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Zimpher: Common ground on Common Core

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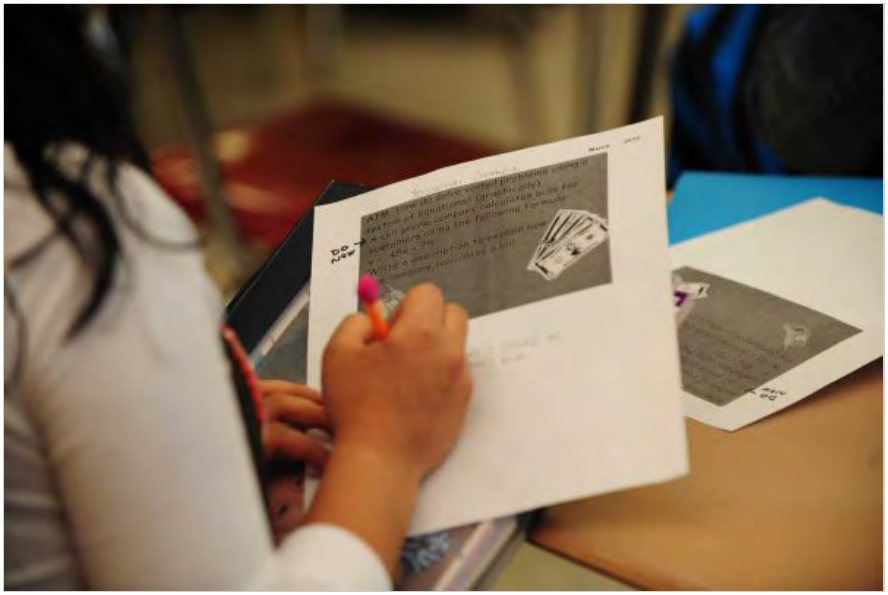
By NANCY L. ZIMPHER



A student works on a problem in a 9th grade Integrated Algebra class at Freeport High school where the lessons are based on the Common Core standards. (March 7, 2012) (Credit: Newsday / Karen Wiles Stabile)

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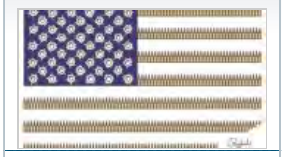

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For too many New Yorkers, the term Common Core has been hijacked. What should stand for preparing today's students for college and skilled careers in the global economy has become distorted, vilified and, more troubling, politicized.

Students and their peers across the state participated last week in an annual April ritual: state exams. But this year the familiar routine was disrupted by parents who held their children out of the tests to protest the new rigorous Common Core standards.

Common Core has been adopted nationwide by the District of Columbia and 44 states on a bipartisan basis, with Republican and Democratic governors adopting the rigorous new standards.

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Raising standards in our classrooms isn't a regional or partisan issue; it's a common sense one. That's why Common Core and its standards are supported by groups across the spectrum including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and the National Parent Teacher Association.

The flurry of media stories about the boycott far outnumbers the parents who actually held their children out. But the debate and hype suggest a question worth answering: What is Common Core and why should we use it?

For too long, inadequate state bubble tests have undermined our confidence in state-mandated exams. They tested to the lowest common denominator and gave us little real insight into how our students stack up against their peers across the country, let alone across the globe.

But the Common Core is different. It encourages us to teach skills students need to succeed in college and beyond. Students are required to think creatively, write at length, and explain their reasoning. By preparing for the new standards, students are becoming better problem solvers and critical thinkers -- rather than better test takers.

And that will make New York students more competitive for college and for jobs. Our colleges and universities spend millions to remediate students who are not college- and career-ready. Across the state, one-third of high school graduates are not college-ready, leading far too many to fail to graduate on time, or at all, and exacerbating student debt and loan defaults.

It's not right to put kids on a path of failure.

By giving high schoolers the tools they need to succeed in college, Common Core can help break this troubling cycle while allowing vital public education dollars to be spent in a more meaningful and effective way.

Starting in 2016, success on the SAT will be drawing on Common Core standards. If we choose to ignore the problem and retreat from high standards, our children will not be able to compete at the same level, putting them at a major disadvantage.

In my experience, many parents and educators have embraced the new standards. That's not to say there aren't legitimate complaints. To many, the way Common Core standards were introduced caused unnecessary confusion, frustration, and anxiety among students, parents, and teachers.

Thus, the problem isn't the Common Core -- it was the execution.

Withdrawing from the globally aligned Common Core standards would leave New York students lagging behind not only the rest of the country but also the rest of the world.

The sensible solution is to find common ground to fix Common Core rather than abandon it.

Under Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's leadership, and with the leadership of the State Legislature, the

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state did just that last week when it enacted a set of reforms that maintain high standards for our students while reducing stress.

Standardized tests will be banned in pre-kindergarten through second grade. For the first time, the time classrooms spend on standardized testing and test prep will be limited. And teachers will receive the extra help they need to make the transition to Common Core.

New York has been a national leader in education. This is no time to fall behind. These common sense reforms will ensure that New York continues to lead.

Nancy Zimpher is chancellor of State University of New York.

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