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New education measures face increasing opposition

Critics cite costs, hard testing tied to Common Core

By Motoko Rich | NEW YORK TIMES AUGUST 16, 2013

NEW YORK — The Common Core, a set of standards for kindergarten through high school that has been ardently supported by the Obama administration and many business leaders and state legislatures, is facing growing opposition from both the right and the left even before it has been properly introduced into classrooms.

Tea Party conservatives, who reject the standards as an unwelcome edict from above, have called for them to be severely rolled back.

Indiana has already put a brake on them. The Michigan House of Representatives is holding hearings on whether to suspend them. And citing the cost of new tests requiring more writing and a significant online component, Georgia and Oklahoma have withdrawn from a consortium developing exams based on the standards.

At the same time, a group of parents and teachers argue that the standards — and particularly the tests aligned with them — are simply too difficult.

Those concerns were underscored last week when New York state, an early adopter of the new standards, released results from reading and math exams showing that less than one-third of students passed.

“I am worried that the Common Core is in jeopardy because of this,” said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. “The shock value that has happened has been so traumatic in New York that you have a lot of people all throughout the state saying, ‘Why are you experimenting on my kids?’ ”

Supporters worry that opposition could start to snowball as states face new exams in 2014-15.

“The danger here is that you have two kinds of problems going on,” said Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust, a nonprofit group that works to close achievement gaps. “One is a Tea Party problem, which doesn’t have deep roots but does have lots of political muscle behind it, and then you’ve got a bit of antitest rebellion coming from the left. The question is what’s going to happen if they both get together. That’s the more terrifying prospect.”

One goal of the standards is to reduce high remediation rates at colleges and universities and help students compete for jobs that demand higher levels of skills than in previous generations.

According to some estimates, about 40 percent of students entering college must take remedial courses before they can enroll in credit-bearing classes. Nancy L. Zimpher, chancellor of the State University of New York, said the system spends about $70 million a year conducting catch-up courses for students.

The Obama administration promoted the Common Core by giving priority to states that adopted “college and career ready” standards when it awarded grants under its Race to the Top program. By last summer, 45 states, including Massachusetts, and the District of Columbia had adopted the standards.

But even many who support them are wary about how they have been adopted. David Cohen, an English teacher at Palo Alto High School in California who described the standards as “reasonable,” said that among colleagues, “the resistance and the anger and frustration are still coming largely, but not entirely, from the process.”

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has repeatedly emphasized that states, districts, and teachers have broad flexibility to devise their own curriculums and lesson plans based on the standards. Speaking about the Common Core to the American Society of News Editors in June, Duncan said: “The federal government didn’t write them, didn’t approve them, and doesn’t mandate them. And we never will. Anyone who says otherwise is either misinformed or willfully misleading.”

Last year Kentucky became the first state to give new math and reading tests based on the Common Core, and as in New York, the levels of students deemed proficient fell sharply compared with a year earlier.

Such results have spooked teachers watching from afar, particularly as more states are moving to evaluate teachers in part on student test scores.

In an interview, Duncan acknowledged that the transition would be difficult.

“It’s easier to keep saying everything’s looking great,” he said. “Potemkin village, whitewash the

walls. That's the easy way to do it, but I'm not quite sure that changes kids' lives or helps our country remain competitive economically."

According to a report from the Center on Education Policy at George Washington University, teachers in 30 states are already teaching some lessons based on the standards. But only 10 states reported that more than three-quarters of teachers had received any Common Core training in the most recent school year.

Supporters of the new standards say critics are too impatient. "It's going to take time, and it's going to take a lot of work," said David Driscoll, former commissioner of education in Massachusetts, which raised its own standards in the late 1990s and faced a falloff in state test scores before seeing them steadily climb.

Today, Massachusetts leads the country in scores on exams administered by the Department of Education and ranks close to some countries frequently cited as world leaders in academic performance.