



7-2014

Politics are Crushing the Standards

Dave Powell
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/edfac>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), and the [Education Policy Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Powell, Dave. "Politics Are Crushing the Standards." *Education Week* 33.36 (July 2014), 34-35.

This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/edfac/24>

This open access opinion is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Politics are Crushing the Standards

Abstract

The recent news that Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin signed a bill to, in the parlance of the times, "repeal and replace" the common-core standards in her state was surprising, to say the least, notwithstanding a [legal challenge to the repeal](#) filed in the Oklahoma Supreme Court by parents, teachers, and state board of education members on June 25. Before Gov. Fallin was against the standards, she supported them. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Board of Education, educational standards, test scores, curriculum, standardized test, common core, No Child Left Behind

Disciplines

Curriculum and Instruction | Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Education Policy

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: July 8, 2014

Published in Print: July 9, 2014, as **Politics Are Crushing the Standards**

Politics Are Crushing the Standards

By Dave Powell

The recent news that Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin signed a bill to, in the parlance of the times, "repeal and replace" the common-core standards in her state was surprising, to say the least, notwithstanding **a legal challenge to the repeal** filed in the Oklahoma Supreme Court by parents, teachers, and state board of education members on June 25. Before Gov. Fallin was against the standards, she supported them.

In January, when she was still on the common-core bandwagon, Gov. Fallin told a meeting of the National Governors Association, which she leads, that the common core "is driven and implemented by those states that choose to participate." She added: "It is not a federal curriculum; in fact, it's not a curriculum at all. Local educators and school districts will still design the best lesson plans, will choose appropriate textbooks, and will drive classroom learning." She could not have been more right. That didn't stop Gov. Fallin from blaming the demise of the common core in Oklahoma on the feds, of course. As she signed House Bill 3399, the governor revealed why she had changed her mind. "Unfortunately, federal overreach has tainted common core," she said, alleging that this was done "in an attempt to influence state education standards."

With her decision, Gov. Fallin joined a chorus of conservative state governors suddenly repudiating the Common Core State Standards for political reasons, including Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal. He wins the prize for having uttered the most ridiculous statement about the common core by a high-ranking elected official: "Centralized planning didn't work in Russia," he declared, "and it won't work in education." Gov. Nikki Haley of South Carolina chose the more circumspect route of writing in a public letter that she supports "finding South Carolina solutions to South Carolina challenges." Unfortunately, for the rest of us, South Carolina has a history of making its challenges our problem.

These three are not alone. The movement against the common core has been picking up steam, and it's making for some strange bedfellows these days. Everyone from Diane Ravitch to comedian Louis C.K. to political satirist Stephen Colbert is finding fault with the standards. Some of this concern is well placed: We should be wary of excessive standardization in education, and we should certainly be suspicious of politicians who meddle in the everyday work of teachers and students in schools. We should also look closely at state departments of education eager to micromanage the implementation

of standards, whatever form they take. When the work of teachers is prescribed as narrowly as it has been in some states, powerful and transformative teaching and learning are the first casualties.

I agree with the critics, mostly. Testing *is* out of control, and the stress it causes students and teachers has absolutely no place in educational settings. Tying student test scores to teacher evaluations is both absurd and morally reprehensible. How can you hold someone accountable for something he or she did not do? Ms. Ravitch is on pretty firm ground, too: The common core's drafting and implementation process did not include as many teachers as it should have, nor was it pursued in a transparent way that encouraged open discussion and reflection on the implications of adoption.

But these concerns can be addressed without throwing out both the baby and the bathwater. Unsurprisingly, the constant chipping away at the common core has created an opening for those paranoid about "government overreach" (which it is not) and the demagogues who serve them. This is as true in Oklahoma, where Mary Fallin did an about-face on the common core as soon as she had to come home and explain herself, as it is in Louisiana, where Bobby Jindal is being reminded by his own state superintendent, John White, that the governor does not have the power to unilaterally decide whether to pull the plug on an education policy initiative with so many moving parts, no matter how good doing so might be for the governor's presidential prospects.

In both cases, political hacks have bowed to ideological pressure in an effort to please the shortsighted membership of the flat-earth society. It's hard to imagine a more cynical approach to public service.

I'm not the world's biggest common-core fan, but there is a reason all of this matters. Most of us, rightly so, have a tendency to think of standardization in terms of its negative qualities. I, for one, am deeply concerned about the faith we place in standardized testing as a measure of student growth and performance in school, and I am never in favor of letting outsiders narrowly prescribe for teachers what they should and should not teach in their classrooms.

On the other hand, the word "standard" has two other important connotations. One is as a required or agreed-upon level of quality or attainment; the other is as an idea or thing used as a measure, norm, or model in comparative evaluations. In other words, standards can be the engines of equality—which is not, incidentally, synonymous with sameness—and the absence of them can lead to gross inequalities that only drive us farther apart.

Properly aligned standards could help us compare schools in ways we cannot do now in the Wild West hodgepodge of experimental approaches to schooling—ways that might help us begin to come to a consensus about what works in which contexts. They can also help us distinguish the truly professional teachers from the ones who ought to be doing something else. Imagine if we did not have basic standards for food or water quality or for the professional practice of doctors or airline pilots. Now ask

yourself: How could we have come this far without taking the same care to ensure the basic quality of public education?

But what makes the common core especially necessary is the abject failure of our elected officials to do their part to ensure that students and teachers have what they need to do their work. South Carolina, Louisiana, and Oklahoma all have something else in common besides their governors' distaste for the common core: They rank close to the bottom of all states on the [Education Week Research Center's 2014 K-12 Achievement Index](#), which takes into account National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, scores; Advanced Placement scores; and high school graduation rates.

These governors and legislators tell us that education is a local responsibility, then fail, again and again, to provide the resources needed to meet their obligation to their citizens. Worse, they meddle in the work of teachers and make an already challenging job even more challenging by changing course constantly, depending on which way the political wind blows.

My guess is that they fear the common core not because it represents a "federal takeover" of education, but because it might allow us to draw true comparisons between the educational performance of students in different states—comparisons that cannot be so easily explained away.

Of course, these governors want to write their own standards: If you've got the only thing of its kind, there is nothing to compare it with, no matter how bad it is. For all their limitations, standards at least hold the promise of bringing real accountability to the people who, for too long, have made rules and regulations about education without ever being held responsible for providing the resources needed to make their endless pronouncements a reality. For that reason alone, we should all be on board.

Dave Powell is a member of the education department at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania, where he teaches education policy and the politics of education. He started his career as a high school social studies teacher.

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/07/09/36powell.h33.html>