radical changes concerning professional development priorities, standardized testing, teacher evaluation, and eligibility for Title I and Race to the Top funding.

Current debates

Many of the legitimate debates surrounding the Common Core focus on concerns that have been central to education reform discussions since the 1980s. It is unclear whether the fringe elements of the radical right are ignorant of this history or whether they are deliberately distorting the facts. What is clear is that the unfounded and paranoid

The stated goal of the Common Core is to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared to succeed in entry-level college courses or enter the workforce.

rhetoric surrounding the standards distracts from the important debates that are happening among highly informed scholars, state officeholders, policymakers, educators, and families across America. The following are a sampling of some of the valid Common Core-related concerns under debate:

- Education historian and researcher Diane Ravitch has asserted that the Common Core was not developed according to the principles established by the American National Standards Institute. Ravitch says her reason for opposing the standards is not the content but rather concerns about the transparency of the development process and the exclusion of informed, concerned interests such as early childhood educators and special education experts.
- Some critics see the Gates Foundation's support as overwhelmingly disproportionate. The fact that the foundation not only funded—directly and indirectly—such a large percentage of the development of the standards but also the validation and some implementation measures has raised concerns about the ethics and desirability of a single private entity being able to influence a public initiative of the Common Core's scope.
- Some educators oppose the Common Core out of concerns that the standards depart from best practices for teaching and supporting culturally diverse youth. One such critique refers to the reduced emphasis on student reflection and experience in the writing standards. Others point to the lack of diversity in exemplar texts.
- Many teachers and administrators find the implementation timeline of the Common Core unrealistic, noting that the rigor of the standards has bumped the bar so high that it will take years to actually reach it. Meanwhile, pressure on schools to show immediate and measurable improvement makes it difficult for them to chart a slower and more deliberate path to implementation.
- While Race to the Top funding is not directly tied to Common Core adoption, it is tied to the adoption of college and career readiness standards, and more points were awarded to states that adopted the Common Core. Some critics saw the Race to the Top stipulations as federal strong-arming that allowed the Obama administration to paint state adoption as entirely voluntary when, in fact, there were potential financial consequences for opting out.
- Many progressives criticize the role that the Common Core plays in magnifying the toxic testing culture that NCLB and its high-stakes testing made a feature of life in public schools. They note that corporate interests are served whenever testing companies have a mandated market, and that the quick implementation period is, in fact, feeding these interests by creating an urgent need for implementation materials.

The Propaganda Campaign

As states began implementing the Common Core, a backlash began to brew, and it grew more ferocious by the day.

Amid the legitimate concerns expressed by parents, teachers and education experts, distortions and blatant falsehoods began to sprout and spread. Many of the criticisms

are altogether unrelated to the standards but are freighted with themes from the Christian Right's long-running battles over sex education, textbooks, school prayer, the teaching of evolution, LGBT issues, and secular teaching in general. Some of the claims are quite inflammatory, like the contention that children will be "sexualized" at a young age or "indoctrinated" into a "homosexual" lifestyle.

"We all expected and welcomed vigorous educational debate about the standards," noted Carrie Heath Phillips of the Council of Chief State School Officers. "What surprised us was the people and organizations who've taken as their mission to continuously spew out these untruths."

The most common falsehoods: The federal government is dictating a specific curriculum that schools must follow; school districts and states will lose local control; the standards force liberal political and anti-Christian dogma onto students; and testing associated with the standards is part of a government and big business plot to track personal information about students from kindergarten to adulthood.

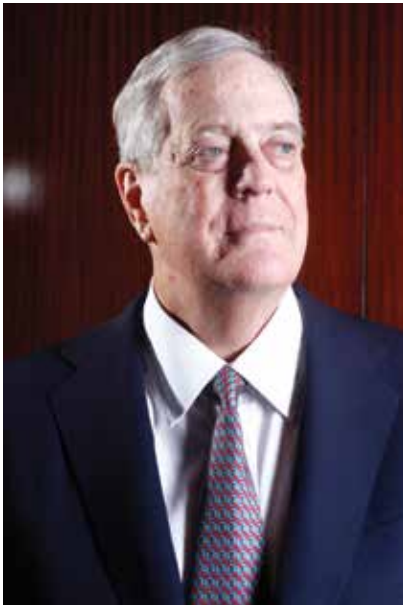
None of this is true, insists Chester Finn of the Fordham Institute, which supports the standards. "There is no federal control," he said. And, as for the Common Core enforcing political and anti-religious beliefs, "this is total paranoia."

In 2013, the propaganda blitz worsened as the issue began to set the conservative grassroots ablaze.

Even as local and state groups associated with the Christian Right, the Tea Party and the antigovernment "Patriot" movement were springing into action, national groups were working hard to stir the pot.

These included the Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation, which calls the Common Core the "next massive effort to further centralize education," and the Chicago-based Heartland Institute, which published a 20-page booklet and established a content-rich Web page for activists called "Fight the Common Core." Homeschooling organizations, notably the Home School Legal Defense Association, also have been active.

Among those pushing the issue are advocacy groups associated with and funded by David and Charles



Right-wing advocacy groups associated with billionaires David (top) and Charles Koch are fueling grassroots opposition to the Common Core.

Koch, the billionaire industrialists who fund many conservative causes and candidates. Politico, the online news outlet, reported in January 2014 that a draft action plan by FreedomWorks lays out the following agenda: “First, mobilize to strike down the Common Core. Then push to expand school choice by offering parents tax credits or vouchers to help pay tuition at private and religious schools. Next, rally the troops to abolish the U.S. Department of Education. Then it’s on to eliminating teacher tenure.”

The group’s director of grassroots activism, Whitney Neal, told Politico the group would kick off a “huge campaign” to “connect the dots” between killing the Common Core and other conservative priorities. She said a major march in Washington was being planned for this summer, perhaps with Glenn Beck.

Another Koch-backed group, Americans for Prosperity, is also pressing the issue in a series of town hall meetings across the country.

So what is the end game for the Kochs?

The 1980 Libertarian Party platform provides some perspective. David Koch ran for vice president on the party’s ticket that year, when its platform called for the “complete separation of education and State.” It went on: “Government schools lead to the indoctrination of children and interfere with the free choice of individuals. Government ownership, operation, regulation, and subsidy of schools and colleges should be ended.”

A principal agitator

The American Principles Project (APP) has been highly influential in galvanizing grassroots opposition across the country, in particular by producing videos, reports, websites and other materials that helped provide the intellectual framework for local organizers. The group says it is spending \$500,000 to fight the Common Core.

The small, Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit was founded by Princeton University law professor Robert George, a constitutional scholar who is considered one of the leading thinkers of the Christian Right. George has also long been active in opposing LGBT equality. He was a founder of the National Organization for Marriage and he also helped found the Witherspoon Institute, a conservative think tank that granted almost \$700,000 to professor Mark Regnerus for a 2012 study designed to help “prove” that LGBT people make bad parents (the study has been widely discredited). George also was a drafter of the Manhattan Declaration, a 4,500-word manifesto that debuted in 2009 in which Christians pledge to engage in civil disobedience against laws they believe violate their religious rights.

The APP is heavily involved in education issues, saying that it wants to promote parental authority and protect the “innocence of children” against such things as



The American Principles Project, founded by Princeton University Professor Robert George, echoes the conspiracy theories of the radical right, warning that the Common Core advances the “utopian, grandiose planning for a managed global economy.”



Hoosiers Against the Common Core stages a rally at the Indiana Statehouse in April. Indiana became the first state to drop the standards after Gov. Mike Pence signed legislation ordering the state school board to draft new ones.

promiscuity, pornography, violence, and “other corruptions.” One of its projects, American Principles in Action, has led campaigns against teaching about LGBT people in schools and has worked against the repeal of the military’s anti-gay “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy.

In 2012, the APP released a report, *Controlling Education from the Top: Why Common Core is Bad for America*, that portrays the standards as a federal takeover of education. The following year, in September 2013, the group co-sponsored an anti-Common Core conference at Notre Dame University, drawing more than 200 activists from states as diverse as California, Louisiana, Massachusetts and Michigan. It also has released numerous videos about the Common Core and has sent representatives to testify against implementing the program at several state legislative hearings. It regularly sends speakers to panel discussions and grassroots events around the country.

The APP materials appear, for the most part, to contain rather arcane critiques: the standards are mediocre, the costs to states will be too high, states will lose autonomy, etc. But in a video on the group’s website, APP Senior Fellow Jane Robbins warns of dark forces at work behind the scenes, in language echoing the conspiracy theories of Patriot groups. The standards, she says, are part of a “utopian, grandiose planning for a managed global economy” long sought by “progressives, or socialists as they have historically been known.” The Common Core is part of a “new vision” for America that advances “the model of a command economy and unlimited government.”

This theme is striking a chord with social conservatives who are being organized to fight the Common Core in their own states by national groups with state and local chapters.

One of the most active is Concerned Women for America (CWA), a group founded in 1979 by Beverly LaHaye, the wife of Timothy LaHaye, the evangelical minister and author of the *Left Behind* series of Christian novels. The CWA was founded to fight feminism but today seeks to “bring Biblical principles into all levels of public policy.” It has a big megaphone. According to Right Wing Watch, the group boasts more than 500,000 members in 500 chapters and a daily radio show that reaches more than 1 million people.

CWA’s Georgia chapter has been especially active, creating a website that serves as a key national clearinghouse for activists and links to other grassroots groups and websites.

Far-right ‘Patriots,’ Tea Parties take aim

Battles over education issues have been going on for many years but were mostly fought at the state and local level. In the Common Core, disparate elements of the far right

In the Common Core, disparate elements of the far right found a unifying issue and a common punching bag.

found a unifying issue and a common punching bag—the federal government—even as the individual skirmishes are waged in the 44 states that are implementing the standards.

Various Tea Party factions, the John Birch Society and Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, for example, all refer to the standards as "ObamaCore."

Tea Party groups have spearheaded rallies against the Common Core in many states—Florida, Indiana, Missouri, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Arizona and Wisconsin, to name just a few. They've also provided foot soldiers for the battles being waged in numerous states—packing buses to legislative hearings, bombarding lawmakers with phone calls and helping force legislative investigations of the Common Core.

Joining the Tea Party groups are Patriot activists who are part of a radical-right movement that has staged a dramatic resurgence since President Obama was elected. As these groups have become involved, the rhetoric has grown more extreme. Numerous coalitions fighting the Common Core include groups associated with the Christian Right, the Tea Parties and the Patriot movement.

Chief among the Patriot groups is the John Birch Society (JBS)—the ultra-right organization that once called President Dwight D. Eisenhower a communist agent. The JBS links the Common Core to an all-encompassing conspiracy theory involving Agenda 21, a non-binding U.N.-sponsored set of principles for sustainable development that was developed during the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and signed by President George H.W. Bush. The JBS believes Agenda 21 is part of a plot by a secretive cabal of global elites to institute a "New World Order," a socialistic, totalitarian world government that will enslave Americans.

Mass-producing 'green serfs'

In March, *The New American*, the JBS magazine, published an article under the headline "Common Core and UN Agenda 21: Mass Producing Green Global Serfs." It claimed that the Common Core is part of a broader agenda "in the works for decades" to help usher in the New World Order, mainly by transforming American children into "global citizens" ready for the coming 'green' and 'sustainable' world order." The article claims that UNESCO, Bill Gates, the Obama administration and "other powerful globalist forces are working quietly but fiendishly to impose global education standards on humanity."

JBS affiliates also have been active in stoking fury at the Common Core.

For example, Freedom Project Education operates a Christian-oriented homeschooling website that bills itself as "independent." But it turns out that Freedom Project Education is not so independent after all. It's the educational arm of the American Opinion Foundation, an "independent" nonprofit associated with and created by the JBS. On the Freedom Project's website, academic director Duke Pesta calls the Common Core an "absolute appropriation of Soviet ideology and propaganda." Further, the site calls the standards "a Trojan Horse that mandated cooperation with ObamaCare." Perhaps even worse, the "mainstreaming of homosexuality, promiscuity and other practices—even to young children—is an important component of the scheme."

In case the government leaders don't pick up the message, the JBS's American Opinion Foundation is paying travel expenses for alleged education experts to testify against the Common Core in states like Wisconsin that have held investigative hearings on the standards.



Phyllis Schlafly

Phyllis Schlafly, who founded the Eagle Forum in 1972 to fight the feminist movement and the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, also has found in the Common Core a new battlefield in the culture war. She has crusaded against it for three years through her columns, radio shows and Eagle Forum affiliates across the country. Sounding much like those in the Patriot movement, she claims it will bring this country a totalitarian government.

Other Eagle Forum leaders also wave the New World Order/Agenda 21 red flag. In an interview published on the Patriot website Renew America in March 2013, the president of Eagle Forum Palm Springs, Christina Michas, linked the Common Core to “the ultimate goal” of setting up “internment or re-education camps for those that will not comply with their sick agenda. You either are ‘retrained’ or you will have to be eliminated.”

Such talk refers to the false conspiracy theory, promoted by Patriot groups including the JBS, that the Federal Emergency Management Agency is building concentration camps to imprison political dissidents.

Last August, Schlafly wrote a letter to Catholic bishops warning them to stay away from the Common Core. She blasted the standards for “active promotion of gay marriage, and other federal efforts designed to dismantle moral society. ... We cannot remain complacent as this administration takes aim at our children. ... The laity needs to hear from the bishops on this issue.”

The letter was reprinted in *Crisis*, a lay Catholic magazine, under the heading “Common Core: A Threat to Catholic Education.” On the heels of Schlafly’s well-publicized letter and the APP’s Notre Dame conference in September, more than 100 Catholic professors signed a public letter to U.S. bishops in November denouncing the standards and urging bishops to ignore them or to reverse the decision in more than 100 dioceses where they were already approved.



David Barton

The media amplifiers

Popular right-wing media figures such as former Fox News Channel host Glenn Beck and Michelle Malkin, the syndicated columnist and Fox News contributor, have played key roles in spreading hysteria and stoking opposition to the standards. Beck sponsored two anti-Common Core strategizing conferences in 2013, appointing self-proclaimed historian David Barton to organize them. Barton is the founder of WallBuilders, a Texas-based, far-right evangelical group promoting his revisionist view that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that it ought to be ruled by biblical principles. Although he has no academic credentials in history, he has written numerous history books and has served as an adviser to Newt Gingrich, U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann, Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback and Mike Huckabee. His books have been widely discredited by historians for their factual



Glenn Beck, who sponsored two anti-Common Core strategizing conferences in 2013, calls the Common Core “evil.” Commentator Michelle Malkin claims “government meddlers” will gather “intimate data” on children and sell it to business interests.

errors and distortions. Barton’s most recent, *The Jefferson Lies*, was withdrawn from the market and recalled by the world’s largest Christian publisher in 2012 because it contained so many factual mistakes. That year, readers of the nonpartisan History News Network, affiliated with George Mason University, voted the book “least credible history book in print.”

But Barton continues to enthrall Christian Right audiences. Lately, he’s been spinning tall tales about the Common Core.

Beck’s conferences, moderated by Barton, drew activists from around the country with the goal of mapping out coordinated attacks on the Common Core. Beck calls it “the biggest story in American history. ... It is Communism, we are dealing with evil.”

On his website and BlazeTV Internet-based show, Beck has repeatedly railed against the standards, often in apocalyptic terms. “We will not save our country unless we save it first from this attack,” he said. The headlines on his site include: “Do Common Core’s roots date back to America’s earliest socialists?” and “Common Core: A Lesson Plan for Raising Up Compliant, Non-Thinking Citizens.”

The liberal plot

Malkin has written extensively on the Common Core, denouncing the “collectivist agitators” who have “chipped away at academic excellence in the name of fairness, diversity and social justice.” Much of what she writes purportedly reflects the views of education experts, whether accurate or not, who disagree with the standards. For example: “Traditional Euclidean geometry is replaced with an experimental approach that had not been previously pilot-tested in the U.S.” But the conclusions she draws are straight out of the Patriot conspiracy textbook: that it’s all a big liberal plot to indoctrinate children.

Malkin has also warned that, through the Common Core, “Washington meddlers ... are gathering intimate data on children and families” that will be “sold by government officials to the highest bidders.” The data collection and selling, she claims, “is the central fraud of Washington’s top-down nationalized curricular scheme.” Malkin based her warning on the APP’s 2012 report, produced with the Massachusetts-based Pioneer Institute, which said the Common Core “is merely one part of a much broader plan by the federal government to track individuals from birth through their participation in the workforce.”



Public Education Under Assault

The documentary *IndoctriNation: Public Schools and the Decline of Christianity in America*, promoted on the website above, contends that public schools are unconstitutional, were created to instill communist ideas, and “are not an option” for Christians.

The attacks on the Common Core are, in many ways, simply a proxy for a broader assault on public education itself, one of America’s greatest achievements and a cornerstone of its democracy.

As the standards are hotly debated, schools and teachers are being dragged through the mud by Christian Right culture warriors whose cause has been joined not only by Tea Party factions and radical antigovernment activists but by powerful right-wing think tanks and advocacy groups with an even more expansive agenda to privatize education. Indeed, the Koch brothers-affiliated group FreedomWorks, which helped birth the Tea Party movement, is scheming to use the Common Core debate to build support for the private school vouchers and other “school choice” measures, and to abolish the U.S. Department of Education.

Public schools are “dangerous anti-God indoctrination camps” that “threaten our nation’s very survival.”

ANITA STAVER, PRESIDENT OF THE LIBERTY COUNSEL

It would be easy for many Americans to dismiss the most incendiary claims about public education as the rantings of extremists who have no real influence. That would be a mistake. These allegations are being absorbed by millions of Americans and are entering the mainstream public discourse.

For decades, education debates often revolved around ways to improve education. Today, many of the critics offer no suggestions for reform. Instead, they contend that our secular neighborhood schools are rotten to the core, and the only hope is to turn back the clock to church-affiliated education and “every family for itself” homeschooling. That is the mantra of *IndoctrINation: Public Schools and the Decline of Christianity in America*, the movement’s rallying-cry documentary, released in 2011 and funded, according to *Mother Jones*, by companies that produce homeschooling materials.

The 90-minute documentary features Scottish-born producer Colin Gunn traveling the United States in a school bus with his wife and children. He interviews so-called education authorities who are really evangelical preachers; extremist libertarians; politicians who don’t believe in publicly supported education or modern science; and ex-teachers who left schools because they weren’t allowed to bring Jesus into the curriculum. Viewers learn that U.S. public schools were created to instill communist ideas; that since they’re “not an option for Christians,” parents who place their children there are incurring the wrath of Jesus; and that our schools are unconstitutional.

The film has generated a blitz of publicity and interest. It’s sold as a DVD by dozens of retailers as well as online at Amazon and the *IndoctrINation* website. A companion book to the DVD is sold on the website of the rabid conspiracist Alex Jones, whose show is streamed online, archived at his website and carried by more than 60 radio stations. The film is being screened at church gatherings and homeschool conventions. The *IndoctrINation* website also provides a manifesto for readers to sign and share with their pastors, urging religious leaders to preach removal of congregants’ children from public schools.

The film won the “best documentary” prize in 2012 at the San Antonio Independent Film Festival, a Christian-oriented movie showcase. It was pushed hard by Jones, who devoted a show to it and recommended it “for anyone who has kids in the government training camps.” Warning of rampant pedophilia at public schools, Jones told parents, “You’re handing your kids over to a bunch of globalist scumbags.” To Jones, public schools are “part of a wicked plan” by “sick deviants” to enslave humanity under a satanic New World Order. “The top New World Order people do worship Lucifer,” Jones said. “They think Lucifer’s actually God and that Jesus is the devil. And that’s why, at the end of the day, we are actually dealing with Luciferians.”

Conservative columnist Cal Thomas also has praised *IndoctrINation*. “Every Christian parent with a child in a government school should see this and be forced to confront their



Cal Thomas

unwillingness to do what Scripture requires for the children on loan to them by God,” he said in an official endorsement. “A mass exodus from government schools is the only way to preserve the souls and minds of children.” Thomas’ platform is vast. He’s among the most widely syndicated columnists in America, appearing in more than 500 newspapers, including circulation-leading *USA Today*. He’s heard on more than 300 radio stations and as a political commentator on Fox News.

“We cannot stick our head in the sand while our nation’s children are held hostage in government indoctrination camps,” wrote Anita Staver, president of the Liberty Counsel, in a September 2013 newsletter in which she pleaded with parents to homeschool their children. Public schools are “dangerous anti-God indoctrination camps” that “threaten our nation’s very survival.”

‘Soviet Union style of education’

Alex Jones isn’t the only Patriot media figure to attack public schools. Radio host Dave Hodges of Arizona has also drawn schools into his circle of antigovernment conspiracy theories. He hosts a program called “The Common Sense Show,” broadcast on more than 50 stations and live-streamed online, that seethes with anger against the “New World Order” that he claims has turned the U.S. into a police state. “Move your children out of the government schools,” urges Hodges. “[They] are increasingly propagandizing our children. For example, the new unproven religion being worshipped in the public schools is environmentalism and global warning. ... The government schools are conditioning our children to accept a lower standard of living and to pay tribute to the global elite through carbon taxes.”

Indeed, neighborhood schools may be committing treason by rewriting history, Hodges contends. “The anti-American point of view put forth by these public schools is both treasonous and also represents a Soviet Union style of education.”

Extremist libertarians also are firing away. Some are articulate, highly educated ideological warriors whose credentials confer legitimacy. For example, C. Bradley Thompson is a political science professor at Clemson University and executive director of the Clemson Institute for the Study of Capitalism. He’s been a visiting fellow at Harvard and Princeton universities. He’s also written, “The ‘public’ school system is the most immoral and corrupt institution in the United States of America today, and it should be abolished. It should be abolished for the same reason that chattel slavery was ended in the 19th century: ... [It] is a form of involuntary servitude. ... [P]ublic schools force children to serve the interests of the state.” Thompson penned this diatribe as a cover story in the winter 2012 issue of *The Objective Standard*, a quarterly libertarian journal. His words, such as “the abolition of public schools is an idea whose time has come,” were widely linked and touted on Internet sites.



Alex Jones



Rod Parsley

AP IMAGES/ JOEL PAGE (THOMAS); YOUTUBE (JONES); AP IMAGES/ KIICHIRO SATO (PARSLEY)

“The ‘public’ school system is the most immoral and corrupt institution in the United States of America today, and it should be abolished.”

C. BRADLEY THOMPSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF
THE CLEMSON INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF CAPITALISM

‘Satan is after them’

Buffalo attorney and libertarian blogger James Ostrowski strongly agrees. Author of the 2009 book *Government Schools are Bad for Your Kids: What You Need to Know*, sold on Amazon and available on Kindle, Ostrowski also thinks public education deserves to die. “It is time to pull the plug on this failed 150-year-old experiment and move on,” he writes. As do many anti-public school activists, Ostrowski idealizes a distant, rural-centric era when children were taught privately. “Many government schools are turning into fornicatoriums featuring more and more sex, and less and less education.” They’re destructive hives of violence and drug abuse, his book claims. There’s only one solution: Get your children out.

This isn’t innocuous rhetoric. It’s a stab that points disproportionately at children of color and the poor. As a result of white flight to private academies and homeschooling, and the nation’s changing demographics, minorities now comprise nearly half of public school students—nearly double the percentage of three decades ago. They are on track to become the majority of students in public schools in five years. In many locales today, public schools are already populated overwhelmingly by African-American and Latino students. Plus, 48 percent of public school students today live in or near poverty.

Perhaps then, it is no surprise that these attacks are becoming more fierce as millions of evangelicals, the vast majority of them white, join the homeschooling movement, just as white students fled public schools in the Deep South following the Supreme Court’s decision outlawing racial segregation in schools.

In some corners of the evangelical world, it is becoming conventional wisdom that public schools are harmful to children.

Rod Parsley, the flamboyant televangelist and pastor of World Harvest Church, a Pentecostal megachurch in Columbus, Ohio, has woven ardent derision of public schools into promotional marketing for his book, *The Cross: One Man. One Tree. One Friday*, released in October 2013. Parsley is a leading advocate of dominionist theology, which preaches that the U.S. should be governed by Christian biblical law.

The pastor says Satan now lives in local schools. “Our children are our righteous seed, and Satan is after them,” he wrote in the October issue of *Charisma* magazine, which circulates to Pentecostal churchgoers. “He has turned our public schools into cesspools of godless propaganda where God is publicly mocked and reviled. It is time to take a stand against the devil.”

Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul has called the Common Core “a dangerous new curriculum” marred by “the same old radical Progressive ideology in a new package.”

The Political Impact

In early April, a Tea Party activist appeared before Alabama’s Senate Education Committee during a hearing on legislation that would allow individual school districts to bow out of the Common Core State Standards.

“We don’t want our children to be taught to be anti-Christian, anti-Catholic and anti-American,” said Terry Bratton. “We don’t want our children to lose their innocence, beginning in preschool or kindergarten, told that homosexuality is OK and should be experienced at an early age and that same-sex marriages are OK.”

Lawmakers adjourned for the year without voting on the proposal. But incendiary rhetoric like that, with no basis in fact, greatly concerns those who see the Common Core as one of the best ways to raise student achievement.

All of the fervid, “fear-based” propaganda “is absolutely having an effect,” said Allan Golston, president of the United States Program within the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has invested more than \$170 million in the standards. “It’s causing political leaders to question this, with hearings across the country. There are indications some political leaders are feeling pressure to back away from Common Core. At the least, it’s a big distraction. The ultimate effect is not yet known.”

Last summer, the Michigan legislature defunded the program but rescinded the step in October. Then, in March, Indiana became the first state to drop the standards altogether after Republican Gov. Mike Pence signed repeal legislation that orders the State Board of Education to draft new ones.

Other states could soon follow Indiana’s lead.

States wavering

According to an Associated Press report citing the National Conference of State Legislatures, about half of the more than 200 Common Core bills filed in state legislatures would slow or halt implementation of the standards.

In April, the Oklahoma Senate voted to repeal that state’s commitment to the Common Core. Mike Neal, president of the Tulsa Regional Chamber of Commerce, which supports the standards, said the state’s political leaders all initially backed them. But now, with the 2014 elections looming, both Republicans and Democrats are “running scared.” Opponents, he told National Public Radio, have been telling politicians that “if you support Common Core, we’re going to beat you, and we’ll beat you over this one single issue.”

Patte Barth, director of the Center for Public Education, a nonpartisan clearinghouse for accurate facts on public education sponsored by the National School Boards Association (NSBA), worries about the misinformation being spread by groups such as the American Principles Project. Although the NSBA has taken no official stand on Common Core, Barth has published “truth squad” articles to debunk the myths.

“These standards will have to be carefully implemented, and that remains to be seen,” Barth said. “Right now, the public is just not getting good information, and a lot of bad information on Common Core is out there.”

A nascent political backlash is also evident at the federal level, particularly among Republicans aligned with the Tea Party.

Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul has joined with seven other senators, including Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, to sponsor legislation prohibiting federal financing for any Common Core component. Paul has called the Common Core “a dangerous new curriculum” marred by “the same old radical Progressive ideology in a new package.” In 2013, he declared, “Instead of teaching about our Constitution, it will teach students to be ‘global citizens.’” Paul may not be aware of this, but the Preamble to the Constitution is among the handful of texts actually required by the Common Core. The others are the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address.

Other members of Congress, too, are buying into the anti-Common Core propaganda. U.S. Rep. Jim Bridenstine of Oklahoma, a first-term Tea Party Republican, said in a March interview with Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council that the standards are “much like socialism.” He added, “Socialism has been spreading poverty equally across the world and that’s not what we believe in. We believe in exceptionalism and that’s what our country should be advancing, not commonality.”

Controversy over the Common Core also appears to be shaping the early contours of the GOP’s intraparty fight for the presidential nomination in 2016. Jeb Bush, a strong proponent of the standards, is taking heat from hard-right elements of his party. “This is a real-world, grown-up approach to a real crisis that we have, and it’s mired in politics,” Bush said in March during a Tennessee event promoting the standards. Some other potential candidates, including Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, appear to be equivocating after earlier supporting the Common Core.

Meanwhile, mainstream business interests, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, find themselves increasingly at odds with social conservatives and the Tea Party factions.

But there’s an even bigger game at play.

Advocacy groups associated with the billionaire industrialist Koch brothers, some of them playing key roles in organizing grassroots opposition, envision the Common Core fight as just the prelude to larger changes: enacting school privatization measures across the country.



U.S. Sen. Rand Paul



U.S. Rep. Jim Bridenstine



Why It Matters For Everyone

Free, universal and compulsory education has been a pillar of American success for more than a century—leading to literacy and economic mobility levels that have historically been among the best in the world.

But today, the very institution of public education is under attack. Though the claims advanced by the radical right seem outlandish, the damage they can wreak is serious.

These attacks come at a time when public confidence in education is ebbing. Forty years ago, according to Gallup, most Americans—58 percent—expressed strong confidence in public schools; by 2013, that confidence had dwindled to 32 percent. Over the same general period, perhaps not coincidentally, financial support for public education has eroded. From 1972 to 2011, while GDP grew at an average annual rate of 2.7 percent, total spending on public education grew by only 2.5 percent annually—far below the growth of spending for public functions such as law enforcement (4.8 percent) and health care (5.7 percent).

Propaganda vilifying the very notion of free, secular schools that serve all children fuels this crisis of confidence and propels a host of schemes—from school choice to vouchers and opt-out programs—that threaten to undercut the foundation of an essential American institution.

Our nation’s founders understood that education is a public responsibility and necessary for self-government. Among the most important laws enacted by the fledgling government was the Land Ordinance of 1785, which established a mechanism for funding public education by setting aside one section of land in every township to support schools. A subsequent law, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, noted that “schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

In the nearly 230 years since, public schools have become deeply embedded in our culture. “The most American thing about America is the free common school system,” Adlai Stevenson said in 1948.

Americans have not always agreed on curriculum, governance or even the length of the school year, but we have shared a consensus that public schooling benefits all of us. It

Public education is a pillar of American democracy, but support is ebbing. The most troubling assaults come from far-right critics whose real purpose is to destroy public schools, not reform them.

prepares young people for citizenship, eases assimilation for immigrants, and makes possible economic mobility. In today's reform language, it prepares young people for careers, college and citizenship.

That consensus is now under siege from critics on all sides. But the truly troubling assaults come from the most ardent on the radical right whose real purpose is to destroy public schools, not make them better. These groups attempt to recast the narrative in two ways: first, make the very idea of public education malevolent; second, make the case that education is a consumer service primarily benefiting students and parents, not society at large.

The conditions for the withdrawal of public support are already present: Fewer households than ever include school-age children (fewer than one in five); an aging population no longer sees its stake in education; and political constraints make it hard to support taxes for long-term investment. Deprived of public support, the institution is in real danger.

A bitter blow

The destruction of public education, of course, would be a bitter blow to millions of Americans who cannot afford private schools or homeschooling. It would mean that children from low-income families—48 percent of K-12 enrollment—would have fewer opportunities to rise out of poverty. It would mean that the children of immigrants—21 percent of students—would have fewer opportunities to assimilate. And it would mean, increasingly, that children of color—who will comprise 50 percent of American children by 2019—would be unprepared to make their way in modern society, crippling the economy and ruining chances of being globally competitive.

“Any time you have a public narrative that aids those who want to disinvest in the public education system for any reason, including the hate-driven ones, that’s going to hurt low-income and students of color the most because they most depend on public education for a path up,” said Daria Hall, director of K-12 policy development for the Education Trust, a nonprofit that advocates for closing the achievement gap between poor and minority children and their peers.

Based on her vision of what’s best for children, eminent education historian Diane Ravitch has not hesitated to criticize education over her long career. Indeed, she opposes the Common Core, in part because she believes the standards have not been adequately tested. But she never derides public education *per se*. On the contrary, in her new book, *Reign of Error*, she explicitly lauds the institution of public schools. In a 2013 article, she warned of the harm to our common welfare in thoughtlessly attacking them.

Public education “expanded opportunity to more people, distributed the benefits of knowledge to more people, and strengthened our nation,” writes Ravitch. “When public education is in danger, democracy is jeopardized. We cannot afford that risk.”

“Despite its faults,” asserts this forceful education critic, “the American system of democratically controlled schools has been the mainstay of our communities and the foundation for our nation’s success.”

And that is something that America cannot afford to lose.

Common Core Myths

MYTH: The Common Core dictates curricula to local school districts and teachers, telling them which texts to use and what to teach.

FACT: The Common Core is not a curriculum at all. Rather, it is a set of *standards* spelling out the knowledge and abilities that students should master at every grade level. For example, a grade 4 reading standard expects students to be able to “determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.” The Common Core does list “exemplar” texts, or examples of books to give teachers an idea of the level of complexity required at different grade levels. But teachers are not required to use them. Only one set of texts are “required” (in grades 11 and 12): the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. Beyond those foundational American texts, states, school districts and schools continue to choose what curricula to follow.

MYTH: The Common Core is a “top-down” federal program that tramples the authority of states and local school districts and puts schools under federal control.

FACT: The federal government was not involved in developing the Common Core. Instead, the idea was launched in 2007 by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, an association of state school superintendents who report to their state’s governor. They saw that working together would be a cost-effective way for each state to create high-quality standards that would put the United States on a par with other nations and ensure educational equity across regions and states. The decision about whether to adopt the standards remains with the 50 states. Decisions about implementation will be made by those states and their districts and schools.

MYTH: The Common Core – or “Obamacore” – was forced upon the states by the Obama administration.

FACT: In order to receive Race to the Top federal grants that were part of the 2009 stimulus package or to receive waivers releasing them from certain elements of the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the Obama administration required states to adopt “college and career readiness” standards. But it did not specify the Common Core. In fact, Virginia and Texas’ decision to write their own college and career-readiness standards did not make them ineligible for Race to the Top funds. To be sure, under Secretary Arne Duncan, the U.S. Department of Education has been a cheerleader for the Common Core and has provided incentives – like the Race to the Top



funding—to encourage state adoption of the Common Core or other rigorous standards. These funds account for less than 1 percent of all spending on education.

MYTH: The Common Core invades the privacy of students by requiring the collection of data that will be sold by the federal government to private interests.

FACT: The NCLB law enacted under President George W. Bush launched the era of big data in education. NCLB required states to collect and report data about student performance. It also required that the data be disaggregated by race so that racially based achievement gaps would be exposed and addressed. Schools use student data to identify what works and what doesn't. Districts, states and researchers use large, aggregated data sets—with individual, personal identifying data stripped out—to uncover patterns and discover more about how students learn. Data is the basis for all educational research. By law, the federal government has access only to aggregate data collected by states—not information about individual students—and the Common Core does nothing to change that.

MYTH: The Common Core “dumbs down” education in public schools, enforcing standards that are inferior to those already in place in states.

FACT: While there is room for a healthy, fact-based debate about the quality of the standards, most experts agree that they are superior to those they were designed to replace in most states. For example, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative-leaning think tank dedicated to “advancing educational excellence for every child through quality research, analysis, and commentary,” reported in 2010 that the Common Core standards are “clearer and more rigorous than the ELA [English language arts] and math standards presently used by the vast majority of states.” The institute’s study found that about three-fourths of the existing state standards were inferior in math and English to the Common Core; one-fourth were roughly on par. (English and math standards are the only ones developed thus far under the Common Core.) Also, the Common Core standards represent a floor, not a ceiling. States that are doing better can continue to offer advanced

Among the pervasive falsehoods about the Common Core is the accusation that the federal government will gather personal data on children and sell it to big business.

courses. The reality is that 60 percent of students enrolling in community college have to take at least one remedial course. If the standards can ensure that high school graduates are ready for college work, the nation could save an estimated \$7 billion.

MYTH: The Common Core de-emphasizes critical thinking skills.

FACT: This is exactly opposite of what the Common Core does. The standards are designed explicitly to promote critical thinking. The English standards, for example, encourage students to understand an author’s point of view and purpose for writing a text; to compare and evaluate claims and types of arguments; to support claims with credible sources; and to gather information from multiple, relevant sources. The math standards encourage an understanding of concepts and how numbers work, as opposed to simply memorizing techniques to solve problems.

MYTH: The Common Core indoctrinates students with “leftist” propaganda, such as a belief in global warming, the idea of “social justice,” or that people should be good “global citizens.”

FACT: This and similar claims are presented to their audiences as fact by Glenn Beck, Michelle Malkin, David Barton and many others who apparently believe that secular, public education—by its nature—promotes liberal thought and undermines Christian values. Barton claims, for example, that the “standards teach that the future of the planet is threatened by manmade global warming. ... This is not education, it’s political indoctrination.” The truth is, there is no mention of global warming in the standards, and the Common Core does not appear to have a single exemplar text related to it. There are textbooks on the market that contain passages about the phenomenon, but they are not required reading under the Common Core. Quite often, examples of “indoctrination” cited by critics are based on classroom lessons or texts adopted by individual teachers, districts or states rather than any language or standard in the Common Core.

MYTH: The Common Core is anti-Christian and anti-American.

FACT: These ideas are mainstays among many of the most ardent Christian Right and Tea Party critics, and typically the assertions are made without any factual evidence to support them. They appear, though, to be based on several factors. First, many of the critics object to the very notion of a common set of standards for the entire country, which they believe undermines local control and promotes some kind of anti-American or “collectivist” ideal. Second, they often cite vulgar language, sexual content or other material they consider objectionable in specific books that are listed as “exemplar” texts. As is perfectly clear, exemplar texts—many of which are classics already

taught in public schools—are not required reading under the Common Core. Rather, they are listed as examples of texts that would help students reach achievement goals. Third, because the standards do not promote Christianity, and public schools are, by law, bastions of secular learning, the standards are deemed anti-Christian. The fact is, the standards contain nothing whatsoever that promotes anti-Christian views. And, as noted above, the only required texts are uniquely American—the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address.

MYTH: The Common Core promotes homosexuality and the acceptance of a “homosexual agenda.”

FACT: Like many others, this allegation appears to be based on objections to certain of the exemplar texts, which are not required reading under the Common Core. In other cases, it relies on anecdotal stories about lessons adopted by states, local school districts or individual teachers—the very entities the critics contend should be making these decisions. A Tea Party leader in Alabama told a state Senate committee, “We don’t want our children to lose their innocence, beginning in preschool or kindergarten, told that homosexuality is OK and should be experienced at an early age and that same-sex marriages are OK.” The basis for her statement is unclear. Some groups have linked this claim to the American Institutes for Research (AIR), a firm that has been hired by some states to create Common Core-aligned tests. They contend the AIR promotes a “homosexual lifestyle” among children because it has published materials for schools on LGBT issues.

MYTH: The Common Core is part of the larger “New World Order” plot by devious globalists, including President Obama, to enslave humanity under a socialistic, totalitarian world government.

FACT: Antigovernment “Patriot” activists and groups—most notably the John Birch Society—have linked the Common Core to broader conspiracy theories about the United Nations, Agenda 21 (a nonbinding U.N. agreement to promote global sustainability) and the ever-looming New World Order. The tentacles of this conspiracy theory are virtually endless and involve comparisons of the Common Core to the Soviet Union, to Nazi Germany, to communist China and more. The basic idea is that President Obama and Bill Gates, both part of the New World Order plot, are using the standards as a means of centralizing control over the nation’s schoolchildren and brainwashing them into being “green global serfs,” as the Birch Society’s magazine put it, who will unquestioningly serve the wishes of their globalist overlords. As with most conspiracy theories, these allegations are impossible to refute because they rely on wild conjecture, leaps of logic and supposed documents that have nothing to do with the Common Core.

About the Report

This report was prepared under the editorial guidance of Intelligence Project Director Heidi Beirich and Teaching Tolerance Director Maureen Costello. The editor was Booth Gunter. It was researched and written by Marilyn Elias, Booth Gunter, Adrienne van der Valk and Maureen Costello. Researchers also included Josh Glasstetter, Evelyn Schlatter and Emily Chiariello. The report was designed by Sunny Paulk.



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