

From grant money to test backlash: How Cuomo evolved on Common Core



Cuomo. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

By KESHIA CLUKEY 5:30 a.m. | Jan. 11, 2016

ALBANY — As state education policymakers struggle to overcome the intense controversy the Common Core has generated, Gov. Andrew Cuomo has retreated from the new learning standards.

Cuomo advocated for higher education standards his 2010 campaign for governor, though he hasn't always called for the Common Core by name.

His careful wording and indirect influence over education policy, which is set by the Board of Regents, have given him the flexibility to keep some distance from the debate and step into the conversation when it suits him, as when he campaigned for reelection.

It wasn't until public frustration began to intensify, and creep into the polls, in 2014 that his language on the Common Core really began to change. By the end of 2015, he had called for a ["total reboot"](#) of the state's education system and pronounced the Common Core was "not working."

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"The headwinds started to build at the federal level as well as the state level," said Michael Borges, executive director of the New York State Association of School Business Officials. "I think the governor read the tea leaves and said, 'It's time to take a step back.'"

Others like Board of Regents chancellor Merryl Tisch — a strong backer of the Common Core standards, ushered in under her tenure — don't

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see the governor's shift as a retreat from the standards.

"He just became sensitized to the issues that we've been hearing in the field about the pace of the reform," Tisch said.

Stakeholders are looking to Cuomo's State of the State and budget address Wednesday for clarity — if, that is, he decides to broach the issue. He has mentioned the Common Core by name in just one of his five such speeches, the one he gave last year.

Cuomo's office did not respond to requests for comment on his evolving position on the standards, or whether he will address the Common Core on Wednesday.

He said last week on NY1 that the state's "failing" schools will be on the agenda but referred policy questions to the state Education Department.

"Education in this state is run by a department called the state Education Department. It is not under the governor," he said. "I wish it were."

State courts federal grants

Unlike his [drastic turnaround](#) on the use of student Common Core-aligned state test scores on teacher evaluations, Cuomo's evolution on the Common Core learning standards has been complex and gradual, influenced by a number of factors.

New York became an early adopter of the standards under former governor David Paterson, taking advantage of federal Race to the Top grant dollars as the state struggled to crawl out of the Great Recession. Cuomo touted that program, too, in his 2010 campaign and then in his first State of the State, stressing the need for "rigorous standards and assessments."

"This was linked to the governor's effort to achieve fiscal balance," said Gerald Benjamin, a professor of political science at SUNY New Paltz. "He needed federal dollars and made commitments on Common Core and teacher evaluations to get them."

The standards, implemented in the 2012-13 school year, seemed at first to be "universally popular," said Bob Lowry, deputy director of the New York State Council of School Superintendents.

"It's like buying a new car, and you think it's wonderful," he said. "Then you drive it for six months and say, 'Well, I wish this was better.'"

But immediately New York State's educators, who had been excluded from the process of developing the standards, were concerned, said Carl Korn, spokesman for New York State United Teachers, the state's largest teachers union, one of Cuomo's biggest foes.

Those teaching to the new standards were promised professional development and time to digest the new information, as well as curriculum modules districts could use to help create their own Common Core-aligned lesson plans, Korn said. But the modules came late, and many districts didn't have the funding for professional development.

"It became increasingly obvious that the implementation of the Common Core in New York had been botched, and that parents and educators did not have confidence that the Common Core standards were right for New York," he said.

Public backlash gathers steam

The Common Core became highly politicized as the state became one of the first to test students on the new standards and as student test scores were included in teacher and principal evaluations.

The rollout of so much at one time backfired, with misinformation causing public confusion, and the Common Core became the scapegoat for issues such as perceived over-testing and an unreliable teacher evaluation system.

Whatever people were frustrated with was blamed on the Common Core standards.

"It's a very good illustration of what happens when you tie too many issues together," said Heather Briccetti, president and CEO of the Business Council of New York State, which has been pro-Common Core.

Cuomo stood behind the need for higher standards but for the most part stayed mum, keeping his distance from the name Common Core.

As 2013 wore on, the state Education Department and then-commissioner John King took major heat — even [canceling public forums](#) planned as part of a state tour on the Common Core in the fall after one event's audience got particularly rowdy.

Cuomo called the standards "state-of-the-art," though he later said he'd consider "legislative changes" to address parents' concerns during the state's transition. Still, as the public discontent grew, Cuomo stood behind the standards, instead blaming the state Board of Regents for what he called their "flawed" rollout.

In Spring 2014, more than 30,000 students outside of New York City refused to take the state standardized, Common Core-aligned exams. After he launched his re-election campaign in May, Cuomo began pushing for legislative reforms.

The Common Core became a key issue in that election, with both Cuomo's Democratic primary opponent Zephyr Teachout and his Republican general election rival Rob Astorino, the Westchester County executive, campaigning against it.

Astorino created the "Stop Common Core" ballot line, after Teachout — posing a strong threat to Cuomo from the left — fared better than expected in the primary. Cuomo touted his move to exclude Common Core-aligned test scores from students' permanent records for five years.

Cuomo even vetoed one of the legislative changes that he himself had proposed — a bill to decouple teachers' evaluations from students' Common Core-aligned state test scores. The veto was a jab at the state teachers' union, which had declined to endorse a candidate in the Democratic primary amid broad support for Teachout.

"Big neon wake-up call"

Amid increasing controversy surrounding the Common Core, Cuomo stuck behind the standards in his 2015 combined State of the State and budget address. But if the testing opt-out movement were already gaining strength in 2014 amid the Common Core backlash, then April 2015 brought the onslaught.

That month, more than 20 percent of eligible third- through eighth-grade students opted not to take the state exams — one of the nation's [largest test refusal movements](#). And once again, the results from those who did take the tests showed scant gains.

Cuomo began backing off, saying the Common Core was “not working” in New York. In September, he ordered a review of the standards’ implementation, curriculum, guidance and tests, and he later appointed a task force to study the Common Core.

For Cuomo, the force of the opt-out movement had been a “big neon wake-up call,” said Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers and a former leader of New York City’s United Federation of Teachers.

“I think that he clearly evolved on these things,” she said. “It took parents basically resisting tests for the mid-course correction to happen.”

What comes next

Last month, Cuomo’s task force issued its report on the standards and their implementation, recommending the state revise its learning standards and ditch the Common Core name. In a sign of how controversial the Common Core-aligned state tests had become, the panel even recommended a moratorium on the use of those test scores in teacher and principal evaluations, even though it hadn’t been charged with making a recommendation on the issue.

“The Common Core was supposed to ensure all of our children had the education they needed to be college and career-ready — but it actually caused confusion and anxiety,” Cuomo said after the report’s release. “That ends now.”

The change in tone was striking. But pro-Common Core advocates told POLITICO New York that doesn’t mean he’s simply walked away.

The governor’s language on the Common Core has gotten “tougher” as the politics have “gotten worse,” said Stephen Sigmund, executive director of High Achievement New York, a pro-Common Core coalition of businesses and education reform groups.

“While his language on Common Core is very tough — ‘not working,’ ‘overhaul’ — the task force recommendations are in fact another change in implementation,” Sigmund said. “They include revising the standards to get New York standards, based on the Common Core, and making the kinds of improvements to the test ... that all of us have argued for.”

Tisch agreed, saying Cuomo’s change in tone reflected the dramatic opt-out numbers.

“I don’t think the governor ever, ever said to back away from the standards,” she said.

She said that changing the name of the standards, as education officials and the Common Core task force have suggested, wouldn’t amount to a retreat from them.

Most education stakeholders agree that any name change must be accompanied by significant reform. That prospect raises the question: If the state drastically [changes the standards](#) and their name, has it effectively abandoned the Common Core?

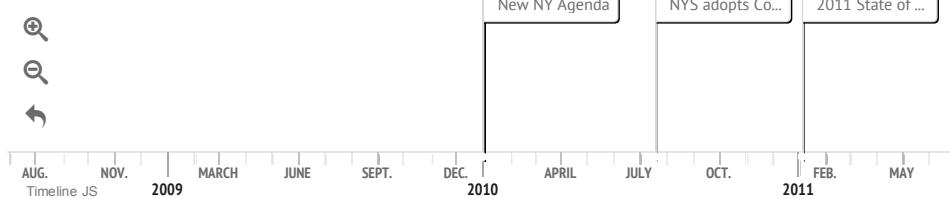
Here is a timeline of the Common Core in New York, and Cuomo’s stance on it. If you’re reading this in your inbox, click [here](#) to see it.

GOV. ANDREW CUOMO AND THE COMMON CORE

This is a timeline following Cuomo, events surrounding New York's implementation of the Common Core learning standards and his reaction to them.



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