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OCTOBER 14, 2014

## Common Core: US education reform? or red herring?

 September 23, 2014 by [stevenyoder](#)  [Leave a Comment](#)

2014 marks the second year that New York state has tested students using the new Common Core standards. The state's results are being closely watched because it's the second—after Kentucky—to do so.

But early results from both New York and Kentucky indicate that regardless of whether Common Core raises the educational bar overall, it may well not change one enduring feature of the U.S. education system—the achievement gap. And that, say some Common Core critics, is a key flaw in the reform effort.

Reformers of all stripes agree that U.S. education performance hardly befits the country with the world's largest economy. On the latest international evaluation, the [2012 Programme for International Student Assessment](#), the United States ranked 36<sup>th</sup> of 65 countries on scores for 15-year-old students in math, science, and reading. Mean U.S. scores were lower than those for Vietnam, Slovenia, and the Russian Federation. The United States also has slipped 10 spots in both high school and college graduation rates over the past three decades, according to a [report](#) last summer from the Council on Foreign Relations.

That was hardly the vision when George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law in

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2001. It mandated that schools improve or else. Under the legislation, kids in grades 3–12 would be tested annually for proficiency—by 2014, every child was to be proficient or schools would face sanctions. But the law also allowed states to game the system by setting their own definitions of proficiency, which they proceeded to do. Many states lowered their passing scores so that they wouldn't face penalties under the NCLB.

That's where Common Core comes in. It establishes one set of standards for what students through grade 12 should know in math and English. Unlike the NCLB, the standards were a private initiative by a coalition of governors, school officials, and education experts. Common Core isn't a federal mandate—the Obama administration created an incentive for states to adopt the standards through Race to the Top grant competitions, which awarded money to states that engaged in education reform—states earned points on their grant applications by agreeing to adopt Common Core. So far, [43](#) have done so.

Regardless of its intent, Common Core has morphed into a target for both left and right. In part, that's because the federal government and states have planned and executed it poorly, say critics. For example, new tests that are based on the Common Core standards are harder than the old tests. In Kentucky and New York, that meant a big drop in test scores and angry parents, students, and teachers.

Critics give other examples of why they think the initiative wasn't well thought through. [Some](#) school districts, for example, are teaching to the Common Core standards but are administering their old state tests for assessment purposes, leading to confusion.

All of that is likely why 7 of 10 teachers think implementation of the standards is going badly in their schools, [according](#) to the National Education Association. Two-thirds of teachers say they weren't asked for input on how to implement the standards.

The politics of Common Core defy easy explanation. For Republicans, attacks on it have helped whip up their political base. One Florida State Representative has [argued](#) that the group implementing Florida's standards are secretly trying to “attract every one of your children to become as homosexual as they possibly can.” Other Republicans say Common Core rips



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control of education out of the hands of localities where it belongs. But even in Democratic-leaning New York, a majority now [disapprove](#) of Common Core.

Worse, Common Core reformers don't appear to have shown evidence that the standards will make any difference in what the Council on Foreign Relations report calls the "real scourge of the U.S. education system": the achievement gap between socioeconomic groups. In a blistering attack on Common Core in a [January speech](#) to the Modern Language Association, former George H.W. Bush administration official Diane Ravitch says that when the White House invited her to meet in 2010, she advised them to field-test the standards to make sure that they didn't widen the achievement gap. When it became clear last year that there would be no field testing, she went on the attack.

"Those who are affluent live in districts with ample resources for their schools. Those who are poor lack those advantages. Our nation suffers an opportunity gap, and the opportunity gap creates a test score gap," Ravitch told the educators.

Indeed, New York's Common Core test scores for 2012 and 2013 appear to show the black-white and black-Latino achievement gap [widening](#) after the state began testing on the standards. In Nassau County's Great Neck, which spends more money per pupil than almost all other state districts, between 60 and 70 percent of students were proficient on last year's Common Core exams, double the statewide average. But in Hempsted, Nassau County's biggest town, which is 96-percent black and Latino, proficiency ranged from 6 to 12 percent, according to [WNYC](#). Kentucky's 2012 Common Core results also [showed](#) a widening of the gap between whites and blacks and Hispanics.

As the Council on Foreign Relations report notes, the majority of developed countries invest more resources per pupil in lower-income school districts than in higher-income ones. But it's the reverse in the United States because schools are funded locally. That funding structure won't be touched whether the Common Core reformers or their opponents win this fight.

It's not even clear that Common Core will create more consistency in standards across states. No federal law mandates Common Core, so implementation varies by state.

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October 12, 2014 By

[joanoleck](#)

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About half the states that have adopted the standards incorporated them into in their curricula in the 2013–2014 school year, while the others will implement them next year. To help states with the next step—testing—the federal government funded the development of new Common Core-aligned tests, which will be ready for release in early 2015.

A handful of states like New Jersey, Mississippi, and Maryland will begin using those tests next spring. Others like Georgia, which adopted the standards, have since seen legislation that would repeal Common Core introduced in their state legislatures—to quell the backlash, they’re developing their own state tests, while keeping the standards. And the seven states that refused to adopt Common Core are implementing their own standards and accompanying tests, though in some of those states there appears to be at least some overlap between the state standards and Common Core.

Even states that won Race to the Top grant money with a promise to implement the standards and have since had them repealed by their state legislatures are likely to keep their grants. This summer, Education Secretary Arne Duncan said that states that pulled out of Common Core can keep their grants “as long as they replace those standards [Common Core] with another set that will get students ready for college and the workforce.” It remains to be seen whether the department will take back a state’s money if it substitutes standards or test protocols that are weaker than Common Core.

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September 23, 2014 By [Liz Fields](#)

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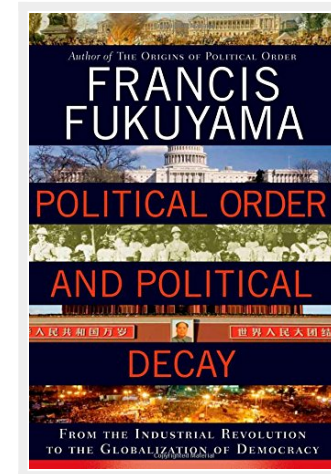
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