

The Most Notable Education Stories of 2013

Here are some of the stories that dominated the education conversation this year—and will likely shape discussions for years to come.

Teaching Kids “Grit” (& Other Soft Skills)



Randy Snyder/AP Photo

“Selfie” might be the word of the year for the general public, but among educators and parents it’s probably “grit.” Here’s why: After several years of public attention focused largely on kids learning “hard” skills (statistics, reading comprehension, knowledge of science), so-called “soft” skills like self-restraint, resilience—and yes, grit—are [having a heyday in schools and among parents](#). University of Pennsylvania researcher Angela Duckworth just won a Macarthur “genius” grant for her work on the topic. There’s a best-selling book ([How Children Succeed](#)) explaining the benefits of soft skills. From tony Riverdale Country School to hardscrabble KIPP charters, schools around the

country are trying to encourage ([and even grade](#)) what educators have dubbed “SEL” (short for “social and emotional learning”). Along with this newfound attention has come renewed discussion about the [multi-screen distractedness](#) that seems to lower patience and focus among kids (and adults), the [effects of poverty](#) on emotional states and decision-making, and education’s tendency towards faddish and vague solutions.

Power Over Big-City School Systems Change Hands



Kathy Willens/AP Photo

Advocates of accountability and charter schools lost out in the nation’s two biggest school districts with the arrival of a new elected school board in Los Angeles and a new mayor-elect in New York City. Already, the ambitious iPad deployment in Los Angeles [has been slowed down](#), and NYC charter schools are [preparing to pay rent](#) or find their own buildings after 12 years of free space under Mayor Michael Bloomberg. If L.A. superintendent John Deasy resigns, as has [long been rumored](#) (despite a new contract) and incoming NYC mayor Bill de Blasio hires a new superintendent who makes charter schools pay rent and [rolls back annual school rating programs brought in under](#)

[Bloomberg's reign](#), the power shifts will be complete, for better or worse. Of course, de Blasio can't do much about [how hard it is to get into popular schools](#) or change state testing requirements, and the new LAUSD school board can't pay teachers more without [making class sizes larger](#).

Teach for America Becomes (Even More of) a Lightning Rod



Tulane Publications/Flickr

Now approaching its 25th year, the nonprofit program to recruit and place recent college graduates in challenging schools is even more popular (and harder to get into) than ever, but the has also become the focus of increasingly angry complaints. For years, the program has [been criticized](#) for its brief (five-week) summer training program and for its skimpy (two-year) teaching requirement. (Its [85 percent rejection rate](#) might also be cause for complaint from the nearly 50,000 people who applied this year.) The research continues to show that [Teach for America teachers do reasonably well or even sometimes better](#) compared to other similar teachers. However, veteran educators now

claim that the [program is being used](#) to push experienced teachers out (rather than fill in where certified teachers weren't available) and to advance a pro-charter agenda.

Protests have roiled expansion sites like Seattle and Minneapolis—and helped motivate some TFA alums to [hold a conference against the organization](#) last summer. The nonprofit recently Tweeted out that it was [getting used to being a scapegoat](#).

Massive School Closings In Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit



Charles Rex Arbogast/AP Photos

As if budget troubles, teacher strikes, and increasing child poverty weren't enough, three of the nation's biggest school districts underwent massive school closings this year. In Chicago alone, there were [nearly 50 schools shuttered](#) this past spring. Community members, teachers, and local politicians [protested in nearly every case](#), but district officials claimed that dwindling funding and decreased enrollments gave them little choice. So far, efforts to lure [white, middle-class parents back into these systems](#) have

not been big or powerful enough to make a numerical or qualitative difference.

Steubenville Ohio Educators Indicted



Jason Cohn/Reuters

Investigators announced [indictments against three educators](#) from the Ohio school district that has been the center of a controversial cyberbullying/date rape case—including the superintendent. None of the three were alleged to have been directly involved in the assault, but officials say they interfered with the investigation. Innocent until proven otherwise, they join the 34 Atlanta educators accused of cheating on annual tests in the 2013 Hall of Educator Shame—and re-ignite the debate over [whether high school sports play a positive or negative](#) role in public schools.

Backlash Against the Common Core



Steve Rhodes/Flickr

The state-initiated, federally-funded effort to make academic standards higher and state tests tougher ran into a small but [vocal surge of opposition](#) in 2013, including parent protests, petitions, and [even an arrest](#). The result has been [seven states](#) putting the brakes on their involvement in field testing the new exams, and a small but well-publicized increase in parents [pulling their children out](#) of standardized tests as protest. Education gadfly Diane Ravitch [has called on teachers](#) to join the protests by refusing to teach using Common Core materials or to administer any of the new tests this spring. Governors, state education chiefs, and Obama education secretary Arne Duncan remain strongly supportive of the new initiative, by and large. However, Duncan spent two weeks recently apologizing for having denounced scared “[white suburban moms](#)” for opposing the effort—[not the first time](#) he has stuck his foot in his mouth. Meanwhile, most states continue implementing the Core in classrooms —[some of them are in their second or third year](#).

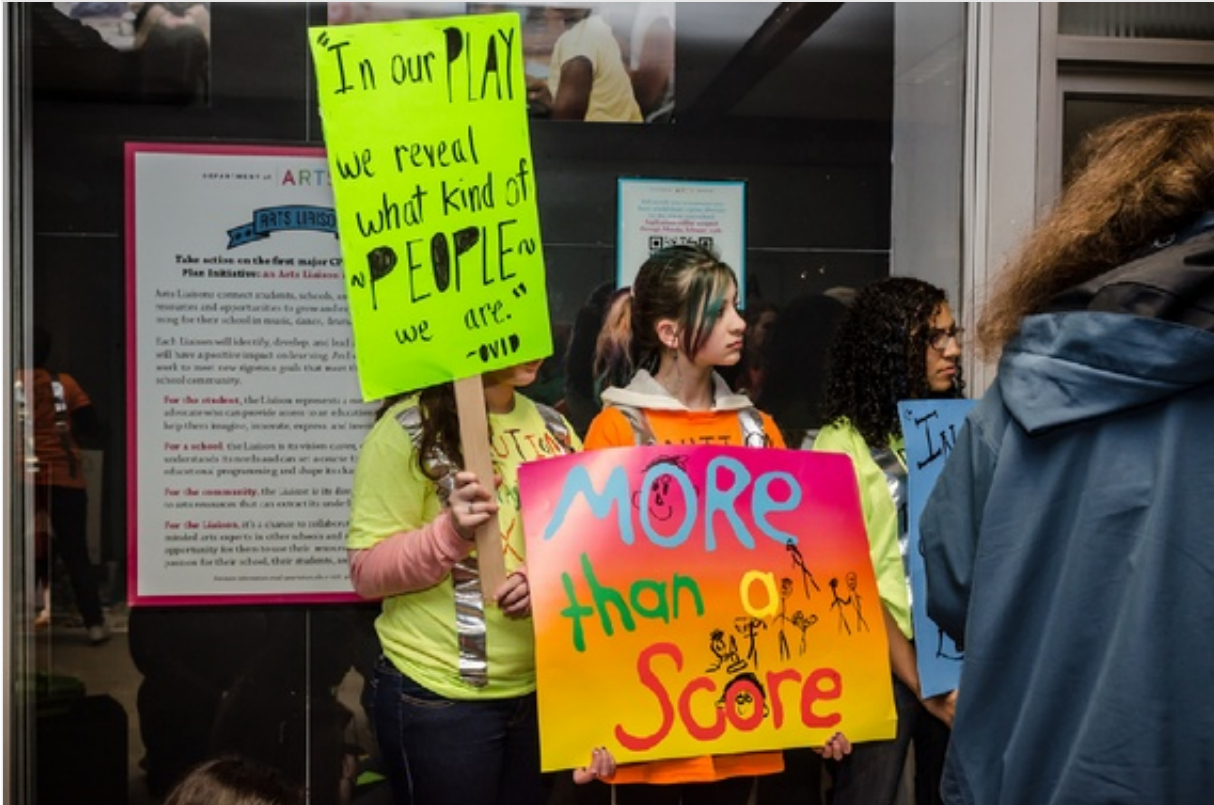
EdTech Thrives/Stumbles



John Bazemore/Flickr

While educators' interest in edtech continues to grow—tablet purchases (most of them iPads) were up nearly 50 percent in 2013— the setbacks nearly matched the momentum. Ambitious tablet deployment efforts have [stumbled in Los Angeles](#) (where students hacked their iPads) and Guilford County (North Carolina) where officials have halted the use of malfunctioning Asus tablets [using learning software developed by Rupert Murdoch](#)'s education division. One of the founders of the online and generally free course movement (known as MOOCs) revealed that [few students who signed up for the courses actually took and passed them](#). Much-admired edtech startup Tutorspree.com [shuttered its virtual doors](#). Most schools are wired, but [few have schoolwide wifi](#) or enough bandwidth to allow everyone to be connected at the same time. Good news may be on the horizon, however: Google devices and software are beginning to make the education tablet market more competitive, and the President has [begun pushing](#) to give more schools high-capacity wireless.

Parents Opting Out of Standardized Testing



Sierraromeo/Flickr

Protesting against test proliferation, excessive test prep, and controversial uses of test results to rate teachers and schools, a [small but vocal group of parents](#) have begun withdrawing their children from some or all standardized tests. The “opt-out” movement hopes to force schools to rethink their testing programs. In a handful of cases—Texas, Chicago, Tulsa, and New York State—their efforts have generated a testing rollback. Critics note that regular assessments are necessary parts of making U.S. schools better, and that poor, minority, and special needs students have benefitted in particular from external accountability provided by testing. Some states like Tennessee and Washington D.C. that put strong emphasis on test scores [saw improved results](#) in the latest round of national testing. However, testing opponents say that test prep has taken over their children’s classrooms and that test results are wrongly being used to make high-stakes decisions about teachers and schools.

Sequestration/Shutdown/Head Start



Brian Snyder/Reuters

Sequestration—the across the board trimming of federal spending required when politicians couldn't agree on annual spending levels—became a fact of life in 2013. Education and social safety net programs focused on the poor were [particularly affected](#), especially given the rise in child poverty and continuing joblessness among many parents. The government shutdown that followed was particularly hard on programs like Head Start that rely primarily on federal funding to stay open. Businessman and philanthropist John Arnold [donated \\$10 million](#) to help prevent some Head Start centers from shutting down and was thanked for his efforts by an angry blog post from Ravitch (who later apologized). The shutdown was also a vivid civics lesson over [how NOT to run the government](#).