

# Teachers Unions



Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, addresses the crowd at the union's annual convention, July 2014

AP PHOTO / DAMIAN DOVARGANES

# and the Common Core

## Standards inspire collaboration and dissent



**THE MEDIA AND OBSERVERS** across the ideological spectrum were surprised and, in some cases, disconcerted in July 2014 when at the annual American Federation of Teachers (AFT) convention in Los Angeles, the union's leadership team announced that its Innovation Fund grants of \$20,000 to \$30,000 were going to be made available to state and local affiliates to critique the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the massive multistate effort to improve student achievement.

"It's a sign that teachers are frustrated and fed up—and they're making their anger heard, loud and clear," opined a July Politico story about the new initiative.

"This is a huge step because this time last year, they were gung-ho for Common Core," said Fordham University's Mark Naison, a critic of the standards, also in Politico.

David Menefee-Libey, a political scientist at Pomona College, went even further: "It's all blowing up."

The AFT's announcement, combined with the much-publicized rise of Chicago's Karen Lewis and the election of Barbara Madeloni as president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, as well as the emergence of the Badass Teachers Alliance and other social-justice factions within the unions, have added to the impression that union opposition to the standards is large—and growing. And indeed, there's little argument that the unions' rhetoric and tone have changed.

But have the AFT and its larger counterpart, the National Education Association (NEA), really turned their backs on the Common Core in concrete, substantive ways—and if so, how much does it matter?

### A Mixed Message

The unions have no direct authority over the Common Core implementation or the assessments. They're not directly responsible for preparing teachers to use the new standards or for

administering the new tests. They have no formal governance role in the process.

Union pronouncements about the success or failure of the process, however, and unions' work with states and districts and outside partners on the standards, do influence the materials and supports that are being provided to teachers, and also help shape media and public perceptions of the initiative, and in theory could shape lawmakers' positions on whether to continue, pause, or reengineer the effort.

Concern that the AFT, and to some degree the NEA, was flip-flopping on the Common Core, which could encourage classroom teachers' resistance to the changes and endanger the effort's ultimate success, has become a common one among standards supporters and union critics.

"It seemed like they signed on to do this [Common Core development] three years ago, banging the door down saying they needed to be part of it, and then little by little they've peeled off," says Democrats for Education Reform's Charlie Barone.

According to this line of reasoning, the unions expressed their support for the standards during the early stages, when they were being developed and then adopted by states during competition for Race to the Top funds. It was only when the development of assessments began, and the U.S. Department of Education's (ED's) No Child Left Behind waiver process included clear requirements for evaluating teachers based partly on student test scores, that the unions began to balk.

Not everyone goes that far. "They're trying to walk a fine line in which they still support the standards but don't like the way they've been implemented," says Bob Rothman, a Common Core supporter at the Alliance for Excellent Education. "But they haven't reversed themselves" (see "The Common Core Takes Hold," *features*, Summer 2014).

To say that the unions had flip-flopped on the Common Core "would be an absolute mischaracterization," insists Sandra Alberti, field director for the nonprofit Student Achievement Partners (SAP), who

by ALEXANDER RUSSO

has been working with union leadership on implementation.

“The local affiliates doing this work and teachers have remained really committed, and both unions have been committed to providing resources to members despite some of the political controversy,” attests Gates Foundation staffer Lynn Olson, who works with the unions on their Common Core endeavors.

Common Core critics within the AFT aren’t buying the notion that the AFT has reversed itself, either. The AFT-passed Common Core resolution “tries to have it both ways,” according to the Chicago Teachers Union’s (CTU) Jennifer Johnson. She says the new AFT grant program accepts on its face that the standards were a positive step and only encourages minor changes.

“That’s not the right focus at all,” according to Johnson, who believes that Chicago teachers would find their time and energy better spent on working to stop the standards rather than tweaking the standards already in place.

As the controversy grows, it becomes much less clear what union leadership should do. There are dangers on both sides: rebellion from the rank and file on one, and political marginalization on the other.

“If the standards go down the tubes because of fear-mongering and misinformation, the NEA is going to look really bad,” one union official explained to *Education Week*. “Why would anyone take us seriously if we had a seat at the table, and then we turned our backs on the standards?”

There is also the very real danger of confusing teachers. “Most people don’t live and breathe the nuances of Common Core, so I’m not sure where they are in terms of understanding

The standards developers at SAP have met with union representatives like the NEA’s director of education policy and practice Donna Harris-Aikens and AFT’s Ucelli-Kashyap every couple of months, according to Alberti, to share activities, get feedback, and take a look at what needed to be done next.

The Gates Foundation grant for the NEA’s Master Teacher project, which has thus far supported 95 teachers developing Common Core lessons, included the creation of 24,000 resources or 3,500 lessons, delivered through Better Lesson, according to the foundation. AFT locals, including those in Albuquerque, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, and Jefferson County (Alabama), received Gates-funded grants to produce Common Core lessons, some of which are available through Share My Lesson.

The unions have worked closely with SAP, which received an \$18 million grant from the GE Foundation to create “immersion institutes” to familiarize teachers with the standards and to create a storehouse of materials for them to use in their instruction. The two national unions and SAP were part of a group that received an \$11 million three-year grant from the Helmsley Charitable Trust in 2012, which closes out in 2016. Helmsley also provided the two unions and the two assessment consortia, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), a \$1.6 million grant in 2013, specifically aimed at engaging teachers in the development and implementation of end-of-year assessments.

Nor has the unions’ engagement with the Common Core been limited to initiatives with outside funding. Noting the

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the AFT position,” admits Marla Ucelli-Kashyap, director of AFT’s Educational Issues Department. “But our support is still on the books. It’s “not a yes/no kind of issue.”

## The Backstory

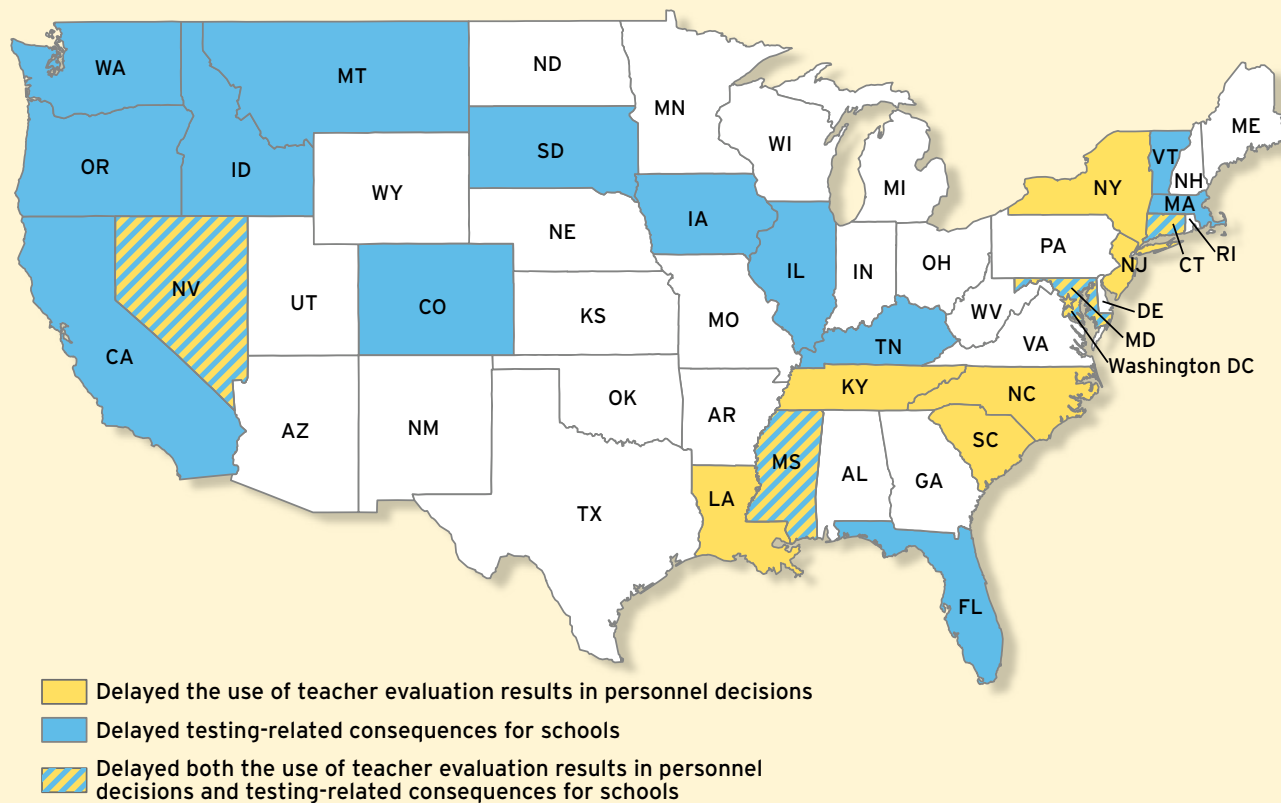
The Common Core State Standards were officially launched in June 2009. Drafts were released in March 2010 and finalized in June of the same year. By August 2010, 33 states and Washington, D.C., had adopted them. Two years later, 12 additional states had joined. Teams of teachers from both the NEA and AFT reviewed the standards at key points and signed letters of support along the way. Union involvement in the Common Core process continued in the following months and years, largely through partnerships with outside funders and nonprofits.

AFT’s focus on the standards in its education journal *American Educator* and the NEA’s \$60 million investment in teacher training projects, a February 2014 *Education Week* article described the two national unions as “among the initiative’s biggest boosters.” Dubbed the Great Public Schools initiative, the NEA projects were funded mostly with union dues rather than outside grants, and focused primarily on helping teachers prepare for the Common Core.

To be sure, the unions and others expressed concerns about the Common Core along the way. The AFT produced a report in 2011 that outlined an action plan and issued recommendations for what the union and others needed to do. The report expressed the AFT’s apprehensions about the design, content, and potential for punitive use of assessments and vowed to ensure that educators continue to have a “significant voice”

### The States Push Back on the Common Core (Figure 1)

Twenty-four states have delayed at least one Common Core-related accountability provision.



**NOTE:** Some states received waivers from the Department of Education to delay implementation of accountability components; other states acted without waivers. Implementation plans and schedules across the states vary widely and continue to evolve.

**SOURCE:** American Federation of Teachers

in implementation of the standards.

Such concerns spread as states began to implement the standards with varying success. In some places—states that won Race to the Top funding in particular—there was time and there were resources to familiarize educators with the new standards and prepare materials to go along with them. In others, things were hurried and incomplete. There wasn't a new curriculum to go along with the new standards, or it wasn't very good, or there wasn't any time to become familiar with it and how to teach with it. In some places, the new standards were in place, but with the old curricula and tests. In others—New York, especially—the new tests were being tried out even before the new curricula were fully in place.

### The Pushback

In April 2013, AFT president Randi Weingarten floated the idea of a moratorium on high-stakes uses of the results from the

new assessments, and the idea quickly gained steam. Eventually, those who supported some version of a slowdown included the accountability hawks at the Education Trust and the Gates Foundation. The U.S. Department of Education began giving out waivers to states allowing them to push back high-stakes aspects of the new system, and a number of other states took steps on their own to delay full implementation (see Figure 1).

In July 2013, the NEA affirmed its support for the Common Core standards by a voice vote but it did not endorse the tests.

Then NEA state leaders met in Washington in January 2014 to consider how best to proceed. In February, the NEA issued its first formal statement expressing concern about the implementation process.

Serious questions about the unions' support for the CCSS became even more public in March 2014 at the Council of Chief State School Officers' annual legislative conference, where AFT and NEA leaders "squabbled" with state education chiefs over public perception and implementation

issues, according to an *Education Week* story. At the event, Weingarten and then NEA president Dennis Van Roekel critiqued various aspects of the implementation process, which led Massachusetts K–12 chief Mitchell D. Chester to remark that the leaders were “condoning” opposition to the standards, creating a “totally adversarial conversation.”

Things soon got worse. In May, the CTU passed a tough resolution opposing the Common Core in its entirety, which it followed with calls for parents to boycott tests; a handful of teachers refused to administer the tests (see sidebar, opposite page).

In June, the New York state legislature went along with a union request and determined that teachers wouldn’t be penalized for low student-achievement scores. The union in New York also encouraged districts and parents to boycott the 2014–15 field tests of the new assessments.



PHOTOGRAPH/ MARK BONIFACIO/NY DAILY NEWS VIA GETTY IMAGES

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Under pressure from members, the AFT stopped taking new money from the Gates Foundation for its Innovation Fund, replacing at least some of the lost funding with member dues and grants from less objectionable funders.

## A Fine Line

Some Common Core advocates consider union criticism of the new tests, which replace multiple-choice, fill-in-the-bubble exams that reflect low expectations, to be deeply hypocritical. Opposing the assessment undermines the credibility of teachers unions, argued The New Teacher Project (TNTP) president Tim Daly in *Education Week* in February 2014.

The unions themselves see little or no conflict between their support for the standards and their concerns about their implementation and use. According to their leaders, the unions were and still are in favor of high, uniform standards for all students. It’s just the implementation of the standards, the new tests developed to measure student achievement, and the planned uses of the results that are problematic.

“We’ve been very supportive and involved in development of the standards,” says Van Roekel in a recent interview. “Then it came time to implement those. We’re still in that phase. Adoption was an event; the implementation is far more of a process.”

And even if the case could be made inarguably that this represents a reversal, unions wouldn’t be the only ones who have flip-flopped on the Common Core. Republican presidential aspirants like Bobby Jindal have taken reversal to an extreme.

At least some of the confusion and concern has come from the fact that the AFT’s Weingarten is a prolific and somewhat peripatetic speaker who is notoriously hard to pin down (or inconsistent in her positions, depending on your point of view). Her position on issues such as measuring teachers using student test scores has changed over the years. Once supportive of the approach, she later called it “a sham.”

## Behind the Scenes

Through it all, both unions have continued working on implementation and continued to collaborate with test developers SBAC and PARCC, which received additional funding from ED to help schools get ready for the tests that they were developing and field testing.

SAP’s Alberti insists that teachers and the unions have supported the standards despite reservations about testing and how agencies were rolling them out. “The strength of the partnership has remained fairly steady,” she says.

And if one takes a close look at the resolutions debated and passed at the 2014 AFT convention, there really was no “dizzying about-face on the Common Core,” as described by Politico. The AFT voted down a resolution calling for a full-throated rejection of the Common Core, put forth by the CTU. Proposals to limit the union’s ability to participate in or even fund Common Core–related activities were dropped. The AFT was careful not to say anything against the standards themselves, and spent time before and after the convention making sure that its external partners, funders and non-profits, knew the nuances behind its statements.

“I think that most people got it,” says the AFT’s Ucelli-Kashyap, though she admits that in some cases outside partners wanted reassurance. “They asked, ‘Here’s how I’m reading this. Is that right, or should we be concerned?’”

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### Less Action Than Rhetoric

How to tell what the union’s real position is, when the rhetoric is so complicated? One way is to look at the unions’ direct actions. For all the concern and caution that has crept into union leaders’ rhetoric, neither one has joined conservative Republicans’ efforts to roll back the standards in state legislatures around the country.

“In those places where we saw pushback, the teachers unions did not seem to play a large role,” says one insider who did not want to be named. “Where they did make their voices known, they were not supporting bills to have the standards taken away but rather working on issues they cared most about, implementation or evaluation.”

An exception might be Tennessee, which dropped out of PARCC, at least temporarily, in June. “The people who actually have the power to block the Common Core and are exercising that power come from the right,” says Rothman. While they

may have criticized the standards, the implementation process, or the testing timeline, unions in Illinois and New York “have not done anything to stop implementation of the standards.”

The most aggressive resistance to the Common Core isn’t taking the form of direct action against the process but is coming from “social justice” liberals and progressives, who may be union members but are not by and large in charge of state or local affiliates. These small but vocal factions within the unions have exerted as much pressure as possible against the standards process, which they see as unwise and destructive. But their impact thus far has been limited.

Union leaders like Weingarten may have picked up some of the rhetoric of these advocates’ views and given them time and space to be heard, but thus far at least do not seem to have adopted their views wholesale.

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## THE CHICAGO STORY

The evolution of views on the Common Core was particularly dramatic in Chicago. Starting with the district’s 2010 rollout of the new standards, all teachers were given a physical copy of the new standards, and math and ELA teachers were asked to develop lessons. Teachers worked hard on the process, according to the Chicago Teachers Union’s (CTU) Jennifer Johnson, but were never compensated for their efforts, or even informed what was done with the lessons they prepared. At least some of them came to object to the standards implementation process and regretted having produced materials that were likely “shoved down throats of teachers at other schools.”

The local union didn’t have a position on the standards at

the beginning of the process, and focused instead on helping members learn and incorporate the new requirements. “But as the debate over Common Core became louder in the schools, leadership and staff wanted to be responsive to that,” explains Johnson. In January 2014, the local held a debate over the standards and conducted an online survey seeking input. By the time members brought a resolution against the Common Core to the House of Delegates meeting in May 2014, the sentiment was pretty clear.

“I’m pretty sure it was a unanimous vote opposing,” says Johnson. And the CTU resolution opposes the standards in their entirety, not just the tests. “It’s not picking and choosing,” according to Johnson. “You can’t separate the tests from the standards.”



anger and frustration” of these activists and possible challengers, according to union watchdog Mike Antonucci, without having to reverse itself entirely.

“The problem is,” explains Antonucci, “as with any education reform you come up with, when it’s instituted there’s a lot of pushback, and it is coming from people in the union, and so union leaders find themselves on the opposite side of a lot of their members” (see “Teachers Unions and the War Within,” *features*, Winter 2015).

### What Happens Now?

The current course may well continue: union officials express concern while continuing to work on assessments and implementation behind the scenes.

Under this scenario, the unions will continue to take foundation funding and spend down whatever remaining Gates Foundation resources that have already been received. (As of July, the Gates funding had still not all been spent.)

At least some of those who’ve been involved with the implementation process believe that things will continue this way. “I looked through the new grant opportunities language last night,” says SAP’s Alberti, referring to the revamped AFT Innovation Fund criteria. “The language is all about moving the standards forward.”

Alberti also notes that incoming NEA president Lily Eskelsen García is a staunch standards supporter, not a “shut it down” kind of president like some social-justice members



PHOTOGRAPH/RICHARD LEE COLVIN

*Lily Eskelsen García, the new president of the NEA, is a staunch standards supporter.*

bad, she says. “We need them to become increasingly strong about demanding the resources that their teachers need to do the work well. I don’t think it’s about not doing the work. I don’t think that’s a threat to the effort.”

“The biggest threat to the Common Core is not that states will pull out” under union pressures, argues Rothman. “The biggest threat is states that stay in but don’t do much to implement the standards.”

“What happens next?” responds Van Roekel. “I don’t think

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would probably have liked (see “Teacher of the Year to Union President,” *features*, Summer 2014).

Another possibility is that the standards and assessments continue to rankle teachers and that pushes the unions into taking tougher positions and actions than they have thus far. According to the 2014 *Education Next* poll, teachers’ support for the Common Core slipped from 76 percent to 46 percent in just a year (see “No Common Opinion on the Common Core,” *features*, Winter 2015). An increase in negative publicity from states already using the new assessments (like New York), or (most likely) their expanded use this spring, could prompt union leaders to change their views, as well.

“Their position has to get stronger as accountability and assessment triggers take place,” notes Alberti. That’s not all

the process will be reversed. Too many states have gone too far, many with positive experiences, so they’ll correct any flaws rather than start over. Are you going to start a whole new process? It took three to five years to get this far.”

“The unions so far, when they have stood up, it’s been for the Common Core,” explains another pro-standards insider, “but they haven’t stood up for the assessments.”

And where the timelines on implementation and uses of assessments have been relaxed, they haven’t yet played a more constructive, supportive role, either.

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