Common Core Sparks Parent Revolt

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A landmark push to bolster U.S. Education standards is being greeted by a big backlash

The movement started with stomachaches. Every night in the spring of 2012, a third-grader from North Bellmore, N.Y., would sob as he hunched over math worksheets. In the mornings he would beg to stay home. Jeanette Deutermann, the boy’s mother, diagnosed the ailment as anxiety over new standardized tests. She did some homework of her own and didn’t like what she learned about the curriculum changes or the emphasis on tougher testing. So she decided her son wouldn’t take the tests. “I was kind of ground zero,” says Deutermann, who is known on Long Island as the mother of the movement to opt out of the Empire State’s new exams.

Soon there were pockets of panicked parents scattered throughout New York. On Facebook they swapped tales of impenetrable homework and once enthusiastic students turned sullen and scared by the intensive work needed to prepare for tougher benchmarks they were suddenly being measured against. The culprit, parents argued, was the Common Core—a landmark push to bolster and synchronize U.S. education standards for English and math.

This was a laudable goal. The U.S. lags behind its global counterparts in educational achievement. So in 2010, when the National Governors Association and a team of educators unveiled a new set of standards designed to better prepare students for college and careers, 45 states quickly signed on. Common Core was hailed as that rare bipartisan jewel. “We were told this was a new curriculum that would raise standards and go deeper. Who could object to such a thing?” says Joseph Rella, a district superintendent on Long Island. “But the devil is in the details, and the details are horrible.”

By early April, parents were in open revolt, arguing that the program had flunked. Thousands across New York State pulled their kids out of mandatory English tests. (Students have not been disciplined in these cases.) In Rella’s district, 60% of students skipped the exams. The scope of the protests was “unprecedented,” says William Johnson, the superintendent in Rockville Centre, where 45% of students opted out. “And it’s just beginning.”

In late March, Indiana became the first state to scrap the standards. Oklahoma legislators are trying to follow, and lawmakers in a dozen more states are reviewing the program. In the meantime, protesters hope the opt-out movement “crushes the system,” says Janet Wilson, an activist from upstate New York. “This is our way of civil disobedience.”

Part of the backlash is political. On the right, Tea Partiers denounce the Common Core as a federal takeover of education. (The charge is inaccurate, although federal grants dispensed through the Obama Administration provide financial incentives.) On the left, teachers’ unions and antitesting advocates helped stoke the frenzy.

But much of the opposition to Common Core comes from ordinary parents who don’t oppose testing or tougher standards but were shaken by the impact of the program on their children.
Before New York administered its new exams to third- through eighth-graders last year, state officials warned that the results would be grim. In both English and math, only about 30% of students received passing scores—a sharp drop from the previous year. That was by design. “There was a choice made to tell the truth about the standards our students were meeting,” says former New York education commissioner David Steiner. “It was a very, very painful truth.”

The switch to tougher material was agonizing for New York children and their parents. Teachers had their own test anxieties. In New York, educators’ evaluations are tied to student performance. In its haste to adopt the standards, the state gave the exams before it had effectively introduced the new material, say some experts. Teachers felt set up for failure. “There’s a genuine sense of anxiety for educators who want to do right by their kids,” says Chester Finn, a Common Core supporter and senior fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution.

New York’s approach may have been “too much, too fast,” says Terry Holliday, the Kentucky education commissioner and president of the Council of Chief State School Officers, who is watching the outcry as many more states prepare to roll out Common Core–aligned tests. “I am worried,” Holliday says, “that this could derail the whole effort.”

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