

Fight over Common Core testing roils Louisiana state government

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A conflict over the implementation of Common Core testing standards in Louisiana schools has gripped the state's government in Baton Rouge for the past several months. The official debate is divided into charter school backers, who support Common Core as a means to convert public schools into privately-run charter schools, and right-wing Tea Party elements, whipped up and supported by governor Bobby Jindal and other sections of the Republican right, who oppose any federal spending on education at all.

On Tuesday, a state judge ordered Governor Jindal's suspension of Common Core lifted, as part of an ongoing lawsuit against the governor by the Choice Foundation, a charter school group based in New Orleans, joined late last month by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). Jindal had vetoed Common Core in June after the state legislature voted to approve the new standards, and signed two executive orders prohibiting its implementation.

Judge Todd Hernandez, while noting that the judiciary should "rarely, if ever" intervene when the executive branch "[claims] to be acting within its statutory authority," cited the "anxiety and harm" caused by the "state of unknown" created by the governor going into the new school year this month as being sufficient cause to overturn the executive orders. The lawsuit is expected to proceed to a full trial in the coming weeks.

The case is one of three separate lawsuits filed last month over Common Core. The Jindal administration and a group of 17 state legislators also filed separate lawsuits against BESE and state Superintendent of Education John White. The latter suit floundered last week when a state judge threw out the legislators' request that Common Core be blocked on

the grounds that BESE had violated the state's open meetings law.

The current crisis, which has gripped the state government for most of the year, began when the state legislature took up the issue of implementing Common Core this spring. Previously, like all but 4 out of 50 states, Louisiana's state government had nearly unanimously backed the Common Core testing standards. Jindal himself had signed the first legislation governing Common Core in 2010.

However, the issue has since become a *cause celebre* within right-wing Tea Party groups, who oppose it on the most unhinged states' rights grounds. The Tea Party of Louisiana, for example, declares on its website that "Common Core is total federalized control of education, indoctrination and socialism." The issue was re-opened in the 2014 session, and Jindal, to the shock of many political insiders, suddenly reversed himself, eager to curry favor among Tea Party groups. Jindal quickly found himself at odds with the majority of the state's politicians, including Superintendent White, whom Jindal had appointed in 2012, and BESE, of which 3 of its 11 members are appointed by the governor.

The Common Core testing standards, like all "accountability"-driven testing schemes, are designed to push public schools deemed to be failing into charter-oriented "restructuring." Bankrolled to the tune of \$200 million by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, a leading "charity" front for the charter school movement, and backed to the hilt by the Obama administration, Common Core was adopted in 46 states by 2010. The implementation of the new testing standards was accompanied by virtually no public discussion, and in many cases no official votes in the state legislatures at all.

The push for Common Core was designed by the Obama administration and the Gates foundation to insulate state governments from right-wing states' rights arguments, a stumbling block in previous attempts to create national testing standards. However, backlash from Tea Party groups has begun to mount in the past year, prompting Indiana, Oklahoma and South Carolina to withdraw from Common Core in 2014.

Louisiana has been the tip of the spear of the charter school movement since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, with BESE and the state's Superintendent of Education playing a leading role. In the aftermath of the storm, the state-run Recovery School District (RSD), overseen by BESE and administered by the state Board of Education, took over virtually the entirety of the city's school system, in order to efficiently turn it over to charter operators without public oversight. Today, the RSD in New Orleans, which controls all but a handful of public schools in the city, is the nation's first major charter-only school district.

The push for charter schools has broad bipartisan support, from the Obama administration to Louisiana Democrats, who passed the law creating the Recovery School District in 2003. Oprah Winfrey, a strong backer of the Obama Administration, developed a reality television show, entitled "Blackboard Wars," portraying the charter administration at John McDonogh High School in New Orleans as philanthropists attempting to lift up the school's impoverished students, portrayed as little better than animals and future felons. John McDonogh High School has since closed down, having been unable to find a charter operator for the 2014-2015 school year.

Political commentators have largely interpreted Jindal's sudden about-face as being motivated by his national political ambitions. Indeed, Jindal has been groomed as potential Republican presidential candidate for several years. He is currently the vice-chair of the Republican Governors' Association, and delivered the Republican response to Obama's State of the Union address in 2009.

Jindal himself has tacitly acknowledged the hopelessness of his position on Common Core, suggesting his purely political motives, declaring that he would ultimately need the support of BESE and the state legislature to permanently overturn Common Core, a political impossibility. Jindal undoubtedly

seeks to harness the power of the Republican right wing in order to boost his national credentials.



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