

Tea party groups mobilizing against Common Core education overhaul

By [Peter Wallsten](#) and [Lyndsey Layton](#), Published: May 30

Tea party groups over the past few weeks have suddenly and successfully pressured Republican governors to reassess their support for a rare bipartisan initiative backed by President Obama to overhaul the nation's public schools.

Activists have donned matching T-shirts and packed buses bound for state legislative hearing rooms in Harrisburg, Pa., grilled Georgia education officials at a local Republican Party breakfast and deluged Michigan lawmakers with phone calls urging opposition to the [Common Core State Standards](#).

The [burst of activity](#) marks the newest front for the tea party movement, which has lacked a cohesive goal since it coalesced in 2010 in opposition to Obama's health-care initiative.

The movement has a renewed sense of purpose and energy following revelations that many of its groups were improperly targeted by the Internal Revenue Service, and members consider dismantling what some deride as "Obamacare" their newest cause. Unlike the health-care fight, though, organizers say the Common Core battle is winnable and could be a potential watershed moment.

"This is the issue that could change things for the tea party movement," said Lee Ann Burkholder, founder of the 9/12 Patriots in York, Pa., which drew 400 people — more than twice the usual turnout — to a recent meeting to discuss agitating against Common Core.

Lawmakers have responded by introducing legislation that would at least temporarily block the standards in at least nine states, including two that have put the program on hold. The Republican governors of Indiana and Pennsylvania quickly agreed to pause Common Core, and Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder (R), a

vocal supporter of the plan, is nevertheless expected to accept a budget agreement struck by GOP legislators that would withhold funding for the program pending further debate.

Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal (R) — who, like the other targeted governors, is facing reelection next year — said, “We didn’t see it coming with the intensity that it is, apparently all across the country.” Deal has responded by signing an executive order “reaffirming state sovereignty” over education matters, but that hasn’t stopped conservatives from trying to undo the standards.

The White House has promoted Common Core, written by governors and state education officials in both parties and largely funded by the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#), to create [consistent math and reading standards](#) from kindergarten through 12th grade. Academic standards vary widely among states, and that patchwork nature has been partly blamed for mediocre rankings of U.S. students in international comparisons.

The standards do not dictate curriculum. Rather, states decide what to teach and how to prepare children for standardized tests based on Common Core.

The standards have been fully adopted by 45 states and the District and are scheduled to be in place by 2014. Supporters fear that an eleventh-hour drop in state participation could dilute some of the potential benefits, such as the ability to compare student test scores across many states, while also creating logistical hurdles for school districts that are developing curriculum and [training teachers](#).

Tea party groups, along with some skeptical liberals, say the standards amount to a federal takeover of education in a country with a long tradition of local control over public schools.

Some conservatives have seized on an optional side project that would have made it possible for states to share student records and test results with researchers, education officials and even software developers. Supporters de-

scribed the voluntary data sharing, funded by private foundations, as a tool to help educators design effective classroom practices. But critics decried it as a Big Brother intrusion — and several states have indicated that they won't participate.

Critics also charge that Common Core was thrust onto schools with little public debate. The standards were developed by associations representing governors and school chiefs, underwritten by private funding and [propelled by the Obama administration](#) using federal grant money as an inducement. The standards were then approved by education boards rather than state legislatures, and some lawmakers sponsoring bills to rescind the program have said they had not heard of it until constituents alerted them in recent weeks.

Nevertheless, many state lawmakers are being asked to approve funding to enact the standards, including tests and classroom materials. The national cost is estimated to reach the billions.

A Republican National Committee resolution approved last month blasted Common Core as an “inappropriate overreach to standardize and control the education of our children so they will conform to a preconceived ‘normal.’ ”

Various national conservative groups also have leapt into the fray, including FreedomWorks, a tea party umbrella organization, and some state affiliates of Americans for Prosperity, an advocacy group backed by billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch.

The American Principles Project, a Washington-based conservative group, has served over the past two months as a nerve center of sorts for the anti-Common Core movement — distributing research papers and talking points to critics while helping state-level organizations establish Web sites and networks. Emmett McGroarty, a lawyer for the group, has appeared on Glenn Beck's talk show and traveled to tea party meetings nationwide. Beck and Michelle Malkin, another commentator, have been hammering away on the issue since March.

“The elites in the Republican Party and the Democratic Party don’t get this,” McGroarty said.

The rising tension is creating complications for the GOP, particularly governors, as conservative activists say they are starting to consider Common Core a new test of purity.

Despite Corbett moving last week to “pause” the initiative, Burkholder said she and other conservative organizers want him to go further and pull Pennsylvania out of the program. If he doesn’t, she said, many activists will look for a GOP primary challenger.

“If we are able to find a candidate who is pushing to keep Common Core out of Pennsylvania, then I can promise they will get traction,” Burkholder said.

The speed and ferocity of the effort to torpedo the standards has surprised the coalition of interests that has been steadily working to enact the changes, which includes leading business groups, civil rights organizations and teachers unions.

Deal averted a showdown with fellow Georgia Republicans last weekend when the lack of a quorum at the state party’s convention prevented a vote on a resolution to pull the plug on the standards.

The opposition’s momentum was evident this week in Michigan, where Republican lawmakers moved toward delaying Common Core despite entreaties from former Florida governor Jeb Bush, a respected voice within the party on education and one of the most vocal GOP champions of the new standards.

Bush, who is considering a run for president in 2016, defended Common Core during a closed-door lunch on Tuesday with state House Republicans in Lansing, then reiterated his arguments Wednesday in appearances with Snyder during a policy conference on Mackinac Island.

“Do not pull back. Please do not pull back from high, lofty standards,” Bush

said in a pleading tone. He described Common Core as a “clear and straightforward” strategy that would “allow for more innovation in the classroom, less regulation.”

“If I felt this was a federal plan or a plot to take away responsibility for how children learn from states and local communities, I would be opposed to it,” he said in an interview later.

Bush’s education foundation is developing a Web site to highlight reasons for conservatives to support the higher standards.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable also are planning a public relations blitz to defend the standards. During last month’s Master’s golf tournament, Exxon aired a commercial praising Common Core.

Proponents, though, wonder whether it’s too late. “What might have been a brush fire is now a more substantial fire,” said Margaret Spellings, education secretary under president George W. Bush.

Supporters say the new reading standards emphasize critical thinking, writing and nonfiction, including the country’s founding documents. The math standards involve fewer concepts than are typically taught in many states, but require a deeper understanding, the authors said.

The Common Core effort began about five years ago, before Obama was elected. His administration sped its adoption by requiring states to embrace “college- and career-ready” academic standards to compete for federal Race to the Top grants or to win waivers from the requirements of No Child Left Behind, the main federal education law.

States largely understood “college- and career-ready” to mean Common Core standards, although two states, Virginia and Minnesota, adopted alternative standards that the administration accepted.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan expressed frustration about the rising angst

over Common Core during an appearance last week on Capitol Hill. He rejected comments from Rep. Matt Salmon (R-Ariz.) that many of his constituents have complained that the administration used federal money to “bribe” states to accept a “federal takeover of curriculum.”

“It’s not a black helicopter ploy and we’re not trying to get inside people’s minds and brains,” Duncan replied.