TIME

Sept 30, 2013

46 states have adopted the new Common Core Standards

# THE NEW SMART SET

## What happens when millions of kids are asked to master fewer things more deeply?

BY AMANDA RIPLEY

ANDREW BRENNEN HAD LIVED IN FIVE states before he could drive, making him an expert in everything that's wrong with American schooling. "In Georgia, I was definitely among the top students in my grade," he says. Then he moved to Maryland, and everything changed. "The level of content was definitely harder. I did not do very well." In Maryland, Brennen had to learn grammar that everyone else already seemed to know. He did so poorly in Spanish that he ended up repeating the class the next year.

In eighth grade, Brennen moved to Lexington, Ky., spinning the education roulette wheel one more time. When he got there, he did fine in science but lagged behind his friends in math. Brennen was basically the same wherever he went: a slim African-American boy with a wide smile and big plans. But "smart," he'd learned, was a relative term. This year, Brennen is a high school senior in Kentucky, applying to colleges in at least five different states—prepared to play catch-up yet again, wherever he may end up.

American education has always been run at the state and local level. Even as Washington has pushed states to try out this or that policy in exchange for federal funding, states have always chosen their own tests and learning goals. Historically this has meant that most states and districts have set the bar lower than colleges and many workplaces would like—or buried their teachers in so many competing demands that they are left to pick and choose what to teach in isolation.

All that is about to end. This fall, for the first time, a majority of American public-school children are working to master the same set of more rigorous skills in math and English. These new targets, known as the Common Core State Standards, have been adopted by 46 states in an almost inexplicably speedy wave of reform. With only Alaska, Nebraska, Texas and Virginia abstaining, the Common Core movement represents the biggest shift in the content of American education in a century.

As such, hostilities have erupted on all sides. Tea Party groups refer to the standards as Obamacore, despite the fact that the federal government had nothing to do with their creation. The Republican National Committee condemned the standards in

Photograph by Mauricio Alejo for TIME

a resolution, calling them a "nationwide straitjacket." Under political pressure, lawmakers in a handful of states, including Indiana and Michigan, are debating whether to halt the rollout of the new standards.

Meanwhile, leftist critics have attacked the standards as "corporate" reforms, despite the fact that they were developed by teachers and researchers at the behest of a bipartisan group of governors and state education leaders. And some union leaders have called for more money and time to prepare teachers and students for tests associated with the new targets, most of which have yet to be completed.

One state bypassed all this tumult, however. It barreled headlong into the future three years ago and embraced the new targets before any other state, holding its children and teachers to a higher bar. That state, long renowned for its bourbon and racehorses, will not immediately come to mind as an educational powerhouse. But Kentucky is the undisputed leader in this historic American journey, and the parents, children and teachers who live there have much to tell the rest of us about what to expect next.

## The Birth of the Core

IN 1893, 10 MEN MET IN A SECRET SESSION at Columbia University in New York City until midnight, debating what American high schools should teach. In the final report, the Committee of Ten concluded that students deserved a strong liberal arts education—in which "every subject [is] taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil so long as he pursues it, no matter what the probable destination of the pupil may be."

Ever since, generations have argued about whether these and subsequent standards are too hard or too easy for American kids and never reached a lasting consensus.

All the while, too many American students have found themselves unprepared for college or a decent job. One in five high school graduates who go to a four-year college (and half of those who go to community college) gets placed in remedial courses, stuck paying for college without getting college credit. In some states, like Hawaii, 38% of high school grads who try to enlist fail the Army's academic aptitude test; in Indiana, which has a higher child-poverty rate, only 13% fail, according to a 2010 report by the Education Trust. An American high school diploma means something radically different from state to state and from school to school, and many kids don't find out the real street value of their education until it's too late.

In 2009, hoping to disrupt this cycle of despair, the Kentucky state legislature passed a bill to throw out the state's standardized test and require higher education standards, benchmarked to international norms. "It was driven by Republicans from a conservative perspective—demanding higher standards for our kids," says Stu Silberman, executive director of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, an influential education-reform organization in Kentucky.

At the same time, the National Governors Association, along with the Council of Chief State School Officers, was working on a similar blueprint. From the beginning, the Common Core standards were explicitly linked with what colleges and employers wanted young people to know. This way, students and their families could find out if they were off track much sooner—say in the third grade, when they still had time to do better, instead of in high school.

To design new standards for kindergarten through high school, a group of researchers collaborated with educators around the country. Experts in Massachusetts, which has long had among the most rigorous standards in the country, helped shape the literacy and math standards. Teachers in Georgia went to work on technical literacy, because the state had an exceptional track record in that field. Teachers from all over the country, meanwhile, pushed to keep the list of standards short and manageable.

The new standards were designed to be "fewer, clearer and higher," says David Coleman, co-founder of Student Achievement Partners, the nonprofit that helped develop the new standards, and they are precisely that, generally speaking. (You can read them at corestandards.org.) For example, on average, states used to require first-graders to learn 13 different math skills, according to veteran education researcher William Schmidt, which meant teachers did not have time to go into all of them in depth (and sometimes skipped some altogether). The Common Core requires that first-graders learn just eight skills. At the same time, the new standards are higher—more rigorous, according to a 2010 study by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute—than the existing state standards in 39 states and about the same as those in the remaining states.

**BEFORE THE NEW COMMON CORE STANDARDS, U.S. TEENAGERS RANKED 26TH ON A MATH TEST ADMINISTERED IN 70 NATIONS**

They are also as high as any found in the top education systems in the world, from Finland to Japan. The ratcheting up of math expectations is vital, given that Americans rank 26th in the world on a math test given to representative samples of 15-year-olds in 70 countries (a far worse ranking than in reading). Even the country's richest teenagers perform 18th in the world in math compared with their privileged peers worldwide.

In English class, instead of writing about how a story made them feel, high school students will analyze whether an author's evidence and reasoning make the text more convincing. In addition to literature, they will also grapple with more nonfiction texts, since that is an area of weakness for American students compared with their international peers.

But writing lofty standards is much easier than making them work. To make the standards matter, teachers need time and high-quality training, two of the scarcest resources in American schools.

## How Kentucky Responded

IN AUGUST 2010, KENTUCKY SCHOOLS rolled out the Common Core standards in math and English. "It was pretty much a nightmare," says Peggy Preston, a veteran math teacher in Louisville. Overnight, the Pythagorean theorem went from a 10th-grade lesson to an eighth-grade lesson. Instead of just identifying the first-person point of view, middle-school students suddenly had to be able to explain why an author chose to use it and how that decision influenced the text. "We were overwhelmed and frustrated," says Kate Grindon, an English teacher at Meyzeek Middle School. Many teachers were also afraid the new standards were too high. "There were a lot of people in the room who said, 'Our kids can't do this.'"

What happened next depended in large part on the principal and superintendent of a given school. In the places with the

strongest leaders, teachers got time to study and discuss the new standards with one another, brainstorming how they could reinvent their lessons for the higher expectations. Kentucky's education commissioner, Terry Holliday, enlisted teachers to help at every step in the process, explaining the new standards to parents and designing test questions—a model he advises other state chiefs to follow. "Teachers are your best voice in the community," Holliday says.

The following spring, the students took the first set of tests synched to the new standards. Everyone knew it would be a humbling exercise: if you raise the bar, fewer will reach it—at least for a while. So state officials warned parents, teachers, students and the media to expect lower scores and interpret them as a sign of progress rather than failure. Every teacher had flyers to give out at parent-teacher conferences explaining that the new test was different from the old one. The Jefferson County PTA held briefings to explain the Common Core to some 8,000 people across Louisville.

When the new results came out, only half of Kentucky elementary students were found to be proficient or better in reading—compared with three-quarters of kids the year before under the old standards. But citing the public outreach, Holliday says, "We had zero complaints from parents."

This school year, their third with the new targets, some Kentucky teachers seem to be thriving with the infusion of clarity, focus and autonomy they attribute to the Common Core standards. Many post specific targets on the classroom wall for all the students to see, rotating each one out every few weeks. De'Vonta Moffitt, a student at Doss High School in Louisville, explains the difference between his freshman and senior year this way: "Before, we read and then worked, read and then worked. It was easy. Basically they gave us tests from the book," he says. "Now, every three weeks we have to know a different standard. I have to actually take notes. I have to think sometimes, take my time."

Even standardized tests can be less grueling when tied to more intelligent goals. Each spring, Sydnea Johnson, a student at Fern Creek Traditional High School in Louisville, used to get migraines from all the cramming teachers asked her to do before the test—trying to cover more standards less deeply. "Now it's a lot less stressful," Johnson says, "because I can take in the information all year long, and it's just a review before the test."

## WELCOME TO THE COMMON CORE

Kentucky's targets for what all students should know at different grade levels—before and after the new Common Core Standards

Before Common Core
After Common Core

PYTHAGOREAN THEOREM

Apply the Pythagorean theorem to determine unknown side lengths in right triangles in real-world and mathematical problems in two and three dimensions

10th grade
Eighth grade

IDENTIFYING LITERARY DEVICES

Identify literary devices (e.g. symbolism, irony, analogies, imagery, foreshadowing, figurative language)

Sixth grade
Fourth grade

VOLUME OF PRISMS

Find the volume of a right rectangular prism by two different methods

Eighth grade
Sixth grade

IDENTIFYING AN AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson or moral

Seventh grade
Second grade

This past spring, Kentucky achieved an 86% high school graduation rate—up from 80% in 2010 and above that of most other states. Test scores for the last school year, only the second with the new Common Core test, show a slight uptick of 2 percentage points. The portion of students considered college- or career-ready is up 20 percentage points to 54% since 2010, according to a battery of assessments given to seniors.

### The Backlash

IT'S ONLY IN THE PAST COUPLE OF MONTHS that Holliday has started to hear local opposition to the Common Core. Kentucky Senator Rand Paul, gearing up for a presidential run, has come out against the new standards, citing a "loss of local control of curriculum and instruction." One Kentucky education leader said he has stopped using the words *common core* altogether. "We call them Kentucky Core Standards or something," he said, searching for the proper euphemism. "We are even trying not to use 'rigorous.' We are trying to say, 'college- and career-ready standards.'"

If the word *rigorous* is politically incorrect in America, the Common Core is way ahead of its time. The destiny of the new standards may depend on competing bogeymen. Which is scarier, international competition for skilled workers or the loss of some local authority?

Historically, the answer isn't encouraging. Some states may step back from the standards altogether, while others will likely do what they did under No Child Left Behind and select dumbed-down tests that do not require kids to think for themselves. A few states will stand firm, continuing to work on smarter tests and better teacher training. I suspect Kentucky may be one of them.

Earlier this year, a coalition of 26 states proposed new standards—for science this time. Like those for math and reading, these new targets allow teachers to go deeper on fewer topics and focus on applying knowledge to solve real-world problems. Already the standards on climate change and evolution have unleashed a backlash, which will likely grow.

So far, just six states have adopted the standards: California, Kansas, Maryland, Rhode Island, Vermont—and Kentucky. ■

TIME *contributor Ripley is the author of a new book,* The Smartest Kids in the World—and How They Got That Way, *and an Emerson Senior Fellow*