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Parallel Play in the Education Sandbox: The Common Core and the Politics of Transpartisan Coalitions

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Parallel Play in the Education Sandbox: The Common Core and the Politics of Transpartisan Coalitions

Abstract

In *Parallel Play in the Education Sandbox: The Common Core and the Politics of Transpartisan Coalitions*, Patrick McGuinn and Jonathan Supovitz examine the successes and limits of transpartisan opposition to Common Core. What are the lessons of the Common Core fight for education policy? Are there lessons applicable to other fragile areas of bipartisan cooperation? This report is the third in a series of New Models of Policy Change case studies published by New America.

Disciplines

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PATRICK MCGUINN AND JONATHAN SUPOVITZ

PARALLEL PLAY IN THE EDUCATION SANDBOX

**THE COMMON CORE AND THE POLITICS OF
TRANSPARTISAN COALITIONS**

**PART OF NEW AMERICA'S
STRANGE BEDFELLOWS SERIES**

About the Authors



Patrick McGuinn is Associate Professor of Political Science and Education and Chair of the Political Science Department at Drew University and a Senior Research Specialist at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE). He holds a Ph.D. in Government and a M.Ed. in Education Policy from the University of Virginia. Patrick previously held fellowships at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, the Taubman Center for Public Policy at Brown University, and the Miller Center for Public Affairs at the University of Virginia, and was a visiting scholar in the Education and Politics program at Teachers College, Columbia University. His first book, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005*, [Kansas, 2006] was honored as a Choice outstanding academic title. He is also the editor [with Paul Manna] of *Education Governance for the 21st Century: Overcoming the Structural Barriers to School Reform* [Brookings Institution Press, 2013]. He is currently working on a new book project with Chris Loss of Vanderbilt entitled *Convergence: U.S. K-12 and Higher Education Policy Fifty Years after the ESEA and the HEA of 1965* which is under contract at Harvard Education Press. Patrick has published many academic articles and book chapters and has produced a number of policy reports for the Brookings Institution, the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for American Progress, and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. He is a regular commentator on education policy and politics in media outlets such as Education Week, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the NJ Star Ledger and was named as one of the top "Edu-Scholars" in the country by Education Week for the past four years. He is a former high school social studies teacher and the father of four daughters who attend public schools.



Jonathan Supovitz is a Professor of Education Policy and Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education and Co-Director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE). Dr. Supovitz is an accomplished mixed-method researcher and evaluator and has published findings from numerous educational studies and evaluations of state and district reform efforts. His areas of speciality include education policy, school leadership, professional development, data use, classroom formative assessment, and state and district standards and accountability systems. He is a lead and co-investigator of numerous sponsored research projects. He directs the Evidence-Based Leadership strand of the Mid-Career Educational Leadership Program at the University of Pennsylvania.

About New Models of Policy Change

New Models of Policy Change starts from the observation that the traditional model of foundation-funded, think-tank driven policy change -- ideas emerge from disinterested "experts" and partisan elites compromise for the good of the nation -- is failing. Partisan polarization, technological empowerment of citizens, and heightened suspicions of institutions have all taken their toll.

But amid much stagnation, interesting policy change is still happening. The paths taken on issues from sentencing reform to changes in Pentagon spending to resistance to government surveillance share a common thread: they were all a result of transpartisan cooperation. By transpartisan, we mean an approach to advocacy in which, rather than emerging from political elites at the center, new policy ideas emerge from unlikely corners of the right or left and find allies on the other side, who may come to the same idea from a very different worldview. In transpartisan coalitions, policy entrepreneurs from the ideological corners recruit endorsers and test ideas, eventually bringing them into the policy mainstream at the local, state and national levels. Unlike traditional bipartisan coalitions, which begin in the center, the established, centrist politicians and institutions are often the last to recognize and embrace a transpartisan vision.

The *New Models of Policy Change* project studies the successes, failures and key figures of this "transpartisan" approach to policy change. It will produce a set of case studies identifying the circumstances under which this approach can flourish, as well as those under which it falls short. Forthcoming case studies include: criminal justice reform, Pentagon spending reduction, climate change and 'climate care,' opposition to Common Core education standards, and policing reform.

The project will also produce a practitioners' handbook, identifying qualities that equip think tankers, advocates and civic entrepreneurs alike for a world in which more and more of our policy advocacy must cross partisan, cultural, professional and other divides.

The Project is housed in New America's Political Reform program; funded by the Hewlett Foundation's Madison Initiative and directed by Heather Hurlburt, with a steering committee of Mark Schmitt and Steve Teles, who bring to it extensive experience in academia, government service, policy advocacy, and non-profit leadership.

About New America

New America is dedicated to the renewal of American politics, prosperity, and purpose in the Digital Age. We carry out our mission as a nonprofit civic enterprise: an intellectual venture capital fund, think tank, technology laboratory, public forum, and media platform. Our hallmarks are big ideas, impartial analysis, pragmatic policy solutions, technological innovation, next generation politics, and creative engagement with broad audiences.

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INTRODUCTION

The controversy surrounding implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) offers an intriguing case study for better understanding the political dynamics—and potential limitations—of transpartisan coalitions. The Common Core was originally promoted in 2010 by a centrist bi-partisan coalition that included Democrats interested in leveraging more rigorous academic standards to improve educational opportunity and moderate pro-business Republicans concerned about workforce development. As states moved to implement the new Standards (and aligned assessments), an anti-Common Core coalition arose first on the far right among Tea Party activists and then from the left,

particularly among teacher advocacy groups. From the margins, opposition flowed into the mainstream.

While temporarily united by their opposition to the CCSS, opponents across the political spectrum did not agree on the sources of their concern or on policy solutions. Understanding where the disparate sides of this coalition agreed and disagreed on the specific issue of the Common Core, and education policy more generally, can shed light on the conditions under which transpartisanship might flourish and the extent to which these types of coalitions can impact policy and remain aligned over time.

THE ORIGINS AND POLITICAL THEORY OF THE COMMON CORE

The Common Core is the latest in a series of American education reforms intended to use standards to leverage improvement (Supovitz & Spillane, 2015). In the 1980s education reformers emphasized minimum competency testing, but the standards intended to be a floor quickly became a ceiling. This spurred the systemic reform movements of the 1990s in which reformers advocated that states develop high standards and aligned accountability systems, while maintaining local flexibility. However, state standards and assessment systems were of uneven quality and rigor. Further, political pressure often pushed states to adjust test pass rates to avoid public backlash. Policymakers also learned that standards and assessments alone did not catalyze the capacity necessary for improving educational infrastructure.

The latest standards movement is an effort to remedy many of these past weaknesses. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in

mathematics and English language arts were developed at the behest of the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The CCSS set forth what students should know and be able to do in mathematics and English language arts at each grade level from Kindergarten to 12th grade. Advocates argued that high, uniform academic standards would improve the academic performance of American students and better prepare them for college and careers.

In many ways, Core proponents adopted a technocratic view of education reform. They saw America's fragmented and varied approach to public schooling and standards-setting as a barrier to systemic innovation and improvement. They believed that the country's 50 states and over 15,000 school districts fostered incoherence and stifled scalable innovation because the producers of instructional materials (such as textbook publishers

and software developers and assessment producers) had to cater to small idiosyncratic markets rather than leverage their resources to develop new approaches at scale. This was the educational theory of change for how the CCSS would bring systemic reform to American schools.

Educational theories of change also require political theories of action. Core advocates presented national standards as a “common sense” solution from experts which they hoped would repress political opposition. This is a fairly common strategy in American politics—anti-political politics—and sometimes it works. But it also threatens a fairly predictable reaction, in populist anti-elitism.

Standards advocates also believed that many states needed incentives and support to build the systems necessary, but that a direct federal mandate (grant-in-aid condition) to adopt the Core would infuriate people across the political spectrum and likely doom the effort. The strategy that emerged went to great lengths to emphasize the Standards as a bipartisan (or even non-partisan) effort, pointing to them as a product of governors rather than national political leaders, and focused on speeding the adoption process without direct federal

intervention. The standards were cast as “national but not federal” with federal incentives (but not requirements) for states to adopt them.

The carrots that the federal government used to encourage states to adopt the Core were the Race to the Top (RTTT) competitive grant competition and the NCLB waiver application process. These carrots were candied by circumstances, as the RTTT bounty was made possible by the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act stimulus funding due to the 2008 economic downturn. The U.S. Department of Education No Child Left Behind waiver guidelines also made it clear that adopting higher standards (such as the Core) would make it much more likely that waiver applications would be approved. The nature of both of these application processes also put governors and chief state school officers—who tend to be more inclined to endorse systemic school reforms irrespective of party affiliation—in charge of drafting state applications, rather than more change-adverse state legislatures. The federal incentives were further supplemented by more than \$200 million in Gates Foundation money, which went towards a plethora of state and local political advocacy groups supporting CCSS adoption (Layton, 2014).

IMPLEMENTING AND COMMUNICATING THE CORE

For a while, this low-profile strategy worked. The scope of conflict around the Core remained narrow and the issue was relatively non-controversial. In 2010, 46 states and the District of Columbia adopted the Core standards (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). Forty-four also initially signed on to use one of the aligned assessments developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) (Forgione, 2012). What early opposition existed got scant attention from the mainstream media (Rothman, 2011). This

created the misimpression that the Standards movement would proceed without substantial controversy. Several Core advocates we interviewed noted that the quiet early implementation period and the lack of controversy contributed to a perception of widespread support (Supovitz & McGuinn, 2015), even though polls showed that few Americans knew what the Core was at that time (Maxwell, 2013). This resulted in a low sense of urgency and relatively few resources expended on defining a pro-Core message. “I think there was a massive underinvestment in Common

Core advocacy between 2010 and 2012,” said one advocacy group leader. Another Core advocacy group leader noted,

Shame on us really, because it was very naïve. There were always these handfuls of people. . . harping about the standards. But for two years that was it. It didn’t really get much beyond that. And then all of a sudden it just happened very fast that they managed to sort of light a fire with the Tea Party. ... I think many of us would say we expected there to be some backlash from the right but not for it to be as politicized as it eventually became.

As a consequence of the low profile of the CCSS, the diverse array of organizations involved, and the diffuse ownership of the standards the messages of advocates were disconnected and discordant (McGuinn 2015). “This is a fight that escalated quickly that seemed to sort of overwhelm everyone and ... no one ever built any kind of coordinating thing that stuck from the beginning with the right people at the table that would meet and figure out the strategy around this” said one Core advocacy

Although many of the pro-Common Core groups knew each other and had regular contact about communications strategy, several of our interview respondents felt that there was not a systemic and organized campaign to sway public opinion.

group leader. Another similarly commented: “when it became clear that there was going to be stiff opposition people ran around throwing money everywhere, you know, trying to play catch up and there wasn’t ...a lot of relationship building and information building, not even a really clear sense of like what do we need to do to win this? And what

would it look like? Unlike, say, the slow and steady approach to advancing vouchers, or supporting charter reform. You just can’t start up a movement in short order from scratch.” Many attributed the decline in support for the Core to the lack of a coherent and coordinated messaging campaign in the early 2010s.

There was no clarity about whose job it was to communicate on behalf of the Common Core, and little effort around grassroots engagement or mobilization. The standards were created by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, but as member organizations with small staffs, they are neither equipped nor culturally inclined to engage in large-scale communications work with the general public. Although many of the pro-Common Core groups knew each other and had regular contact about communications strategy, several of our interview respondents felt that there was not a systemic and organized campaign to sway public opinion. As one advocacy group leader said, “We have not mounted the kind of really expensive, concerted, multi-million dollar public education campaigns that might bring that silent majority in. I’m not aware of anyone that has actually coordinated that. And I think that’s one of the biggest challenges for supporters of Common Core.”

The Hunt Institute, an education advocacy organization and CCSS supporter, hosted a regular conference call with CCSS proponents in an attempt to better coordinate communication effort, but it had little ability to push the unwieldy coalition to take specific actions. By default, messaging fell to state departments of education, which have their own capacity issues and tend to be staffed by technocrats; they developed a technocratic message that fell on deaf ears. Advocates struggled to combat the passionate ideological rhetoric of opponents like Glenn Beck and Michelle Malkin with reasoned arguments about the Core’s benefits.

Similarly, our interviews revealed that the two assessment consortia (PARCC and SBAC) focused on addressing the technical issues surrounding the design, piloting, and full implementation of the

new assessments and did not see it as their job to defend the assessments or standards politically. In general, the national organizations seem to feel that communications work should be done by state and local agencies, while the state and local folks felt that it should be the responsibility of the national organizations. In addition, arguments against the Common Core (and the groups making them) varied widely, making it difficult to develop a single response (Williams, 2014).

Much of the communications done by Core proponents has been passive or reactive. While advocacy groups developed informational materials, tool kits, and web sites that touted the benefits of the Common Core, they often didn't actively push that message out to schools and communities. Much of the messaging responded to attacks on the Core rather than proactively making the case for it.

RISING OPPOSITION

During the latter part of 2013 and early 2014 there was a palpable sense that the tide was beginning to turn against the CCSS—in polling, media and talk shows—and defections of governors such as Mike Huckabee and Bobby Jindal. As states moved toward full implementation of the new standards and aligned assessments during the 2014-2015 school year, an anti-Common Core coalition gained strength.

The first organized opposition came from the far right among media and Tea Party activists. Left-wing activists were next to organize, particularly inside teacher advocacy groups and unions. As less-political parent opposition gravitated to these groups, the issue moved rapidly from the margins of the parties into the mainstream. Some objections to the Common Core were shared across ideologies: a perception that the standards took a one-size-fits-all approach, created a de facto national curriculum, put too much emphasis on standardized tests, might threaten student privacy, and undermined teacher autonomy. Moreover, the Common Core was quickly linked to the emerging anti-testing backlash. While the Core standards were separate from the new assessments—states can and have adopted the Standards but not the tests—they became conflated in the public mind.

Opinion surveys demonstrate that much opposition to the Common Core—on both the

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right and the left—is based on misinformation or misunderstanding. For example, only half of Americans who have heard of the Core understand that states and local school districts retain the ability to choose their own educational materials (Henderson et al., 2015). Advocates have struggled to combat the volume and speed of opponents' messaging on social media where information (and misinformation) is disseminated rapidly and widely. Groundbreaking research on Common Core social media has revealed that a handful of individuals are creating many groups and most of the content, and there is neither real debate over the standards nor communication between supporters and opponents (Supovitz, Daly, & del Fresno, 2015). Instead, social media serves as an echo chamber in which opponents talk to opponents and supporters to supporters.

Core advocates have struggled to articulate a clear, consistent, and convincing rationale for how the standards will improve American education. They focused initially on communicating with political

elites in order to get the Core adopted and to protect it from repeal attempts in state legislatures. Then they focused on communicating with teachers and administrators to assist with implementation. Advocates did not turn their attention to the public until much later and, as a result, allowed opponents to negatively define the Core for far too long.

Common Core advocates also have been challenged by the tremendous turnover among governors, legislators, and state superintendents. Officials who initially made the decision to adopt the Core are no longer in office, replaced by politicians less supportive or less invested in its success.¹ This problem was exacerbated by the Republican electoral landslide in the November 2014 elections, during the first full year of implementation and testing. With those invested officials gone, the weaknesses of the “under the radar” strategy became more visible. The speed and process by

which states adopted the Common Core and took on the Race to the Top application process without much public discussion or debate, though it initially seemed so effective, would ultimately generate anger, resentment, and a perception of subterfuge which crossed party lines. A co-founder of the anti-Core Badass Teachers Association called them the “stealth standards,” while Jamie Gass, the Director of the Center for School Reform at Pioneer Institute (a leading anti-Core group), notes: “In hindsight we know that the Obama administration and the players from D.C. that were in favor of this were really trying to pull a fast one. And that is what has animated a lot of the opposition; and it really cuts across the political spectrum.”

But the left and right anchors of the backlash had other, profoundly different, objections; what is more, they do not agree on a “fix” to the Common Core, much less broader education policy.

GROWING CONSERVATIVE RESISTANCE

Tea Party adherents and others on the right view the Common Core as a dangerous—even unconstitutional—expansion of federal control into education and a violation of states’ rights. Beginning with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, the federal role in education has grown tremendously and, like the law itself, has become more controversial. The Obama administration’s use of the Race to the Top grant competition and NCLB waiver application process to encourage states to adopt the standards, and its funding of the two consortia that developed

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the aligned assessments, have fed concerns that Uncle Sam is becoming the national schoolmarm. This involvement, along with the Obama administration’s vocal support for the Core, has made it easy for opponents to cast it as a federal initiative.

Opposition grew among conservatives after a number of conservative talk show hosts (such as Glenn Beck) and national conservative organizations (including Heritage, Cato, Americans for Prosperity, Freedom Works, American Principles Project, and Pioneer Institute) began to publicize their opposition, fund ad campaigns, and mobilize activists. As Jamieson and Cappella noted in their 2008 book *Echo Chamber*, conservative talk radio has come to play a central role in setting the agenda for the Republican Party.² Journalist Tim Murphy’s analysis found that “when states began to move forward with the implementation...Common Core fast became a tea party cause célèbre...the reform

was viewed as yet another prong of Obama's devious master plan, one aided and abetted by a sinister group of politicians and businessmen.”³

In the aftermath of the 2012 Supreme Court decision, which largely put an end to the effort to roll back the Affordable Care Act, conservative commentators and organizers seized on the Common Core and the federal role in education as the primary focus of their anti-Obama animus.

Opposition to the Core also represented a rejection of establishment Republican cooperation with Democrats, and a political style of complete opposition to big government.⁴ In the aftermath of the 2012 Supreme Court decision, which largely put an end to the effort to roll back the Affordable Care Act, conservative commentators and organizers seized on the Common Core and the federal role in education as the primary focus of their anti-Obama animus. The fight against “Obamacare” transitioned into the fight against “Obamacore.” Some conservative organizations, such as Freedom Works, the American Principles Project, and Pioneer Institute, have also used opposition to the Common Core to attract new members and donations.⁵ A few Republican candidates used the issue as well during the 2014 elections to rally support, as did some 2016 presidential contenders, particularly Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, both former Core supporters.⁶

Jane Robbins, Senior Fellow at the American Principles Project, described the Core as an “attempt to centralize control over education so that we have one set of standards which inevitably leads to one curriculum or curriculums that are very similar to each other and ideally one set of assessment or assessments that are all very similar to each other. It reduces parental autonomy and control over their

children's education.” She added that “certainly the movement started among groups that would be considered more conservative, but it's not confined to that at all...there are a lot of groups that in no way could be described as conservative who are quite as upset about this as people on the other side of the aisle. It's primarily parent groups that have started the movement to stop Common Core and it's through those groups that we've made the pitch, but it's not just to conservatives or to Republicans.”

The crafting of new national standards also reignited long-standing ideological debates about religion and multiculturalism, and the teaching of literature, history, and science.⁷ Opponents of the Core cast it as a national curriculum that is ill-suited to a country with such religious, political, ethnic, and cultural diversity.⁸ Christian conservatives asserted that the Core would result in the indoctrination of children on such hot-button issues as homosexuality and socialism. The Family Research Council, an influential religious-right group, repeatedly warned about the dangers of the Common Core and Michael Farris, president of the Home School Legal Defense Association, stated that “I just fundamentally don't believe in using centralized government standards.”⁹ Additionally,

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the centralized collection of student information and test scores collided with heightened fears of data mining. For example, a 2014 survey by right-leaning Education Next found that 85 percent of Americans who have heard of the Common Core erroneously believe the federal government will receive detailed data on individual students' test performance (Henderson, Peterson, & West, 2015).

THE PROGRESSIVE BACKLASH

Opponents on the left got organized a bit later than conservatives—one seminal moment is the 2013 founding of the Badass Teachers Association. In a 2013 interview, co-founder and co-president Mark Naison emphasized the grassroots nature of the group, its dependence on social media and protests, and its work within—but not directly with—teachers

Opposition focused on long-standing concerns of the left: teacher evaluations, the role of corporations in education, and the call for greater focus on underlying social inequities.

unions. He remarked that: “We don’t raise a cent. This is all done without any money. We’re not a non-profit, we don’t collect dues, we don’t get grants. It’s all social media driven and driven by very smart, very angry people.” Within a year of its founding, the group claimed 39,000 members.

Opposition focused on long-standing concerns of the left: teacher evaluations, the role of corporations in education, and the call for greater focus on underlying social inequities.¹⁰ The Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and major corporations such as ExxonMobil, Intel, and Time Warner Cable have funded Common Core advocacy campaigns, as have foundations with close corporate ties, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This association of big business with the Core comes at a time of unprecedented corporate political contributions and enormous economic inequality and has raised considerable suspicion on the left.¹¹ Some argue that the Core was a scheme intended to increase profits for big textbook providers (such as Pearson), education tech companies (such as Microsoft), or test makers (such as the College Board).¹² Still others see

the Core as part of an even larger conspiracy to dismantle public schools and privatize education entirely.¹³ This led critics on the left such as Diane Ravitch to rail against the Common Core as yet another nefarious example of “corporate school reform.”¹⁴

As state implementation of the CCSS proceeded, many teachers became concerned that states were tying evaluation systems to the new standards and assessments before the kinks have been ironed out. They fear this will result in arbitrary or unfair personnel decisions. A 2014 Gallup poll found that 76 percent of teachers continued to support the goals of the Common Core, but only 27 percent supported using computerized tests to measure student performance, and only 9 percent supported using those test scores to evaluate teachers (Lyons, 2014). At its 2015 convention, the NEA formally adopted resolutions in support of the testing opt-out movement and in opposition to the use of Common Core aligned tests to evaluate teachers or rate schools.¹⁵ APP’s Robbins noted that the teachers’ unions and conservatives look at these issues from a different perspective. “The teachers’ unions really are being pulled into it because of the teacher-evaluation part—the high-stakes testing, basing teacher evaluations on the test scores, tying everything to the test results. But although many conservatives also question the appropriateness of this type of teacher evaluation, that’s not the primary focus of what we’re doing—we are focused more on parental rights and local control.”

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Finally, many left activists argue that the Common Core movement misses the mark because it does not address the underlying social inequities at the root of educational performance gaps. Thus, the debate over the Common Core became entangled with long-standing liberal concerns that governments

are not doing enough to address poverty, safety, health, and other out-of-school factors affecting student achievement, and that teachers lack sufficient training and resources to meet the needs of disadvantaged students.

HINTS OF A TRANSPARTISAN COALITION

While conservatives and progressives emphasized different reasons for their opposition to Common Core, their shared concerns and shared goal of repeal seemed to offer coalition potential. National organizations like Freedom Works and Heritage on the right, and Save Our Schools and the NEA on the left, began to produce and disseminate videos, research briefs, talking points, and even full length movies (as was the case of Glenn Beck’s “We Will Not Conform” film which appeared in theaters across the country). In many states, teachers unions and conservative organizations joined grassroots anti-Common Core groups in calling for legislation to repeal the standards and/or delay the stakes for teachers and students connected to test scores.

But outside of the lobbying in state legislatures, the real anti-Common Core action was grassroots, with much of the communication occurring through social media such as Facebook, You Tube, and Twitter (Supovitz, Daly, Del Fresno, 2015). Pioneer’s Gass remarked that “It’s been really a loose coalition of folks. It hasn’t had the same kind of top-down structure or centralized coordination that I think the other side has had...it wasn’t a coalition of people on the two ends of the political spectrum, but there was broad, pretty deep opposition to Common Core, to PARCC and SBAC, a lot of the components of Race to the Top...it’s hard to really pigeon-hole the anti-Common Core audience to just one political stripe or another.”

Andrea Neal, a former Indiana state school board member, observed that “I certainly have seen a strange alliance between Tea Party type

conservatives and more liberal progressive education reformers, in that both seem to favor more local control. So it’s not a clean Republican/Democrat/Conservative/Liberal breakdown at all. It’s more about who decides what goes on in our schools.” Mark Naison, a liberal social justice activist, Fordham professor of African American

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studies, and co-founder of the Badass Teachers Association has remarked that “Never have I found myself finding so much common ground with people who call themselves conservatives and libertarians—we all agreed public schools were going to be ruined by this. This really represents the worst fantasies of both the right and the left coming true: Big Government and Big Corporations imposing this terrible, untested, expensive plan using intimidation and bullying.”¹⁶

While individuals from across the political spectrum united in opposition to the Core and formed new grassroots groups, there does not appear to have been much direct communication or coordination between established state or national organizations such as Tea Party groups and teachers unions.

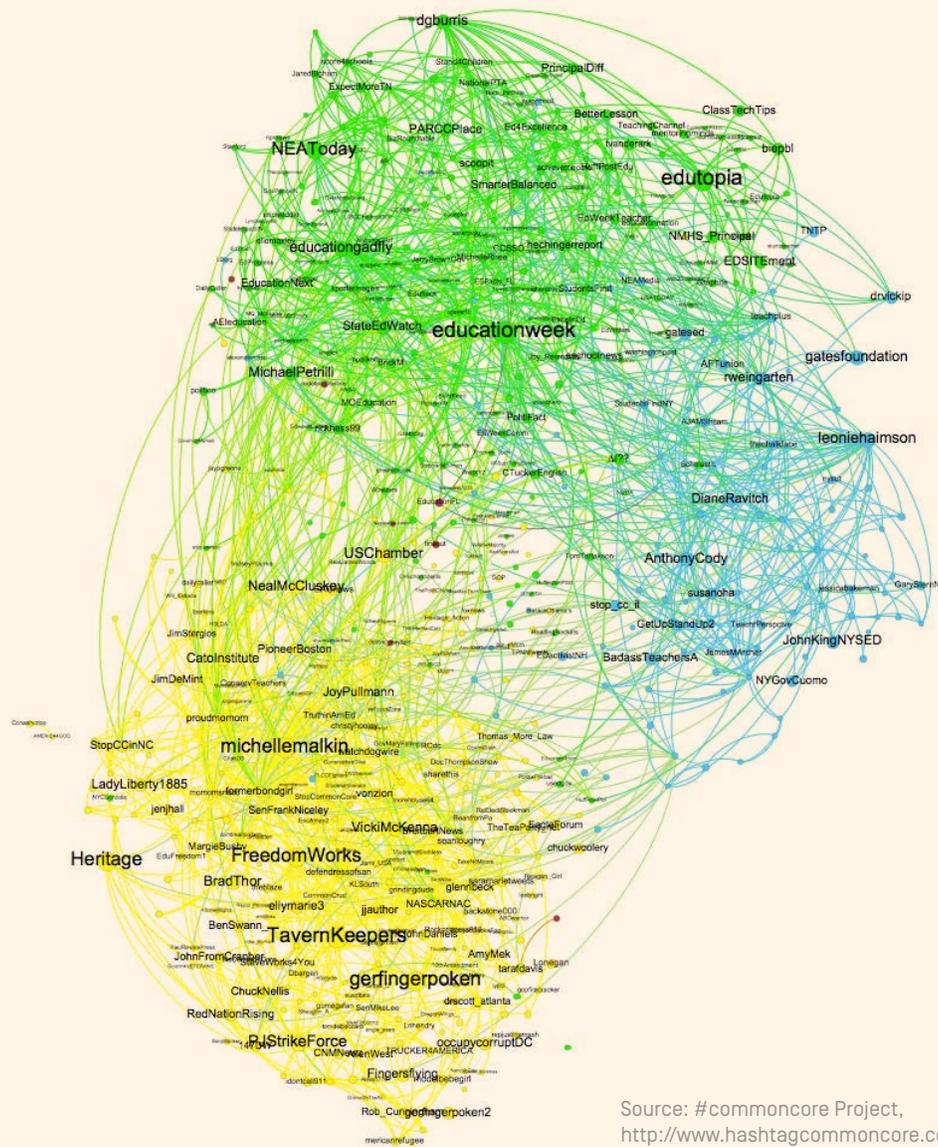
Opposition appears to have begun in a purely partisan way among conservatives and then developed support on the other side. There was little engagement between different groups of opponents. For example, analysis of twitter

data focusing on the hashtag commoncore (#commoncore) from 2013-2014 showed three distinct sub-communities of supporters of the CCSS, opponents inside education, and opponents outside of education (Supovitz, Daly, Del Fresno, 2015).

Figure 1

Transpartisan Debate about #commoncore on Twitter, September 2013-February 2014

Supporters Opponents within education Opponents outside education



Source: #commoncore Project, <http://www.hashtagcommoncore.com>

A close examination of two of the more prominent Common Core battleground states, Indiana and Oklahoma, reveals how transpartisan collaboration

aided Core opponents but also how quickly that partnership hit its limits.

INDIANA CASE STUDY: FLEETING TRANSPARTISANSHIP, SYMBOLIC VICTORY

Indiana was the first state to officially drop out of Common Core and PARCC. The opposition was led by a group called Hoosiers against Common Core, which identified its sole purpose as “to have the adoption of Common Core reversed and end the new PARCC test.” Its aims offered a mix of liberal and conservative touchstones: “restore local control of education, restore quality standards, restore the right of teachers to practice their craft, and reduce the power of standardized testing.”¹⁷ Erin Tuttle, one of the co-founders of the group, recalled her shock on discovering that a state voucher law requiring private schools to offer state assessments had led her son’s private Catholic school to adopt Common Core. She remarked that “When we found out the switch to Common Core was due to the adoption of national standards, we were unaware new standards were even in place. There was no public notice. The schools made this big shift for the worse and parents were upset. That’s how I got involved.” Former Indiana school board member Andrea Neal said, “Indiana’s effort was extremely homegrown. I’m not aware of outsiders coming in to organize, that’s for sure. I believe Indiana’s opposition to Common Core really bubbled up from the parents.”

Tuttle brought her concerns to state legislator Gus Schneider; she reports that he also was unaware that the state had adopted the national standards. He agreed to put forth legislation to repeal the Common Core. After it was defeated in committee, the emerging grassroots group swung into action. Tuttle described the Hoosiers group as “a huge

group of parents who hosted rallies, invited people to come. We crisscrossed the state and spoke at different events: political groups, church groups, parent groups, and some were just at personal homes. We started a website called Hoosiers against the Common Core, just to put that information out there. People would see our site and call us and we would come out. It really was a diverse group of parents. The most common denominator of the parents was that they were highly educated and involved with their child’s work.” The group depended heavily on social media—because it was free and, in Tuttle’s words, “a lot of parents, a lot of mothers, are on Facebook.”

She notes that the group reached out to several national conservative organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and the American Principles Project and academic experts such as Bill Evers of the Hoover Institute, and two dissenting Common Core Validation Committee members Sandra Stotsky and James Milgram, to gather information “so that we felt comfortable in our own understanding of what the issues were.” She utilized the “Truth in American Education” website for the exchange of information about Common Core and the different battles in different states.

While Tuttle encountered many individual teachers who opposed the Common Core, she reported the group had no assistance from any type of teachers union. Neal added that teachers unions and Tea Party conservatives “never really joined forces

here.” The *Indiana Star* concluded that a “tide of grassroots opponents—many fueled by President Barack Obama’s endorsement of Common Core turned key lawmakers from supporters into foes intent on dumping the guidelines.”¹⁸

The key players crossed party lines. Hoosiers against the Common Core did not oppose Republican Tony Bennett, a strong supporter of the Core during his campaign for re-election as state superintendent in 2012. But after his Democratic opponent Glenda Ritz, a former school librarian, teachers’ union president, and passionate opponent of the national standards, pulled off a surprise upset of Bennett, she joined forces with Governor Mike Pence—a former member of the Tea Party Caucus in Congress—to lead the effort for repeal. In 2013, the state legislature paused Core implementation and required the state board of education to adopt new standards.

While much has been made of Indiana’s formal “repeal” of the standards, it is important to assess what did and did not change. The law required that the CCSS be used as the “base model” for the new standards (so that the state would remain eligible for federal funds) and experts who have compared the “new” Indiana standards to the Common Core have found them to be extremely similar. Hoosiers against the Common Core’s Tuttle acknowledges this with frustration: “The [legislation] was successful—at least in repealing it by law. However, having the State Department of

Education properly implement the law is another issue. They basically rewrote our “new” standards to be just like Common Core. Unfortunately, Indiana still has Common Core.” Neal, the state school board member, seconds this view: “I thought we were actually going to replace the Common Core with something better and something home grown, and all we did was rebrand the Common Core... So somehow we pretended to rewrite the Common Core and get credit for rewriting the Common Core when we didn’t actually do that.” Neal believes the grassroots anti-Common Core effort has run its course, and, while she thinks the standards will ultimately be repealed, “I think that we lost so soundly that it’s very difficult to keep fighting.”

The political alliance between the Republican governor and the Democratic superintendent dissolved quickly and spectacularly after the “repeal” of CCSS. One analysis noted that “the issues on which Pence and Ritz spar are many—from school grading and teacher evaluations to school funding and charter schools” and that their “mutual support for new state standards has not translated to cooperation in other areas. As soon as the standards issue was over, Pence and Ritz immediately returned to a significant level of discord and criticism of each other.”¹⁹ Another observer noted: “at their core, Ritz and Pence disagree about education.”²⁰ The transpartisan coalition in Indiana proved fleeting and had little long-term impact on educational politics or policy in the state.

OKLAHOMA CASE STUDY: REPUTATIONAL TRANSPARTISANSHIP

Oklahoma is another case where transpartisanship seems like it might have played an important role in repeal of the Core. There, opposition was led by a group—Restore Oklahoma Public Education—that had originally been created in 2009 as a watchdog of public education for tax payers and parents. The

group’s president, Jenni White, recalls that she learned the state had adopted Common Core while she was researching a tax initiative. “When I saw the part about Common Core, it really kind of stuck in my craw because to me standards were local.” White notes that “initially, our target audience was

legislators because they were the ones who actually enacted the law without informing anybody. I mean they didn't have a clue what they were doing. They just wanted to get federal money and sign up for it. But then we realized after three years that they weren't going to budge on any of this, and we started going directly to parents."

The group used social media, email lists, surveys, petitions, and lobbying, "and then I just literally put many thousands of miles on my car driving around Oklahoma and talking to people, about this and what was actually going on at the federal level in education." While she saw some Democratic opposition to the Core, White remarked that "it really was this primarily Republican-led movement" and that "most of the people that were interested were the Republican groups in our state." She said: "I never did get calls from more Left-wing groups, or I would've gone. I never had a problem talking to anybody about it. But the fact that it's an Obama administration initiative—the Democrats are naturally going to side with the President on that."

Like Hoosiers against Common Core, Restore Oklahoma Public Education partnered with a variety of conservative national organizations, including Truth in American Education²¹, the American Principles Project, the Pioneer Institute, and the Eagle Forum. National groups did not provide financial support, nor were there coordination meetings or conference calls. Rather, they were clearinghouses for information that could be passed along to parents and legislators. When asked whether her group partnered with the state's teacher unions, White replied:

Well, I wouldn't say we were in partnership with them. For the most part we didn't do anything with them because they were either pro-Common Core or they were neutral, or they were just more concerned about testing than they were about Common Core. So we didn't really have any common ground with them. Every once in a while they published something about testing that had a good solid message that we agreed with.

As in Indiana, the Oklahoma anti-Common Core forces were successful in securing passage of a bill (in 2014) that "repealed" the standards. But the state Department of Education rejected a plan to return to the state's old standards,²² there are concerns that the state's new standards closely resemble the Common Core, and teachers and administrators who spent years training to adjust their curricula and pedagogy to the Core have been resistant to replacing it.²³ White acknowledges that "We're kind of heading in the Indiana direction with the standards rewrite. And that's certainly very frustrating for us. And we've been putting out as much information as we possibly can on it. But at this point the legislators and the general public think to themselves, 'Wow, hey, Common Core is repealed. I'm going back to sleep.' I mean, it's done for them—so engagement is always such a challenge when you're trying to do anything politically." The Oklahoma case demonstrates that while the anti-Common Core movement often attracted some liberal individuals to the cause, it was nonetheless a primarily (and organizationally) Republican-led effort.

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The Indiana and Oklahoma case studies reveal that the "success" of the anti-Common Core coalition in these states—as well as in many others—has been overstated.

these states—as well as in many others—has been overstated. Nonetheless, the "scope of conflict" around Common Core has clearly expanded dramatically over the past two years across the country with extensive media coverage and a large and diverse array of actors engaging on the issue.

THE BLOWBACK GOES NATIONAL

While the effort to roll back the Common Core at the state level was in many places stymied—or resulted in only symbolic victories, as in Indiana and Oklahoma—those very defeats encouraged the opposition to take their fight to the national level. In the wake of the “rebranding” of Common Core in Indiana, Tuttle says that Hoosiers against Common Core has “changed our strategy to direct more attention at federal policies because they control every aspect of state policy. We focused on the re-authorization of No Child Left Behind. We wanted to get to the point where the U.S. Department of Education didn’t have as much influence over standards, assessments, and state education policy setting, and return that power back to the state level. The bureaucracy of the federal government has become unwieldy, and despite the hype in D.C., the passage of ESSA will do nothing to curtail it.” It is too early to ascertain the role that anti-Common Core groups played in the December

2015 passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, which replaced NCLB and significantly reduced the federal role in education. It appears likely, however, that the centrist bipartisan coalition that came together to enact ESSA might not have emerged without the presence of transpartisan pressure from the ideological extremes of the Republican and Democratic parties.

While many have been quick to declare that ESSA amounts to a death knell for Common Core, it is important to note that the law itself doesn’t automatically repeal the Core in the states—it just prohibits the federal government from mandating or incentivizing states to adopt/maintain the standards in the future. Whether individual states that have already adopted the Common Core (the majority) end up dropping it will ultimately come down to the state level political dynamics discussed here.

CONCLUSION

Views on the potential of transpartisan coalitions such as those that emerged around Common Core vary widely. As one optimistic observer noted, “Unlike bipartisanship, which often takes two existing viewpoints and, effectively, splits the difference, transpartisanship encourages solutions that can align with many viewpoints...Passion, deftly deployed, is actually an effective political tool with which to advance good ideas. That’s the promise of transpartisanship.”²⁴ Others, however, believe that “it remains an open question whether transpartisanship can really suffice as an alternative to bipartisan problem solving” and emphasize the “issue-specific, time-limited, and thereby fleeting if not fickle nature of transpartisan coalitions.”²⁵ We see the ideological orthodoxy that fuels the

passion of different factions in a transpartisan coalition to be a fundamental constraint because acknowledging the legitimacy of opponents reduces one’s standing amongst fellow members of the same ideological stripe. In the case of the Common Core, transpartisanship seemed like children from very different backgrounds parallel playing in the same sandbox. While they may have shared some of the same toys (i.e. arguments), when it comes to envisioning a different playground, they have little common ground for building a solution together.

The longer no alternative vision to the existing common standards emerges, the less likely we are to see a course shift. The more time that states have adopted the Common Core standards, the less likely

they will drop them. State governments, school administrators, and teachers have already invested a tremendous amount of time, effort, and money in implementing the Core and re-aligning their education systems around the new standards and assessments.²⁶ These represent “sunk costs” that cannot be recouped if a state changes direction. The replacement of the Core with something truly different would require significant new investment to develop. As a result, states are likely to become increasingly “path dependent” with regard to the Core.²⁷ These dynamics mean that large numbers of states are unlikely to repeal the Core and that even in those states that do, many (like Indiana and Pennsylvania) are likely to simply rename their standards or adopt a slightly modified version. Despite the extensive media coverage, ad campaigns, social media activity, and legislative repeal efforts, as of spring 2015, 40 of the original 45 states that adopted the Common Core remained committed to them.

As we have already seen, however, it is more likely that states will pull out of the two major assessment consortium (PARCC and SBAC), which may ultimately constrain the impact that the new standards can have on American education. Pioneer’s Jamie Gass notes that “The major goal of the Common Core is to have a unified set of nationalized standards and tests. More states are now not in the testing consortia than are in the consortia so the commonality and the comparability across states is gone.” As of July 2015, about half of the states had withdrawn from the test consortia and states witnessed unprecedented

rates of students opting out of tests during the 2014-2015 academic year. Opposition to high stakes standardized testing mobilized opposition among parents—and particularly influential suburban parents—in a way that concern about standards did not.

Nonetheless, while the Common Core “brand” has been damaged, surveys show that support for the idea of national standards remains strong among teachers and the general public.²⁸ Thus, the brand of the Common Core may fade, even while the concept of standards-based reform persists. In addition, in the past year several steps have been taken to address the other sources of controversy that have been connected to the Common Core. The testing consortia and state leaders have announced plans to reduce the amount of testing students will have to undertake; many states have announced a pause or postponement in the use of test scores in teacher evaluations; and the new Every Student Succeeds Act explicitly bans the federal government from mandating/incentivizing states to adopt the Common Core.

Over time—as states persist with their implementation efforts—students, teachers, and parents are likely to become more accustomed to the new standards. As a result, predictions of the demise of the Common Core—and the ability of a transpartisan coalition to bring them down—are likely overblown.²⁹ There has been less transpartisan engagement around the Common Core than might appear to be the case, and the victories that anti-Common Core forces have won have often been more symbolic than substantive.

LESSONS

Several lessons about transpartisan politics can be gleaned from the Common Core story.

First, **“empty vessel” issues may enable transpartisanship.** The Common Core debate served as a petri dish for a wide variety of concerns

and deeply held beliefs about public education, including the role of the federal government and corporate America, the increasing prominence of testing and external accountability, and technology and data privacy issues. The nature of standards

as a broad lever for change also meant that it was connected to so many aspects of education that there was ample room for opponents to find common cause without sharing particular issues or concerns. Core proponents seem not to have anticipated the range and depth of American anxieties – across the political spectrum and among apolitical parents – the reforms would evoke.

Second, **transpartisan initiatives may be more likely to arise from policy opposition than policy creation.** The early phase of the Common Core Standards movement was notable for its carefully crafted bipartisan approach. The developers of the standards and their advocates took great pains to create broad support and to avoid the stigma of federal control by working through the CCSSO and NGA to brand the standards as state-led. The economic recession, the federal stimulus package, and the opportunistic way in which the RTTT incented rapid standards adoption, however, undid much of the groundwork paved by the decentralized strategy of the common standards.

The left-right opposition had very divergent visions for education. Conservatives and progressives disagree about the proper role of government and public policy versus markets, and particularly about the appropriate role of the federal government vis a vis the states. On most economic and social policy issues, Tea Party Republicans and progressive Democrats literally could not be further apart. Within the education arena, the conservative education agenda is to abolish the U.S. Department of Education, reduce education spending, expand market-based reforms such as private school vouchers, and weaken (or abolish) collective bargaining and teachers unions. Teachers unions do not support policies that would weaken their own power and job protections, and progressives typically embrace a more robust federal role in education and increased education spending, and vehemently oppose vouchers.³⁰

The anti-Core groups shared few if any positive goals, and they put little or no effort into dismantling the extreme hostility and distrust

between them. Those at the ideological wings of both political parties tend to emphasize ideological purity, which in practice makes them less willing to compromise, but it is compromise which is the grease of policy creation. Transpartisan efforts that are pure alliances of convenience, with little to no shared strategy and infrastructure behind them, may be highly effective for delaying, diminishing or derailing policies—but are ineffective at enacting policies.

Third, **transpartisanship may be more likely when there is no dominant message associated with an issue, and it is not associated with a particular political axis.** The early bipartisan, below-the-radar strategy of the Core advocates made the standards vulnerable. They failed to control and cement the dominant message about the standards while the space was uncontested. While standards are a fairly abstract and technical issue and thus are hard to message, there was little coordination amongst advocacy groups supporting the Core and funders who were supporting their adoption in the states. This left the door open for opponents to paint the issue in their own terms.

Additionally, the Common Core was the first major education issue to play out in the new landscape of social and alternative media. Anti-Core activists used these new tools effectively; Core proponents did not. The American Principles Project’s Robbins described the “huge” role of social media in this rise of opposition to the Common Core: “You get a group of parents together and they put up a Facebook page and things kind of takeoff from there. Twitter, Facebook have gotten the word out more so than it would have been possible otherwise...It’s the lifeblood of the movement.” Transpartisan opponents of the Core were far more effective in their use of social media to mobilize their supporters and influence the political process than were advocates. Whether policy advocates and funders seek to mobilize or neutralize these forces, they will need to prioritize longer-term planning for implementation, public communication, and analysis of grassroots political forces at the local and national level.

Fourth, we may experience forms of **transpartisanship in which groups at the ideological poles are partners without even communicating with each other.** Sharing a common goal can be sufficient for transpartisanship to arise. In fact, the necessity of speaking to one's base risks that acts of coordination are seen as consorting with the opposition. In this way opposition to the Common Core was very much like the left and the right parallel playing in the education sandbox. In transpartisan parallel play, the objective may be similar, but the arguments are very different. In this case, the arguments used by opponents on the right included intrusion of the federal government on state's rights and local control and fear of data collection and privacy infringement. On the left, opposition to the standards was driven by objection to encroachment on teacher autonomy (anti-teacher evaluation), protests over the monetization of education, and anti-testing sentiment. Common goals do not necessarily mean common ground.

Fifth, **outspoken presidential support for a policy can polarize an issue.** As Smith and Seltzer (2015) have noted, twentieth century presidents have become very polarizing figures—particularly during periods of divided government. In this context, the bully pulpit is often counter-productive as presidents who publicly endorse a particular policy may succeed in mobilizing the opposition even more than they mobilize supporters. Hess (2014) has suggested that the Core might have had a different political trajectory if advocates had not pushed for rapid universal adoption “tainted” by federal and corporate endorsement, but rather had started in a smaller number of states that were genuinely enthusiastic about it, and let it spread over time to others as a result of proven success.

Finally, **transpartisanship's influence seems strongest at producing pressure at the agenda setting stage rather than at the policy construction stage.** The grassroots backlash against the Common Core put pressure on establishment policymakers to respond—to do

something—but they were less able to influence the content of the actual response. This led establishment interests to respond with largely toothless or symbolic policy—such as states renaming the Common Core without significantly changing the standards themselves.³¹ Similarly at the national level, while Core opponents succeeded in getting language included in the Every Student Succeeds Act that prevents the federal government from pressuring states in any way on national standards, the ultimate impact of this provision remains questionable. Diverse grassroots coalitions of the sort that arose in opposition to Common Core typically do not have the infrastructure, resources, or staying power to exert long-term influence. Transpartisan initiatives have longer-range staying power ONLY when they either entail significant contact and deliberate effort to develop ways of working together OR when the attention they garner mobilizes mainstream or elite actors – as in the case of anti-testing backlash moving into influential suburban school districts.

Transpartisanship's influence seems strongest at producing pressure at the agenda setting stage rather than at the policy construction stage.

In sum, the Common Core issue provided fertile ground for transpartisan opponents to come together to raise concerns about an essentially centralized standards reform movement in the traditionally decentralized education terrain. However, because the transpartisan coalition lacked shared perspectives about the nature of the problem, when it came to seeking alternatives, the coalition proved to be built on quicksand.

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