

# Down to the core

Efforts to make schools across America adhere to a common set of standards in maths and English have met with fierce resistance in some states. Could the US Presidential election end up derailing the 'Common Core', asks **Julian Hall**

With terrorism, foreign affairs and immigration dominating the headlines for obvious reasons, there has been little mention of education in the recent US Presidential debates – not even of that domestic hot potato the 'Common Core'.

That's not to say all the hopefuls support this government-approved scheme, to introduce common standards in English and Maths to US schools. Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton are advocates but Donald Trump has called it "a disaster" and Ted Cruz wants it repealed, describing Common Core as "national standards being dictated from Washington". Bernie Sanders is on the fence.

With the election fast approaching more uncertainty lies ahead, and for education businesses who have already been caught in the crossfire, that's bad news. But why does the Common Core attract so much

ire – and could someone like Cruz really reverse the impact it has had since its phased introduction began in 2010?

## Big gaps

At heart, Common Core's (CC) mission is a noble one: to close the big gaps in educational performance that exist between US states. Neatly described in *The New Yorker* as "a federally approved but not nationally mandated" initiative, it lays out a set of standards against which schools can assess their performance through testing. Its proponents stress it is not a national curriculum, is fully based on research, and is in no way controlled by the Federal government. It's also up to states whether they want to use it.

But in a country where education policy is dictated from within state lines, CC's top down approach was always going to raise heckles. Its fiercest opponents are typically those on the right of the Republican Party, who characterise it as something akin to a federalist conspiracy. It is ironic to

learn then that the genesis of Common Core lies in the failure of a Republican policy – George W Bush's 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act.

The law exploited the fact that, while the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act forbids the federal government from intervening in school curriculum development, it also makes federal funding for states contingent on raising educational standards. As such, NCLB decreed that states had to ensure all US students (including those from disadvantaged backgrounds) reached proficiency in reading and maths by 2014. To achieve this they were expected to create their own assessments of basic skills, although these did not have to be aligned with national standards.

The policy faltered, firstly because the 2014 target was unfeasible, and secondly because states got to set their own performance targets, meaning that some would report high performance while performing badly against national



measures. “It was deeply embarrassing for governors who were trying to attract national and global companies to their states,” says Marc Tucker of think tank the National Centre on Education and the Economy.

It was an attempt by states, and not the White House, to fix this that led to the birth of the Common Core. Through the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, state governors got together in 2009 to work up a set of common standards applicable to maths and ‘English language arts’ (reading, writing, critical thinking etc). These were released to the country in June 2010 on a voluntary basis – although the Obama administration greatly incentivised take-up by making other pots of federal money more accessible to CC-adopting states.

### 42-and-a-half states

Today, 42-and-a-half states are operating the Common Core. The refuseniks from the start were Texas, Alaska, New England,

Nebraska and Virginia; the reverse adopters were Indiana, South Carolina and Oklahoma; and Minnesota only uses CC for one subject, English.

But in reality, non-participating states have also ensured their standards are broadly in line with the Common Core, suggesting the whole idea was pretty sensible. It is the way CC has been rolled out that leaves much to be desired.

The biggest issue was how the standards worked in tandem with the (now repealed) No Child Left Behind act, which remained operational during Obama’s first administration. A key provision of NCLB was that teachers should be held directly accountable for the performance of their students; in fact if a school failed to make adequate progress for four years in a row, it risked having all of its staff replaced.

However, as states rushed to adopt Common Core’s tougher standards, many teachers suddenly found themselves blindsided by NCLB’s requirements.

“It has been an accumulating disaster,”

says Tucker. “Schools administrations required schools to administer tests every quarter, or every month, or more, ensuring the students were learning enough to pass the new end-of-year tests. Teachers were apoplectic, parents pulled children out of schools. Often those who had been seen as very good teachers were fired or resigned early, or refused to serve in areas with disadvantaged kids. Meanwhile, applications to become teachers plummeted and shortages occurred.”

No Child Left Behind was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act last December, which removed the link between pupil progress and individual teachers, but the damage was done.

Teacher unions such as the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, who were previously supporters of Common Core, have now turned against it. The biggest protests against CC-aligned tests were in New York State, where critics claimed the introduction of the standards had



► been rushed. Michael Petrilli, president of conservative education policy think tank the Thomas B Fordham Institute, notes that this was “a rare example of a Democrat state that really caught fire; it’s usually a bigger issue in Republican states”.

### Main objectives prevailing

Right-wing Republicans like Trump and Cruz make hay from saying they will eradicate the Common Core, but this, of course, is now up to states themselves. And while further states may drop out of CC, the reality, according to Petrilli at least, is that its main objectives are prevailing.

Writing on the Education Next Website, under the heading ‘Common Core Not Dead Yet’, Petrilli points out that goals to improve subject standards, testing standards, testing alignment, instruction in the classroom and interstate comparatives have been met. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (a government initiative), much of this is down to even the non-participating states having similar standards to CC, along with the emergence of more ‘honest’ tests.

Petrilli is, however, the first to admit that things have run far from smoothly for CC and in particular how it is tested. Among the various lines of attack on CC, there have been numerous aspersions cast on how it influences the teaching of maths. One elementary school teacher complained in a *Guardian* article: “We are forced to assess students’ abilities to use every way of modelling or solving a problem that we teach – even the ones that don’t work.”

For education companies, whose job it is to supply learning resources to go with CC, it has been a bumpy five years. At the height of anti-CC fever in 2014, prominent education historian Diana Ravitch took aim at major companies like Pearson, which have ended up delivering CC-aligned tests in many states.

“All Common Core testing will be done online,” she said. “This is a bonanza for the tech industry and other vendors. Every school district must buy new computers, new teaching materials, and new bandwidth for the testing. At a time when school budgets have been cut in most states and many thousands of teachers have been laid off, school districts across the nation will spend billions to pay for Common Core testing.”

Such vitriol may have contributed to Pearson losing testing mandates worth hundreds of millions of dollars in Texas and New York State last year. Karen Magee, of the NYSUT union in New York State, claimed at the time that Pearson had offered “a bad product”. But arguably the ‘bad product’ was the haste in which the state adopted the new standards and testing, and Pearson was merely the sacrificial lamb.

### ‘Sell more books’

Another PR blow for the sector came in December 2015, when a Houghton Mifflin Harcourt employee was caught in a sting set up by conservative activist group Project Veritas. She was filmed claiming that education publishing was “all about money” while her friend, a

teacher from Brooklyn, berated Common Core as motivated “to sell more books”. Though Project Veritas is known for its manipulation and selective editing, the employees’ cynicism seemed genuine.

The HMM employee was subsequently dismissed but the headlines were damaging. It may well explain HMM’s decision not to give a comment for this article; McGraw Hill also declined to comment.

Pearson’s corporate affairs spokesperson Shilpi Niyogi did however share her views. She believes much of the “anger and frustration” felt towards the education industry finds its roots in the historic battle for access to public education and the role of “for-profit players”. As for how palatable the materials ultimately produced are for pupils, teachers and parents, no matter how much they are road-tested by experts there will, as she puts it, “always be disagreement between experts and serious interpretive arguments”.

Clearly the turbulence around Common Core has not gone away. Many parents, teachers, unions and politicians of both hues have an axe to grind and it may well lead to further US states dropping out of the initiative.

But what replaces CC in these cases may not look very different, amounting to a victory of sorts for Common Core advocates. “It doesn’t matter if things are achieved under the Common Core banner,” says Petrilli. “What matters is that states have high standards and it is unlikely that many will choose to go backwards.” ■