

The Economist

THIS year anyone with any interest in education will find it hard to ignore the growing, and often nonsensical, row over the common-core standards, due to be fully introduced in the 2014-15 school year. As anxiety has grown over the introduction of these new performance measures, critics from both the left and right have piled in to attack them. These complaints range from fair critiques over some botched implementations, hysterical nonsense and downright lies. And as the year progresses, parts of the right will continue to wage a campaign against the common core, hoping to gain influence and even to move forward a more radical agenda. A bit of background is useful to fully appreciate this particular row in all its glory, and in particular how it is possible for a fairly innocuous bit of bipartisan policymaking to become such a punchbag for some on both the left and the right.

The new standards were released in June 2010 and say what all students, from kindergarten through high school, should know in mathematics and English at the end of each year. The nation's governors and education commissioners created them so that all children had a clear set of expectations, and a prescription for the skills they were expected to master at different ages, from learning how to read to drawing a bar graph. In the past, states set their own standards on their own and these were often terribly low. The new standards, which 45 states and the District of Columbia have signed up for, are set high. This will help tackle

the problem that American children are falling behind in international comparisons. This means that states, schools and children will see a drop in student scores, which has many up in arms. But the case for having one set of high standards is clear: students will have realistic expectations about their performance throughout their career and will know exactly what to do in order to do well. Also there will be no nasty shocks later in life when second chances may be difficult to come by. Moreover, early adopters of the common core, Tennessee and Washington, DC, are seeing enormous gains in career and college readiness. Although the standards have quite a wide base of support, the politics in an election year are tricky. Many right-wing groups have seen the core standards as an opportunity to stir up some anxiety about big-government meddling, as if expectations for what students should know upon graduation tramples the toes of state and parental freedoms. Indeed the lie that these standards are imposed by the federal government finds its best evidence in the campaign the right is waging for states to pull out of them. States may, indeed, decide to do so. But conservatives pushing for states to abandon the standards have yet to be convincing. Only the Republican governors in Indiana and Pennsylvania have put the standards on hold. To help defang critics, Massachusetts decided to delay assessing the standards until 2015. More states may follow.

Parts of the far right are also trying to use the core as a rallying cry for conservative ideas about education, as *Politico* recently reported. One group, FreedomWorks, has a campaign for educational freedom that starts with eliminating the common core and then pushes to use state money for any form of schooling (presumably this includes religious education). A march on Washington is planned for later in the year.

All this activity on the right is leaving the core's opponents on the left somewhat confused. Some are opposed to any kind of testing, believing that standardised tests are not only stressful, but also crude measurements of a child's abilities. Unions have fought hard against attempts to introduce greater accountability, and

there is a reasonable amount of anxiety that teachers will be evaluated according to how well students do on these new tests. Seventeen states are asking schools to implement new teacher evaluations. Although some on the left would like to see the common core have its wings clipped, even Diane Ravitch, an influential left-wing policy analyst, told *Politico* she would be "very concerned" if the core became a vehicle to promote vouchers and charters. In the hands of bloggers on the left and right, routine school issues are being turned into monstrous nightmares. "Chicago School Rations Bathroom Visits to Help Prepare for Common Core Tests", "Common Core again threatens to make little kids pee their pants". The tests make "little kids vomit, pee their pants". It will also "kill literature", and is a "leftist indoctrination plot". Many more horror stories will unfold about the common core this year. And you never know, one or two of them may even be true. None of them will mean that the standards should be scrapped or that anyone should rush to hit the pause button on assessments. Forewarned is forearmed.