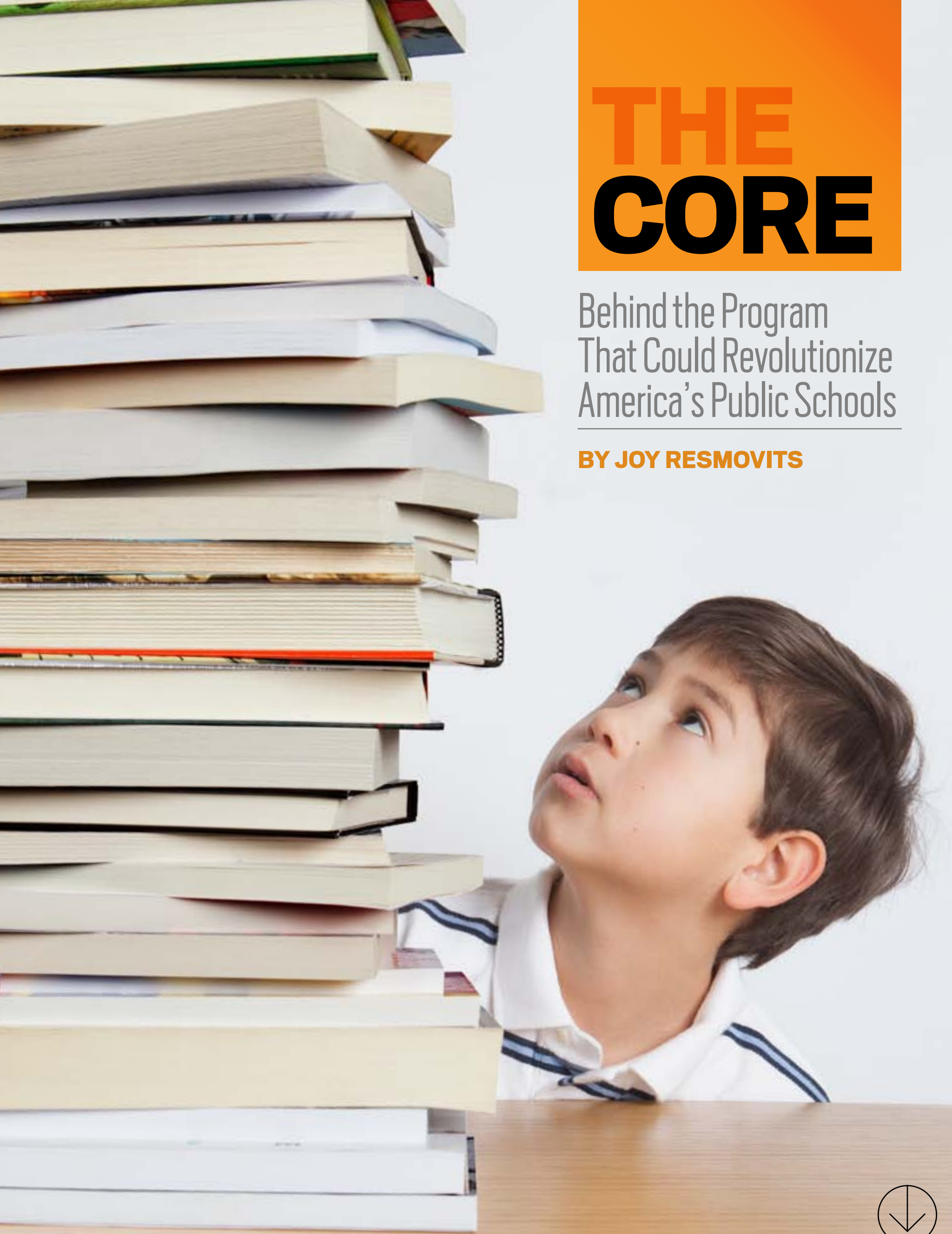
THE CORE

Behind the Program That Could Revolutionize America's Public Schools

BY JOY RESMOVITS



SHORTLY BEFORE THANKSGIVING, Arne Duncan made a glib remark about the Common Core that quickly blew up. ¶ Speaking before a gathering of state schools chiefs, the secretary of education dismissed growing opposition to the new national set of learning standards, saying "white suburban moms" were rising up against the Core simply because its more rigorous tests meant they were being told "their child isn't as brilliant as they thought they were."

The riff wasn't all that different from Duncan's usual words of support for the Common Core. He often says states have "dummied down standards" and insists officials need to tell students the truth about just how smart they are. But as soon as he named "white suburban moms" as part of the problem, his refrain became the gaffe heard 'round the mom-blogger world.

The pointed phrasing fed into parents' bubbling anxiety about the Core, more fully known as the Common Core State Standards Initiative, an education push that aims to make sure students across the United States are learning the skills they need to succeed in a global economy. In recent months, as schools began teaching and testing students on the new standards — and telling families about their plans — what started as an effort by officials to remake American education has become a favored punching bag of pundits and parents alike.

Duncan repeatedly apologized for his "clumsy" handling of the Core's opponents that day in November, but he maintained he wasn't sorry for the sentiment — that holding children to higher expectations and being honest about what they do and don't know is important. The Core is supposed to do just that.

The Common Core differs from the current educational standards system in that there is no current system. Each state sets its own learning standards, and those get translated through thousands of districts and schools and teachers. The Core is supposed to unify this patchwork of efforts not only across states, but across the country. And contrary to popular belief, it's not a curriculum: School

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systems and teachers can choose their own instructional materials, as long as students know what the Core says they should know by year's end.

Students will learn less content, but more in-depth, coherent and demanding content. In other words, students should know fewer things, but they should know them better. The Core encourages teachers to move away from memorization and to ask students to show their work. In math, it means emphasizing such things as learning fractions and fluency in arithmetic. In reading, it means more nonfiction texts — recommendations range from historical speeches from Martin Luther King, Jr., and Winston Churchill to more instructional reads such as the Environmental Protection Agency's "Recommended Levels of Insulation" and FedViews, by the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco.

It asks even younger students to respond to books and articles by making inferences based on evidence, rather than their personal feelings. Overall, it should yield fewer lectures and more conversations. Teachers across the country are already incorporating the standards into their lesson plans, changing things like the order and structure of their classes to corre-

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan upset mothers last year when he said "white suburban moms" don't like the Core because it is too rigorous for their kids.

spond with this vision.

If implemented effectively — that is, if the standards actually reach the classroom and teachers are given the materials, training and support they need — the Core will dramatically change what it means to be a student in American public schools. Its supporters hope it will create more effective teachers and, in the long run, help the U.S. improve its international educational standing after a decade of stagnation. They say this new education paradigm could also be game-changing for the U.S. economy, as American schools begin to teach lessons in sequences similar to those of higher-performing countries around the world, such as Finland and Singapore.

Yet it appears that after three years of relative quiet, the initiative is poised to become a political football, both imperiling its implementation and potentially undermining any good its supporters think it could do. What's at stake is the classroom experience and outcomes for over 40 million kids, as states and local school districts find themselves caught in the middle of this debate and continue to face troubles transitioning to a complex new system. In New York, the transition has been so rocky that after months of prodding education commissioner John King to do a better job helping teachers adapt, the state's teachers union's board of directors last weekend unanimously voted "no confidence" in King over his handling of Common Core. The board also withdrew support for Common Core as it has currently been implemented by the state.

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"White suburban moms"-gate showed just how much more scrutiny the initiative is getting these days. Detractors across the political spectrum have associated the Common Core with, at various points, "zombies," "Hitler" and "vampires." Some Republican officials who helped create the standards are having trouble holding down support as their constituents argue the Core represents yet another way for federal officials to micromanage their lives. Right-wing organizers are channeling this anger into a campaign to take down the Core. Earlier this

Terry Holliday speaks with the media after being announced as the new Kentucky commissioner of education in 2009. Kentucky became the first state to adopt the Common Core in 2010.

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month, FreedomWorks posted an action plan to fight against the standards, a campaign that will culminate with a march on Washington, D.C., this summer. The American Principles Project plans to spend at least $500,000 on the cause, Politico reported.

Meanwhile, proponents of the Core also face grounded concerns from academics, parents and some left-wing politicians about the true rigor of the standards and the limits they could place on higher-performing students.

New attention to the Common Core is admittedly overdue, and the vitriol perhaps inevitable. In a sense, the initiative was conceived in a political vacuum: The standards were quietly drafted and implemented over the last five years by a relatively small group of experts and officials around the country and with limited public input. This meant the process went fairly smoothly — initially, creators were able to secure the backing of 48 governors, from red and blue states alike.

But in the three years since states began adopting the standards, the political landscape around education has changed to reflect the overall polarization of

partisan politics. The Core's most high-profile supporter, President Barack Obama, was reelected. But during the 2012 campaign, his opponent branded the Core as a federal overreach, pushing Obama to walk a fine line between bragging about it and falling prey to those sensitivities. "We've convinced nearly every state in the country to raise their standards for teaching and learning," Obama said in one debate, but he was careful never to mention the Common Core by name. At the state level, new governors and legislatures took office and found they had inherited their predecessors' ideas about how to educate their children — ideas they didn't necessarily agree with.

The Common Core has yet to be tested in a big way. To understand where the initiative goes from here, we have to go back to where it started, and recover some of the history that's often lost on newcomers to the debate. To do that, The Huffington Post spoke to key players responsible for the Core's creation and adoption to find out exactly how we got here.

Think fewer zombies, and much more bureaucracy.

CORE BEGINNINGS

Terry Holliday had a problem. That's what the Kentucky schools chief thought as he sat in an auditorium filled with governors and state school leaders in the Chicago Airport Hilton one day in April 2009. His legislature had told him he needed to write new learning standards that ensured students

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were more prepared for higher education or careers — a process that could cost as much as $3 to $5 million per subject — but his budget had been slashed. How could he possibly satisfy the law?

As he munched on pasta and salad, Holliday focused on the meeting. High-ranking employees of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers — organizations that represent officials involved in the process of setting education standards — were giving presentations. Both hit on an attractive idea: Instead of states developing standards on their own, why not pool resources and

work on the project together?

The standards, in reading and in math, would be developed by the nation's foremost experts, the students of Kentucky would be able to compare their academic performance to their peers in other states, and Holliday would save money. The more he thought about it, the more the idea appealed to him. A year later, Kentucky would be the first state to adopt the Common Core.

The idea of creating a common set of educational standards wasn't new. For decades, officials have bemoaned the fact that it's possible for a fourth-grader who lives in Arkansas to be considered proficient in math — only to be told he's failing when he moves across the border to Missouri. This inconsistency makes it hard to compare student performance across the country. It also illustrates just how fuzzy states' measures of proficiency can be. Duncan often points out that the No Child Left Behind Act, the decade-old law that tied school performance to federal funding, let states set their own, often unimpressive, expectations. Over the last 50 years, federal officials, advocates and governors have tried to create national standards in fits and starts (the Clinton administration's Goals 2000 project is one notable example), but each fizzled.

COURTESY OF CHRIS MINNICH

"States were saying, 'we're being compared against each other and if we have lower expectations in our states, that doesn't help us,'" said CCSSO President Chris Minnich (pictured) of initial discussions about Common Core.

Yet somehow the Common Core didn't lose steam. The idea had lately come up again various education circles, memorably in a November 2007 CCSSO meeting in Columbus, Ohio. As the group's president, Chris Minnich, recalled, "States were saying, 'we're being compared against each other and if we have lower expectations in our states, that doesn't help us.' Chiefs said, 'No state should have lower expectations than another.'" And like Kentucky, several states were facing a mandatory update to their learning standards. One chief raised the idea of working on them

together. At the time, Minnich only expected an informal group of about 10 states to join in. But a series of meetings organized by CCSSO combined with simultaneous efforts by outside groups ultimately led to a level of buy-in that far surpassed his expectations.

Government officials meeting in airport hotels weren't the only ones thinking about these problems. In New York, college buddies David Coleman and Jason Zimba had created — then sold — the Grow Network, a startup that sought to make the results of tests under No Child Left Behind inform teachers' instruction. Coleman recalled they were shocked to discover in their research that learning standards tended to be so scattershot and cumbersome that it was almost impossible for a teacher to convey them to her students with any depth. Existing learning standards, he felt, were simply a laundry list, a product of school-board politics.

Coleman, now president of the College Board, and Zimba, a former Bennington College physicist, went to work on a seminal paper for the Carnegie Foundation that called for "math and science standards that are fewer, clearer, higher." Directors at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation saw the paper and were impressed by its ideas. They funded some of Coleman's work — and eventually dropped as much as $75 million on what would become the Common Core.

Around the same time, Janet Napolitano, then the Democratic governor of Arizona, became the chairwoman of the National Governors Association. She created "Innovation America," an effort that ultimately led to a task force set on catching U.S. students up to their international peers. It enlisted the help of CCSSO and other education organizations, and

President of the College Board, David Coleman, was among those who called for higher learning standards.

COURTESY OF DAVID COLEMAN

produced a paper with five education policy recommendations for governors. One was to "upgrade state standards by adopting a common core of internationally benchmarked standards."

The task force considered that single recommendation the key to all the others, and members formed an advisory board that drew on expertise from organizations including the College Board and the testing company ACT to make it happen. That group became known as the Common Core State Standards Initiative. At meetings held throughout the country between June and September 2009, Zimba and Coleman joined teams of writers from various universities, public schools and education departments to develop the standards. A "validation committee" composed of experts was assembled to audit the results.

But who would use them? And would anyone pay attention?

BUY-IN FROM THE GOVS

As it turned out, most governors were interested. At that pivotal 2009 Chicago meeting when the Common Core was presented to schools chiefs and governors, a consensus easily emerged.

"There was a lot of discussion among the chiefs that it was the right thing to do," Holliday, the Kentucky schools chief, said. No one from the federal government attended that meeting, he added, emphasizing that the adoption of the Core was, at least initially, a state-led effort. "It was just a concern in the audience among chiefs that if we didn't do something to pull together and raise expectations, the economy would take a big hit because we wouldn't be able to keep the well-paying jobs here," he said.

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Sonny Perdue, then Georgia's Republican governor, was particularly vocal about the need for common standards. His students had posted some of the lowest ACT scores that year. Perdue told Dane Linn, who worked for the National Governors Association, that allowing states to set learning standards at different levels was inherently unfair. Perdue was convinced of the need for common standards, and he wanted to get other governors on board.

CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

Then-governor of Arizona Janet Napolitano created "Innovation America," an effort that ultimately led to a task force focused on catching U.S. students up to their international peers.

Fellow Republicans like Tom Luna, the elected schools chief of Idaho, voiced their support at the meeting, as did Illinois schools chief Chris Koch. At one point, Eric Smith, then the head of Florida's schools, asked CCSSO and NGA to send around an agreement that would allow states to opt into the process of creating new standards.

Lucky for Smith, that document already existed. Minnich and Linn passed around a "Memorandum of Agreement" they had written hoping that governors and schools chiefs would sign on. The memo committed states to participate in the process of developing common learning standards, but specified that the standards would remain voluntary.

The meeting itself was fairly uncontroversial, Minnich said. He heard "really very few arguments" against the Common Core. In a body that represents 50 states and their varying internal politics, there is rarely broad agreement about anything, but by day's end, 48 states had signed on — all but Alaska and Texas.

A few months later, the project got a sudden boost from the

federal government. Shortly after Obama's inauguration, the new president launched the Race to the Top competition, which let recession-addled states vie for billions in extra stimulus funding in exchange for agreeing to certain education reforms. Early drafts of Race to the Top guidelines required states to agree to implement the Common Core standards if they wanted to get the money.

But even at the time, Linn knew that heavy-handed federal involvement in a primarily state-led project could be the Core's political undoing: He anticipated right-wing critics would point to Race to the Top and allege states had only signed onto the Core in exchange for funding, handily connecting that sequence of events to a tea party narrative about a socialist and micromanaging government.

So NGA and CCSSO representatives lobbied the Education Department several times to get the Common Core standards adoption requirement cut from Race to the Top guidelines. The feds didn't exactly back off, but they did remove the term "Common Core" from the guidelines, requiring instead that states adopt "college- and career-ready standards." The administration also allocated $350 million in stimulus cash to fund the development of tests aligned to the Common Core.

As expected, even the lightened federal fingerprint would come back to haunt the Core's proponents. Last April, a group of eight right-wing U.S. Senators including Kentucky's Rand Paul wrote a public letter lashing out against the Common Core and seeking to end the disbursement of Race to the Top funds. "While the Common Core State Standards Initiative was initially billed as a voluntary effort between states, federal incentives have clouded the picture," they wrote.

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THE WRITING PORTION OF THE TEST

But first the standards needed to be written. Over a few months starting in the summer of 2009, as governors and schools chiefs sought the input of their school boards, Coleman, Zimba and other

Tom Luna, the Republican schools chief of Idaho, voiced his support for common education standards in 2009.

AP PHOTO/JOHN MILLER

experts worked on reading and math committees to actually write the standards. They started by examining international education systems and researching what it meant to be "college ready." Then they determined precisely what an American high schooler should know upon graduation.

From there, they went backwards, mapping the standards from 12th grade down to kindergarten. While existing standards were inconsistent, the Core dictated that all 12th graders would be expected to do things like "demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics." High school seniors would also have to know how to multiply matrices in math, and graph atmospheric carbon dioxide levels over time.

The writers of the Core especially wanted students to understand the logic, reason and narrative language of math. Some of the biggest fights they had centered on the question of whether kids really needed to learn how to divide with remainders, or memo-

ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

Last April, Rand Paul (pictured) was among a group of eight right-wing U.S. senators who wrote a public letter lashing out against the Common Core.

rize multiplication tables. (In the end, the Core says they must know both.)

Throughout the writing process, they solicited feedback from teachers. At one point, the math standards writers met with a group of teachers from across the country to discuss a draft. "When we entered the room, we noticed the entire walk was covered with strips of paper," Linn wrote in a chapter of a recently published book about the Common Core. "The teachers had literally cut up all the standards and reordered them where they thought they made sense."

Content experts also looked at each draft, and the writing teams used their comments to revise the standards further. State officials and national organizations affiliated with the effort also had input, while outside experts conducted their own reviews.

The writers incorporated all these opinions, at the same time striving to prevent the Common

Core from becoming yet another laundry list unfocused and impractical learning standards. Some of the standards' writers recall pushing back on certain details, pointing to what they saw as the strongest research and evidence on what knowledge and skills students need to succeed.

In March 2010, the standards writing group released a draft to the public. They didn't know what to expect. "Nobody thought it would be the sort of national news that it is now," Minnich recalled. They analyzed 10,000 public comments pulled from a website they had set up and revised the standards yet again with that feedback in mind. More than half of the comments came from educators, but only 20 percent came from parents. In June of that year, CCSSO and NGA released the final Common Core State Standards at an event in Suwanee, Ga.

In the end, they accomplished exactly what they had set out to achieve: Through good luck, good timing, the support of the federal government and a long-held desire among governors to get it done, they had created the country's first set of shared ideas for what students need to know and when.

Some states were enthusiastic about the Core's potential — proud of a process they had engaged in for years. Others went along to comply with their Race to the Top promises. One by one, 45 states signed onto the finished Common Core, with Minnesota just adopting the reading portion.

Some of the biggest fights they had centered on the question of whether kids really needed to learn how to divide with remainders, or memorize multiplication tables. (In the end, the Core says they must know both.)

The last of these states to sign on did so by the middle of 2011.

It had all happened fast. Maybe, in hindsight, a little too fast. "Part of me wishes it had taken a little bit longer so ... everyone could have had a deeper understanding of what this was," the NGA's Linn said.

CORE IN TROUBLE

Several states have rolled out the new standards — often quietly — and teachers across the country are already teaching to them. Jennifer Wilson, a math teacher in Mississippi, said she loves the flexibility the Core gives her, and added that her classes are more

engaging. Instead of trying to cram dozens of math concepts into a semester, she can go deep on the basics so that her students truly understand math, rather than just how to compute equations. "Geometry unfolds differently for kids" under the Core, she said. "They never know what they're going to figure out. They're not looking at their watches waiting for the bell to ring."

States including Kentucky and New York are now testing students based on the standards. Because the Common Core is supposed to be harder and more demanding, those tests have shown major drops in proficiency rates from previous years. In New York, fewer than one-third of students were found to be up to Common Core English Language Arts standards in the 2012-2013 school year — down from 55 percent on non-Core aligned tests the previous year.

Policymakers predicted this drop, but faced with lower scores and higher expectations, some parents and politicians have started to object to the Core on a number of counts. Even some Core supporters have pointed to the abrupt New York score drop as reason to slow down implementation, particularly the use of new exams. American Federation of Teachers union president Randi Weingarten recently called Common Core implementation "far worse" than that of Obamacare, and has said New York City teachers weren't given a thorough Core-aligned curriculum before their students were first tested on the standards.

As more states start piloting Common Core-aligned tests this year, debates about the federal

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers union, recently said the rollout of Common Core was worse than that of Obamacare.

WILLIAM B. PLOWMAN/NBC/NBC NEWSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES

AP PHOTO/OTTO KITSINGER

government's role in education are further politicizing the standards' adoption. Critics argue the federal government is reaching too far into schools and setting kids up for failure. Some worry that by concentrating more effort on purely academic — as opposed to vocational — pursuits, the standards won't serve the thousands of students who drop out of high school each year. Others have voiced concerns that the Core will continue to burden poorer students, who can't afford luxuries like extra study guides and tutors to help them absorb its tougher teachings. And Sandra Stotsky, a University of Arkansas professor emerita who served on the Core's validation committee, has raised concerns that the Core simply aims too low.

The fight against the Core is spreading. In November, an upstate New York mother organized a Common Core protest day, ask-

Earlier this year, Idaho's Republican Governor Butch Otter (pictured) pledged to press on with implementing the Core, despite the negative response from his base.

ing parents to keep their kids home from school. The Baltimore County teachers union filed a grievance against its board over Common Core implementation. A few months earlier, a Maryland parent was thrown out of a school board meeting for protesting the standards. Tea party groups including the American Principles Project have organized their members against the Core, and conservative radio personality Glenn Beck has called it a product of extreme leftist ideology."

These critiques puzzle the Core's proponents. "This whole agenda, the Common Core, is pretty much a Republican agenda," said Holliday, the schools chief of Kentucky, an Independent. "I find it interesting when some factions of the Republican Party push back so hard on this work." In early January, Idaho's Republican Governor Butch Otter pledged to press on with implementing the Core despite the negative response from his base. "It's the right thing to do," he said.

But the pushback has led to reflection on the part of some of the Core's creators. It seems that by not involving enough stakeholders on the front end, they opened themselves up to much of the current criticism. "There should have been a deeper state-level engagement in terms of their communities," said Minnich, the CCSSO president. "The discussions may not have been deep enough."

Most Americans weren't informed about the process as it happened, and they still aren't.

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According to a Gallup poll last fall, only 38 percent of the populace had ever heard the term "Common Core State Standards." Perhaps a more deliberately public debate could have avoided some of the attacks that now threaten to undermine what was meant to be a promising change, a reform Arne Duncan called "the single greatest thing to happen to public education in America since *Brown v. Board of Education*."

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