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The Common Core State Standards is a new initiative that outlines literacy and mathematics expectations for K-12 schools across the country. (iStock)

What to Make of the Debate Over Common Core

Across 45 states and the District of Columbia, teachers are working off the same set of standards. What makes that so controversial?

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For all of their superficial similarities, the cinderblock walls and bulletin boards with scalloped borders, schools in the United States have taken a historically disparate approach to what students are expected to learn. But that is now starting to change, thanks to the Common Core State Standards, a new initiative that lays out common literacy and mathematics expectations for K-12 schools across the country.

The initiative is breathtaking in scope. Not only have 45 states and the District of Columbia signed on, but the standards also are more challenging for K-12 students, requiring them to analyze and apply what they've learned, not merely commit it to memory.

Scholars' Academy, a middle and high school located in Rockaway Park, New York City, is among the first schools in the nation where nearly all teachers have revamped their lessons to match the new standards. In fits and starts, teachers here have been overhauling their instruction over the past three years.

In Leslie Kohn's ninth-grade humanities class, students work in small groups, discussing several texts about the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, a seminal event in U.S. history, which galvanized the labor movement and paved the way towards occupational safety standards.

Kohn, though, is not teaching this event in a traditional manner. No glossy textbooks sit open on the tables at which her students are gathered. Instead, the students are reading a 1911 *New York Times* article on the fire and examining records of the existing fire codes at that time. There are no pictures, no simplified narratives in colored boxes.

The discussions are in response to several prompts from Kohn: What factors contributed to the fire? Were the factory owners to blame for the deaths of the workers? What evidence from the readings can students cite to support their arguments?

One student points to a passage buried deep in the news article referring to four previous fires at the sweatshop. The key detail supports her thesis that the deaths were preventable.

“They could have made things safer,” she says.

Kohn's lesson exemplifies major pieces of the Common Core State Standards in literacy.

While decisions about specific curricula and teaching methods will still fall to individual school districts and teachers, knowing how to weigh sources of information, cite evidence and digest nonfiction writing will be expected of all students.

“We were practically spoon-feeding students how to read and interpret text,” says Kohn's colleague, eighth-grade English teacher Carrie James. “Now, we are trying to get them to be more autonomous.”

Math expectations are higher, too. It used to take two to three days to learn about how to find the slope of line in math classes here, says high school math teacher Kerri Naples. Now teachers spend at least two weeks on the concept.

For decades, each of the nation's 14,000 school districts made their own determinations, largely free of oversight. Not until the 1990s did state legislators and education officials, concerned about widely divergent student performance, begin to develop their own, statewide sets of reading and math standards—broad statements outlining what students should know—meant to guide curriculum development and teacher training.

Yet many of the state standards suffered from serious shortcomings. There were dozens upon dozens of them, more than any teacher could possibly cover. They were vague and repetitive.

As standards proliferated, so did tests examining students' knowledge of their requirements. But the tests focused instruction on neatly digestible, easily assessed facts, sometimes at the expense of more cognitively demanding aspects of learning.

Things might have continued that way, but by 2009, two other factors began to bring the issue of content standards back to the policy table. First concerns about U.S. students' middling performance on international assessments came to the forefront in the debate over education policy, with specific emphasis placed on the lean, focused standards in place in top-performing countries.

Second, the recession highlighted the cost and inefficiencies latent in the traditional state-lead model. Faced with 50 different sets of standards, school districts suffered from an inability to import lesson plans and textbooks across state lines.

In a seminal March 2009 meeting, the nation's governors agreed to the principle of shared standards.

Sixteen months later, with the financial backing of several prominent philanthropies, the Common Core standards were born. Though crafted by a small group of academics tapped by groups representing the nation's governors and state schools chiefs, educators from every state gave feedback on the drafts before they were finalized.

These shared standards are effectively a corrective to their predecessors, emphasizing depth of mastery of fewer topics over breadth. They focus on students' ability to analyze and apply knowledge, rather than recall it. And they are designed so that, in theory, a student who masters them by the end of high school will be able to succeed in college or an entry-level job without remediation.

One of the standards' most influential writers, David Coleman, sees in that end goal a recommitment to the equity push that gave fruit to academic standards in the first place.

"Particularly for low-income kids, remediation is a trap they don't escape," says Coleman, now the president of the College Board, which oversees the SAT college-entrance exam.

The shifts in student expectations are on display throughout the school in the Rockaways. Consider the bulletin boards in the middle school hallway, where sixth graders recently completed a unit on Homer's *Odyssey*.

An end-of-unit essay under the auspices of the New York state standards might have asked for a student's response: When did you do something heroic? What is it like to wait a long time for something you want? Thought provoking, surely, but not dependent on analyzing the myth.

At Scholars' Academy, the essay topic requires a deep analysis of Odysseus' character: "Is Odysseus truly a hero, and why? What evidence can students cite from the myth? After all, he puts his men's safety ahead of his own. On the other hand, Odysseus takes an awful lot of extended diversions."

The results are replete with delightful, cheeky headlines: "Odysseus: Hero or Zero?" Some are good enough to be the beginning of a high school thesis.

The concept of deep probing of content underpins the Common Core math standards, too. The standards still expect students to calculate the quadratic equation, but they will also be expected to master the underpinning concepts and patterns that structure mathematics.

Take fractions, a topic math educators routinely cite as a problem area for American youths. Everyone who's been through middle school in the United States remembers learning fractions about slices of a pizza pie, and that works when there is just one pizza to worry about.

Dividing fractions is another story. What does it *mean* in practical terms to divide three-quarters of a pizza by two-fifths of one? Why does the procedure of flipping numerator and denominator and multiplying across lead to a correct answer? Why do fractions get larger, not smaller, when divided? Properly implemented, a student well versed in the Common Core should be able to reason out responses to such conceptual queries.

That the standards have been adopted by 45 states is itself a notable calculus considering that every previous attempt to create common standards has failed.

U.S. history standards funded through a federal grant in 1991 fell victim, four years later, to that decade's culture wars after critics said they presented an overly negative portrayal of key American events. And a Clinton-era attempt to create a national panel to certify whether states' content standards were equal to the quality of a "model" national standards was never seated.

The political winds that sank prior efforts continue to swirl around the Common Core. In recent months, measures seeking to scuttle or delay implementation have emerged in a half-dozen state legislatures. No state has yet pulled out of the project, but the criticism seems unlikely to fade away quietly.

Conservatives have opposed the standards on the principle of local control, arguing that even if the Common Core was led by states, they were effectively coerced into participating. Among those critics, Florida Senator Marco Rubio voiced his concern that the standards would create a "national school board," the same formulation used by critics of the earlier 1990s efforts.

In a public letter, South Carolina governor Nikki Haley called for a measure to block the implementation of Common Core in her state, noting “South Carolina’s educational system has at times faced challenges of equity, quality and leadership – challenges that cannot be solved by increasing our dependence on federal dollars and the mandates that come with them.”

The U.S. Department of Education provided financial incentives to states to adopt the Common Core standards, most prominently via the Race to the Top initiative. But it had no hand in crafting the standards, a process led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

A new front of criticism centers on the statewide, standardized tests being developed by consortia of states to measure students’ attainment of the standards—and to replace the hodgepodge of current exams. But because these new exams will attempt to gauge application of knowledge rather than factual recall, they will be costlier for some states. When a report released by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, one of the two consortia developing tests, announced its expected per-student cost, officials in some states such as Arizona used the figures to argue that the program would be prohibitively expensive. Georgia, Indiana, and Pennsylvania have announced that they won’t use the common tests, though they will still teach to the standards.

In one of those strange-bedfellows phenomena, progressives on the other side of the political spectrum are opposed to the standards on similar grounds. Shared standards, they argue, will lead to a lockstep approach to teaching and learning, more standardized testing, and even less flexibility. In a flexing of progressive opposition to the Common Core program, some members of the National Council of Teachers of English, which represents educators in that field, attempted to make opposition to the standards a formal policy of the organization. The bid narrowly failed, but a nonbinding resolution to the same end passed.

Pedagogical debates lurk, too. The English standards call for use of nonfiction texts in science and social studies classes, conflicting with the long-established focus on fiction to build literacy. (Critics such as the Boston-based Pioneer Institute, a think-tank, worry that the standards will crowd out literature. Kohn’s humanities unit will go on to explore E.L. Doctorow’s novel *Ragtime*, which takes place at the turn of the century and mixes historical figures with fictional characters.)

Teachers at Scholars’ Academy almost uniformly praise the standards for their rigor and for creating shared expectations across content areas. But they do harbor some practical and reasonable concerns about New York’s accelerated timeline for Common Core implementation.

The state administered the first exams measuring the harder standards this past spring, causing scores in most schools to drop. Many schools were not as prepared as Scholars’ Academy; schools and districts with more low-performing students especially struggled. In the Rochester district, in both English and in math, just 5 percent of students scored at the proficient level.

If the standards survive immolation on the altar of politics, they could face the slower death of bad implementation. More than 3 million teachers in the U.S. will need training, and quality materials are in short supply.

“It really requires the development of a strong curriculum to interpret the standards, and honestly, I do not see that capacity in any state, or in most districts,” says Nancy Grasmick, the former state superintendent of Maryland, who is now helping to incorporate the standards into

teacher preparation at Towson University, the largest producer of teachers in the state.

The standards are an especially tough lift for teachers in subjects like science who may have no experience selecting appropriate nonfiction texts or designing writing assignments. To quote Scholars' Academy science teacher Anna Bulatewicz, it is difficult to find scientific articles, rather than "articles about science," at the right level of complexity for high school students.

But gradually, breakthroughs have occurred, and will hopefully continue as innovative teachers and schools across the country implement and explore the new standards.

Visual-arts teacher Kelly Trpic, another Scholars' Academy teacher, retooled a research paper into a new assignment in which students analyze historical materials to interpret artworks in the context in which they were created. For her, the difference in results is no contest.

"I used to get the most boring biographies ever—you know, how many sisters and brothers the artist had. It had nothing to do with the artwork," she says. "But this year, I got the most incredible essays."