



**ROTTEN CORE:** New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg discusses the new standardized tests students will be taking, based on the Common Core benchmarks being pushed by the Obama administration. New York was the second state to adopt them.

# Education Without Representation

*Parents lead the resistance against national education standards.*

by Candi Cushman

**A**mid the outcry against increased federal intrusion in daily life comes another telltale sign that Big Brother Government is hitting closer to home for moms and dads: the effort to create nationwide education standards.

Known as Common Core (short for Common Core States Standard Initiative), the benchmarks provide a framework for what students

should know from kindergarten through 12th grade. For now, they're focused on English and math, but other efforts to promote national science and social studies guidelines aren't far behind. At least 45 states and the District of Columbia already have adopted Common Core since the final version was released in June 2010. The federal government wants every state to be using it by the 2014-15 school

year, and New York and Kentucky have already begun using the standards in their tests.

Proponents argue the standards will create "college- and career-ready" students while eliminating wildly unequal academic environments across states. But critics warn of unprecedented federal overreach into an area that belongs to states and local districts—not to mention the danger of a one-size-fits-all system that can't meet students' unique needs.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan ridiculed these concerns as being "a conspiracy theory in search of a conspiracy."

So what's the truth behind all the debate? And is there really cause for alarm?

## The Real Experts

The best insights come from parents like Heather Crossin, an Indiana mother of four, whose initiation into Common Core began two years ago, when she noticed a mysterious change in her daughter's third-grade math homework.

The assignments moved away from the rigorous practice of basic calculations to requiring regurgitated explanations of mathematical concepts (like how addition and multiplication are different from one another) or drawing pictures of numerical theories. In short, it looked like "fuzzy math," said Crossin, and it wasn't helping her daughter.

"The lack of practice was doing her a disservice," she told *Citizen*.

She and other parents showed up at a school meeting to learn what was behind the change. A textbook publisher, apparently brought in to allay anxiety, "gave us a sales pitch" for a new math book, Crossin recalled, "and explained that this is one of the first Common Core-aligned books in the country."

When the idea of being part of a fabulous new educational experi-

ment failed to comfort parents, the principal “explained they have to teach it this way because it’s going to be on the new (state) assessment. So basically, it was out of his hands. That’s the way I interpreted it,” Crossin told *Citizen*.

The incident illustrates a key problem with Common Core.

“It is furthering a centralization trend in education that has been growing for the past half century,” said Lindsey Burke, an education policy fellow at The Heritage Foundation. “The people who are locally based know the unique needs of the children in their school system, and they can get input from parents if there are mistakes or changes that need to be made. But with Common Core, once those decisions are sort of nationally established and set, it will be very difficult for parents” to do that.

Even more alarming is the fact that Crossin’s daughter attended a private Catholic school. How are standards touted as public education reform impacting private school textbooks?

Unbeknownst to Crossin, her state had decided to replace its previous standards—which have been rated among the highest in the country—with Common Core and newly aligned tests. It’s a scenario playing out nationwide, which means many private schools participating in school-choice scholarship programs could be impacted—particularly if students receiving scholarships are required to take Common Core-aligned assessments. In addition, the nation’s key academic tests—the high school GRE and the college-entry SAT and ACT—are aligning with Common Core.

“If you are a private school, or a homeschooling student who wants to do well on college entrance exams, you are facing some issues now,” explained Burke. “There are more questions than answers. Do you have to follow a Common Core

regime in order to be successful?”

Crossin isn’t alone. This June, Karen Light, a mother of two living in Delaware, noticed her son’s private school sent him home with a summer workbook stamped with the Common Core logo. She wondered why she hadn’t heard about it before.

“When you look at Common Core, what’s missing is family involvement, parents,” she told *Citizen*. “They are not in the equation, and parents want to be in the equation.”

The good news is that many parents are refusing to take a back seat in the process, and they’re having an impact that’s resonating nationwide. Indiana, for instance, was one of the states most deeply entrenched in Common Core. So when Indiana legislators voted in May to halt the adoption of the standards until a cost analysis and public hearings were done, it created national shock waves. Gov. Mike Pence added to the furor by announcing the state was pulling out of a partnership to develop Common Core-aligned tests. At press time, at least seven other states had taken or were considering similar steps.

### Mom Momentum

After that fateful school board meeting, Crossin and another concerned parent began asking questions. They were shocked to learn several longtime educators and state legislators knew little or nothing about Common Core. The decision to adopt the standards was made by appointed state school board members with little public input—and no vote from elected representatives. “It was disappointing we would make such a radical shift in power and there wasn’t any notice,” Crossin said.

So the moms “took all we found” to state Sen. Scott Schneider, R-Indianapolis, who eventually pro-

posed legislation to completely withdraw from Common Core. But well-connected activists fought back, and the bill failed. Rather than going home in despair, the moms turned defeat into motivation: “The more we researched it, the more certain we were that if the people of Indiana knew what we knew, they would never stand for it,” said Crossin. “We just felt this urge, this compulsion to get the facts out there.”

Among the key points the moms—and other parents across the country—highlighted were:

- **Federal strings:** Coordinated by bureaucratic education groups, the testing industry and political associations, the standards have been touted as “voluntary.” But the definition of “voluntary” seems suspect, considering the federal strings attached.

For instance, the Obama administration lured states with its multibillion-dollar “Race to the Top” grant competition, offering extra points if they promised to adopt “standards common to a significant number of states.” Of course, “the only standards game in town that met that requirement was Common Core,” said Burke. In the middle of an economic downturn, many cash-strapped states took the bait. Adding another thumb-sized impression to those federal fingerprints was the Obama administration’s decision to directly fund the multi-state groups developing the Common-Core standardized tests.

Even though the federal government did not technically write the standards, “let’s be honest, what’s on the test will dictate curriculum,” said Neal McCluskey, an education analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C. “People need to see the handwriting on the wall. The federal government was the entity that pushed this thing—and even

though they didn't write it this time, there will be heavy pressure and a slippery slope."

- **Taxpayer expense:** Cost estimates for Common Core's implementation vary, but the Massachusetts-based Pioneer Institute offers a well-documented (and conservative) projection of \$15.8 billion across participating states. Expenses include new textbooks, teacher trainings and tests. "I'm concerned that this is falling on the shoulders of local taxpayers," said Ann Marie Banfield, a mother who volunteers for Cornerstone, a pro-family group in New Hampshire. She also started a "Stop Common Core" Facebook page. "People are just a little more in tune to the fact that we could spend loads and loads of money on education and not see any real benefit from it. So we are going to pay again for another unpiloted, unproven set of standards."

- **Subpar standards:** As one of the only academic mathematicians involved in the development of Common Core, James Milgram, emeritus professor of mathematics at Stanford University, refused to sign off on the final draft. Common Core's claim to be "benchmarked against international standards" is "meaningless," he told Indiana senators. "They are actually two or more years behind international expectations by eighth grade."

"As someone who was at the middle of overseeing the writing process," he added, "it became clear that the professional math community input (to Common Core) was often ignored."

Then there were the red flags raised by Sandra Stotsky, another emeritus professor and English/language arts content expert. In the 1990s, Stotsky led the development of Massachusetts' education standards, which were considered

among the nation's best. Like Milgram, Stotsky refused to sign off on the final draft.

In a report titled "Common Core Standards' Devastating Impact on Literary Study and Analytical Thinking," published by The Heritage Foundation in December 2012, Stotsky criticized the "misplaced stress on informational texts" rather than literary classics. "An English curriculum overloaded with advocacy journalism or with 'informational' articles chosen for their topical and/or political nature should raise serious concerns," she warned.

Armed with those facts, the Indiana moms headed to a Tea Party event to spread the word. "We made copies of our articles at Kinkos and got a little booth, and started talking to people," said Crossin. One thing led to another, and soon the moms found themselves "crisscrossing the state" to speak. They started a website—[hoosiersagainstcommoncore.com](http://hoosiersagainstcommoncore.com)—and "met with as many legislators as we could."

Those efforts generated enough statewide backing to enable Schneider to successfully propose another piece of legislation in Indiana, this time calling for a pause in Common Core until more analysis was done. "It's just good governance," said Ryan McCann, public policy director of the Indiana Family Institute (IFI). "We didn't really know what we were getting into here. We never really voted on anything."

IFI backed the moms' efforts by asking people to contact their legislators. But it was Crossin and other parents who "brought a crowd of people and had meetings at the statehouse," he said.

In Delaware, Light took similar steps, starting a website and a parent-led group called the Delaware Education Reform Coalition.

In addition to stopping Common Core, Light wants her group to inspire others to think bigger.

"We can't just be against something," she said. "What are we for? That means talking about school choice," as well as "looking at what standards are good and using those" at the state level. "We want kids to have access to good education regardless of where they live and regardless of their parents' income."

Likewise, Cameron Smith is a father of two in Alabama whose children will soon be entering public schools. As the vice president and general counsel of the Alabama Family Institute, he decided it was time to speak up to protect parental rights. "To know someone at the federal Department of Education, much less have conversations with them, is something that is foreclosed for the vast majority of parents," he said. "I feel much better (when decisions about standards are made) by people I can approach. I can walk up and ask questions, and more importantly, vote directly for or against them."

In short, the movement to stop federal standards is being driven by a variety of moms and dads. While supporters of Common Core "have really deep pockets," said Crossin, "what we have are average American citizens armed with the truth—and a passion that the other side doesn't have."

"Because our passion is to protect our children. That's the only skin we have in the game." ■

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*For more information about Common Core and efforts to stop it, visit [The Heritage Foundation's website at heritage.org](http://TheHeritageFoundation.org) or the [American Principles Project at americanprinciplesproject.org](http://AmericanPrinciplesProject.org).*