

# The Atlantic

## What Kentucky Can Teach the Rest of the U.S. About the Common Core

Three years ago, it became the first state to adopt the new, tougher K-12 standards

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TEXT SIZE



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LOUISVILLE, Ky.—Freshmen in Kate Barrows’ English class at Liberty High School, an alternative school in Louisville, were trying to solve a crime. A

wealthy man had received a letter demanding money, or else his daughter would be kidnapped. Barrows guided the students through a series of questions to identify the extortionist.

Was the writer male or female? They thought female: The writer asked for the money in a “pretty blue pocketbook.” Could it have been a professional gangster? A gangster would just rob you and wouldn’t bother with threatening notes, the class decided.

The exercise was a lighthearted way to demonstrate how Barrows will expect her students to read more difficult texts later in the year. “We’re going to keep looking at this page of writing, and we’re going to tear it apart,” Barrows said.

In Karen Cash’s Algebra 2 class down the hall, students cut grid paper to make boxes, graphed the volume of the shapes they created, and wrote algebraic equations based on the patterns. Liberty’s math department has made it a point to have students work through the mathematical process on their own instead of listening to lectures. Students have a checklist to go through when they can’t solve a problem, before turning to the old default of asking a teacher. Questions on the checklist include: What information does the problem give us? Can we draw a picture?

Liberty’s emphasis on inquiry-based learning is relatively new, and it comes courtesy of the Common Core State Standards, which Kentucky adopted three years ago. Since then, Barrows, Cash, and other teachers across the state have focused on new concepts and trained in new teaching methods. Yet, Kentucky has still not seen a substantial increase in test scores—the yardstick that the success of the new standards will ultimately be measured on.

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In fall 2010, Kentucky became the first of 45 states to adopt the Common Core, making the state a test case for the standards. So far, Kentucky's experience over the past three school years suggests it will be a slow and potentially frustrating road ahead for the other states that are using the Common Core. Test scores are still dismal, and state officials have expressed concern that the pace of improvement is not fast enough. Districts have also seen varying success in changing how teachers teach, something that was supposed to change under the new standards.

The National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, two nonprofit coalitions, developed the Common Core in 2009 and 2010 out of a concern that the United States was falling behind on international measures of student achievement and stagnating on its own benchmarks of success, like the National Assessment of Education Progress.

“To maintain America's competitive edge, we need for all our students to be prepared and ready to compete with students from around the world,” NGA Vice Chair Vermont Gov. Jim Douglas said when the initiative was announced in June of 2009. “Common standards that allow us to internationally benchmark our students' performance with other top countries have the potential to bring about a real and meaningful transformation of our education system.”

The groups hired experts from universities, testing groups ACT, Inc. and College Board, and other nonprofits to write the standards, and committees of educators reviewed and validated their work.

Common Core architects promised it would fundamentally change teaching and learning. “The day has come for both mathematics and language arts. What sits before the governors is the greatest opportunity we have to improve learning in these two areas,” William Schmidt, a Michigan State University Professor who helped review math standards, said in June 2010.

“This truly could be the turning point for education reform in the United States.”

Not only would the standards be much more difficult than those in place in many states, they would move away from rote memorization. In math, students would be more responsible for showing their work and applying formulas rather than just memorizing them. In English, an emphasis would be placed on detailed critiques of readings and forming arguments based on evidence, not opinions. Teachers would transition from lecturing to facilitating student discussions.

In 2009, Education Secretary Arne Duncan called on states to “raise the bar dramatically in terms of higher standards.” The Obama administration gave out grants and waivers from federal requirements under the No Child Left Behind law to states that adopted more rigorous standards, which most states interpreted as the Common Core. Duncan called the Common Core standards “an important step toward the improvement of quality education nationwide” when they were released and pledged to “support state implementation efforts” with federal funds.

A bipartisan group of high-profile education leaders—including former governors Jeb Bush of Florida and Mitch Daniels of Indiana, both Republicans, and Democratic governors Andrew Cuomo of New York and Deval Patrick of Massachusetts—have also championed the Common Core.

“There are a lot of people that believe that somehow this is a national takeover of what is the domain of local and state governments,” Bush said in a September speech to the National Press Club. “But in fact, these are 45 states that have voluntarily come together to create fewer, higher, deeper standards that, when you benchmark them to the best of the world, they are world class.”

Critics have raised concerns about the content of the standards themselves, however. For instance, the English standards call for more informational texts to be read and analyzed in all classes, including science and social studies. Some educators, like Sandra Stotsky, who worked on Massachusetts's acclaimed standards, worry the emphasis will decrease the amount of time studying great literature and important concepts in other subjects.

“If a science teacher is trying to teach a chemistry lab, what do you want them to do?” she said. “Give them a book on Madame Curie?”

For Kentucky, the standards represented an opportunity to aim again for a long-time goal. Educators had hoped for years to compete with states like Massachusetts and Minnesota, the country's education elite. Two decades earlier, the state had undertaken an ambitious education overhaul, the Kentucky Education Reform Act, which introduced new standards and assessments. But the reforms failed to catapult the state to the top. Kentucky students continued to be mediocre on national exams. A report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative think tank, gave Kentucky's old math and English standards a D. Only 11 other states were rated as poorly or worse in both subjects.

In April 2009 a state law mandated that Kentucky develop more rigorous educational standards. Shortly after, the architects of the Common Core began working on their new standards. Kentucky expressed interest early on, and officials and educators gave feedback often. In 2010, although the standards had not yet been completed, the state board of education voted to adopt them. The finished Common Core standards received an A- in math and B+ in English from the Fordham report.

“Our teachers are going to need a lot of help. It's hard work, but it's the right work, at the right time, for the right people,” Kentucky education

commissioner Terry Holliday said in a video-taped interview in 2011.

“It will help level the playing field with other states,” said Kelly Sprinkles, superintendent of Knox County Public Schools in southeastern Kentucky. “We have more distance to travel, but Common Core will help us get there.”

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Common Core comes with a slew of state mandates about content and emphasizes testing as a measure of school success. While some schools and teachers, like the ones at Liberty, have fully bought into the changes and have access to resources to help them make those changes happen, in other places Common Core is seen as more of a top-down content shift.

“It’s kind of like rearranging the deck chairs on a very big boat,” fourth-grade teacher Justin Elliott, from Engelhard Elementary School in Louisville, said. “Sometimes the way we use Common Core puts us further down the right path, and sometimes the way we use the Common Core turns into a way to know, ‘Okay, what am I going to drill them on this week?’”

At nearly every grade level in Kentucky, Common Core introduces content to students at a younger age than the old standards did. For example, in math, the order of operations used to be covered late in the year in sixth grade; under the Common Core, fifth graders start with it on day one.

“They’re still having trouble mastering the basics and you’re trying to add stuff on top,” said Jason Cornett, a math teacher at Flat Lick Elementary School in Knox County. “Over all [Common Core] is a positive change, but it’s been hard on some of the kids in the middle of the transition.”

Knox County, an isolated, rural district in the Appalachian Mountains with a 16 percent unemployment rate, is the kind of low-performing district that officials hope Common Core will pull up. At Flat Lick, the district’s poorest

elementary school, 89 percent of students qualify for free- or reduced-priced lunch. Attendance rates are always highest on Friday, when the school gives out backpacks full of free food to students.

The district has traditionally been among the lowest performing in the state; in 2013, the district scored in the 20th percentile statewide on standardized tests.

The state hosted a series of regional trainings in 2010, where representatives from school districts could learn how to teach their colleagues about the new standards. No extra funding has been allocated to districts to help them prepare for Common Core, though.

Knox County, which is about two hours away from the nearest urban area, sent a few teachers to the training, but is doing the bulk of the transition work in-house. The district has used grant money from state and local sources to pay teachers to compare Common Core to the state's old standards, revise the district's curricula, and identify gaps in content.

Flat Lick, like other schools in Knox County, relies primarily on one-on-one interventions to make up the difference between Common Core and the old standards. Teachers meet weekly to determine which students need extra help and small groups of students are frequently pulled out of class. But the effort is difficult to sustain. The school has lost a math resource teacher, and drops in Title I funding threaten the school's ability to do more remediation even as students struggle with basic arithmetic.

The transition to Common Core has been less noticeable at Knox's highest performing school. Jesse D. Lay Elementary School's students are mostly working class, and the school ranked in the 69th percentile on Kentucky's 2013 tests.

Sheila Terrell, Lay's curriculum director, and her principal, Jeff Frost, compared Common Core to using a new textbook and said it's led to only minor changes in how their teachers operate in the classroom. They comply with all state laws and mandates, but don't feel like an overhaul of their classroom teaching is necessary. Lay already has good teachers, they say, and good teaching is good teaching.

Superintendent Sprinkles expects a more dramatic shift for most schools, though. "There's no way a teacher can teach the old way—stand and deliver," he said.

Still in transition, the district is a mix of old and new. In a classroom at Knox Central High School this August, Victoria Pope was guiding her Advanced Placement U.S. Literature students through William Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation," a lesson she teaches every year. Students sat in rows, their heads bowed over thick textbooks, and took turns reading out loud. Pope perched on a stool at the front of the room occasionally interjecting with questions—"Why would he want you to know there was a guy on the ship who made fun of him?"—and comments—"He's telling you he fixed a beam. He wants you to know he's self-sufficient."

Across the hallway, Rachel Hibbard was experimenting with a new way of teaching English. She introduced her sophomores to the rhetorical triangle, a lens used to analyze different kinds of arguments, with a Ram truck commercial. Under Common Core, the rhetorical triangle concept will be a cornerstone of 10th grade as students are asked to think critically about the relationship between audience and message and to construct arguments on their own. Students were actively answering her questions and chiming in with some of their own.

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The first tests based on the Common Core standards were administered in Kentucky in spring of 2012, at the end of the first year of full implementation. Testing the harder standards produced worse results. Proficiency ratings were about 30 percentage points lower than they had been the year before. The same drop was seen in New York this spring when it became the second state to test under the new standards. Common Core supporters say the results are a necessary growing pain of shifting to more difficult, but still realistic expectations of students. David Coleman, one of the Common Core architects, told *The Atlantic* last year that states who use the standards should expect “a short-term reduction in [test] scores.”

The news was only slightly better for Kentucky this year. “Overall, the math and reading scores in grade 3 through 8 and high school did go up, but the concerns we have is that they did not go up fast enough,” Holliday said at a September press conference announcing the new results. Statewide only about 40 percent of students scored at least proficient in math and about 50 percent in reading. And the gap has increased between the percentage of white students who are proficient and the percentage of African Americans.

Opponents have become more vocal. A group of Kentuckians is attempting to follow Ohio’s lead and get a bill introduced to repeal the standards. In June, the board of education felt the need to pass a resolution reaffirming its support for the Common Core.

The mix of educator responses to Common Core in Kentucky—and the still-lackluster test scores—suggest it won’t lead to an instant revolution, in Kentucky or elsewhere. The standards have to contend with the skill level of students and declining school budgets, which allow for limited education resources to help them catch up. Common Core also has to win the respect of skeptical educators who have seen waves of education reform before. And incremental progress provides openings for opponents to make their case

against the standards and erode support among an American public that's still unfamiliar and confused about what they are.

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*This story was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education-news outlet based at Teachers College, Columbia University.*

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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**EDUCATION** JANUARY 3, 2011 12:00 AM

# Fayette schools ramp up foreign language studies in earliest grades



By Linda B. Blackford - [lblackford@herald-leader.com](mailto:lblackford@herald-leader.com)

It's before the long holiday break, and Miko Momozono is charming a difficult-to-captivate class of second-graders at Picadome Elementary, not with a story or a movie, but with the simple act of counting. In Japanese.

She holds up the letters in Kanji characters and waits to pick from the frantic forest of waving hands of kids who want to answer.

She speaks to them only in Japanese, and they clearly understand her. Since they were in kindergarten, they've been taking 20 minutes a day of Japanese as part of Fayette County's growing foreign language programs.

It's grown so much that children in 21 elementary schools now have foreign language instruction of some kind. It's part of the district's emphasis on getting languages to children when it's easiest for them to learn.

"We know there is a window when children are most open to picking up different languages," says Alicia Vinson, Fayette County's language coordinator. "That is what we're trying to do here — open their minds to a different language and a different culture."

The longtime Spanish immersion program at Maxwell Elementary has been expanded to Liberty Elementary. In addition, thanks to federal grants and some allocations from the school board, 12 elementary schools have added some instruction in either Spanish, French, Chinese or Japanese. Three middle schools have added programs this year alone. Five middle schools offer Chinese, which has also been added to some of the high school's language programs.

School councils can decide how to implement the instruction, but Vinson said the Picadome model is working well.

In 2007, Picadome hired one teacher to start teaching Japanese to kindergarten students. Each year, they've added a grade. Now Momozono is teaching third-graders who are starting their fourth year of Japanese. She teaches all students for 20 minutes a day, which makes for some hurried times pushing her wheeled easel from class to class. But Principal Daria Sims says that keeps the language fresher than if students had class once a week.

"We can see such a big difference," Sims said.

Momozono also gives brief Japanese lessons to Picadome's teachers at their faculty meetings.

The push has come most of all from Superintendent Stu Silberman, who first started making waves as an educator more than a decade ago in Daviess County, when he mandated Spanish classes at all 12 elementary schools.

He based the decision on brain research, which showed that exposure to art, music and foreign language in the early years created better pathways for other kinds of learning, too.

When he moved to Fayette County in 2004, the emphasis on languages came along.

"It's a critical piece for overall brain development," Silberman said. "We've moved into so much more of a global society that having that second and third language is a great advantage to our kids."

Fayette is working with the University of Kentucky's Confucius Institute on the now extensive Chinese instruction.

"The feedback from families is very, very strong, also," Silberman said. "It's about schools doing the right things for kids. I would love to see every single student starting off working on a second language."

Back at Picadome, second-grade teacher Erin Porter likes the quick daily immersion into Japanese. She also likes Momozono's emphasis on Japanese life.

"What I love is that Miko really emphasizes the culture," Porter said. "As a teacher who wants her students to have more of an open mind, it's nice for them to hear there's another way of doing things."

Porter also says that because Momozono rarely breaks out of Japanese, the children have to work harder.

"They have to focus on what she's doing, and plug some things together to figure out what she's saying," Porter said.

Her students seem to enjoy it. Second-grader Anne Jeong, who is Korean, says she really likes her Japanese and wants to learn other languages.

"I like learning about all the things they do there," Jeong said. "It's fun."



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# Kentucky school tops national rankings again

Matthew Glowicki, The (Louisville, Ky.) Courier-Journal 7:27 p.m. EDT September 10, 2014



(Photo: Brian Powers, The (Louisville, Ky.) Courier-Journal)

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — For the third year in a row, a Kentucky high school has been

[ranked the best in the nation \(/story/news/education/2014/09/10/gatton-academy-atop-national-rankings/15355815/\).](/story/news/education/2014/09/10/gatton-academy-atop-national-rankings/15355815/)

The Carol Martin Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science in Bowling Green topped a list by news website The Daily Beast of the 754 best high schools in the United States.

And by all accounts, the distinction is a welcomed accolade born of hard work — not award chasing.

"It's a thrill to be a three-peat," said Julia Roberts, executive director.

Roberts has been with the Gatton Academy since its start in 2007 when it was lauded as a "beacon of excellence" by state and Western Kentucky University officials who wanted to challenge and inspire gifted students from across the state.



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She said the school's supportive focus on students and its "economical" partnership with WKU that allows it to tap into campus resources such as professors and programming helps Gatton Academy stand out.

"It has exceeded any expectations that anyone could have," she said. "The research that they're doing is outstanding at any level, much less as juniors and seniors in high school."

The academy is part boarding school, part high school and part university. It selectively draws high school juniors and seniors from across Kentucky — admitting 20 percent of applicants from 113 of the state's 120 counties — with a passion for math and science.

Students take science, technology, engineering and math focused coursework taught by WKU professors in WKU classrooms along with traditional undergraduate students — all financially supported by the state.

Jane Clarenbach, director of public education for the National Association for Gifted Children, said one of the biggest benefits of schools like Gatton is their ability to offer access to advanced academics to students, regardless of financial means or hometown. As a newer statewide public school, she said, Gatton was able to learn from existing successful programs.

Ranking Gatton, which operates as a statewide school district, alongside schools with limited districts is clearly not comparing apples to apples, she said.

"That doesn't make the high school a bad high school or a less quality high school," she said. "It just means they've done what they can do for gifted students. It's not about comparing the two in my mind."

Seniors Josh Stewart and Kelly McKenna, both from Crestwood, said they chose Gatton because Advanced Placement and honors classes at their home high schools weren't challenging.

McKenna entered Gatton with an interest in math, but soon developed a passion for computer science. She plans to major in chemical engineering. Last year, Stewart conducted research in a WKU professor's lab and presented his findings at a national conference this summer. He plans to attend medical school to become a surgeon.

The two recently returned from taking an English course in England, which is one of the international experiences the school offers.

McKenna and Stewart said Gatton's national rankings don't put pressure on them because their focus isn't on rankings.

"Of course, we're not regular high school students, but at the same time we're just going through high school and doing our coursework," McKenna said.

"Most of us here feel like being number one is less of a goal we set to achieve," Stewart added. "It's more of a result of all the hard work we do. The rankings aren't always on our minds."

The national rankings will, however, help Stewart's college applications stand out from the rest, he said.

Lynette Breedlove, Gatton Academy director, joined the school in July. She said the award is an honor that comes with an unstated, undercurrent of pressure.

"It's important that that doesn't become our focus," Breedlove said, "that our decisions are always made on what our students' needs are."

Fourteen other states have a state-supported high school like Gatton, Roberts said.

"It's an economic development strategy to develop the talent we have in this state," she said.

Isaac Kresse graduated from Gatton this year and is now a freshman majoring in chemistry at Northeastern University in Boston.

He said he's not surprised by Gatton's national recognition.

"Some people would argue Gatton cherry picks the best students and puts them in one school," Kresse said. "I would argue it's much more than that."

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