Hillary Clinton has a Common Core problem

The presidential candidate’s support for the teaching standards will alienate Democratic parents and educators
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Up to now, the Common Core battle has primarily raged within the Republican Party. Business elites favor the education standards and think that they will raise America’s status in the global economy. But the grassroots believe that they represent federal overreach and make schools worse. Republican presidential candidates face the dilemma of appealing to potential donors or voters on the Common Core question.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, for example, recently announced that his state was pulling out of the Common Core. “We have to reject federal control of New Jersey’s education,” he said. “We need to return it to the parents and students who will ultimately have the most at stake.” At the same time, Christie reaffirmed his commitment to PARCC, the Common Core test whose results determine if teachers or administrators lose their jobs. Christie’s balancing act failed to appease parents who do not want their children subject to the standards and aligned curricula and tests.

Because Hillary Clinton has such a large lead among candidates for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination, she has not yet had to take a definitive stand on the Common Core. She indicated her position, however, at a recent education roundtable in Iowa. A teacher said that the Common Core is “a wonderful step in the right direction of improving American education” but that it has been painful to
see it attacked. The teacher asked what Clinton would do to bring “that heart back to education.”

Clinton agreed that the attacks were painful and that the Common Core started off as a bipartisan — or rather, nonpartisan — endeavor. Its goal, she said, was to “to come up with a core of learning that we might expect students to achieve across our country.” In other words, Clinton believes the idea of the Common Core is good. She is proud of her vote, as New York senator, for No Child Left Behind, the 2001 act that committed America to standards-based reform that the Obama administration has continued.

But the story behind Common Core is more complicated and the objections more serious than Clinton acknowledges. And it’s what ensures that the issue, far from going away soon, will provide Democratic politicians with headaches of their own.

**The devil is in the details**

Much of this tangled backstory is explicated in Louisiana teacher and researcher Mercedes Schneider’s new book on the history, development and intention of the Common Core.

The backdrop to the Common Core is a 1996 education summit, during which governors such as James Hunt (North Carolina) and Tommy Thompson (Wisconsin) and CEOs such as John Pepper (Proctor and Gamble) and Louis Gerstner (IBM) formed a nonprofit organization called Achieve, Inc. When two trade organizations — the National Governor’s Association and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) — took up the project of national education standards, they entrusted Achieve, Inc., led by Michael Cohen, former Assistant Secretary of Education during the Bill Clinton administration, to coordinate the effort.

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The makeup of this first meeting illustrates the fundamental concern that many education activists have: not whether the Common Core was promoted by Republicans or Democrats, but rather that it has been led by business and political elites who want to circumvent the democratic process to impose their educational vision on the country.

And who wrote the standards? There were 24 members of the Standards Development Work Group, mostly composed of representatives from testing companies such as ACT and College Board as well as textbook publishers such as Pearson and McGraw-Hill. But the lead writers of the English Language Arts (ELA) and math standards were, respectively, David Coleman and Jason Zimba.

Coleman and Zimba have minimal K-12 classroom teaching experience. Nor have any of the other members of the 24-person work group ever taught in elementary school or instructed children with disabilities or English language learners. In Schneider’s words, they are like cookbook writers who have never prepared a meal, and it is no surprise that parents and researchers across the country are protesting the results.

As for how the Common Core was adopted, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan used funds from the 2009 stimulus package to run a competitive grant program called Race to the Top. To have a realistic chance to win, a governor and a state superintendent of education had to sign a memorandum of understanding to use the Common Core, which nearly all did in 2010, before the standards were even finalized.

Bill and Melinda Gates also played a key role in the Common Core. After meeting with Coleman and CCSSO head Gene Wilhoit in the summer of 2008, the Gateses agreed to fund the creation of the standards and the promotion of the Common Core by entities such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, The Hunt Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Harvard University and the National Association of State Boards of Education.
In sum, educators or states have not led the Common Core. It has been, in Schneider’s words, “a tool of control in the hands of a privileged, well-connected and amply financed few.”

**The revolt of the masses**

Despite the Gates Foundation’s massive public relations push for the Common Core, the tide of public opinion is going the other way. Teacher support for it is **plummeting**, and this spring more than 155,000 New York students **boycotted** the Common Core exams. Democrat Zephyr Teachout ran a surprisingly competitive campaign against incumbent Andrew Cuomo in the 2015 gubernatorial primary, and one of her main **planks** was opposition to the Common Core.

As with the Republicans, the Democratic base is turning against the Common Core.

Clinton thus faces a choice. She could side with the business interests that want to see the Common Core implemented come hell or high-water. (The Gates Foundation is the single **largest** contributor to the Clinton Foundation, and the Clintons have long supported standards-based reform.) Or, she could side with the teachers and parents who see that the standards lead to adverse educational consequences, particularly for early grade students, children with disabilities and English language learners.

But Clinton cannot expect Democratic parents and educators to campaign for her if she continues to support the disastrous Common Core experiment.

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*The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America’s editorial policy.*