

January 2013 (rev. May 2013)

The Common Core: A Poor Choice for States

by Joy Pullmann*

Introduction

In 2010, every state but Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia adopted Common Core education standards, a set of requirements for what elementary and secondary school children should know in each grade in math and English language arts. Approximately 80 percent of the public does not know about

Common Core education standards,¹ even though they comprise a dramatic centralization of authority over the nation's historically decentralized K-12 education system.

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The public's lack of knowledge is troubling because what is taught in public schools is of fundamental importance to the country's democracy, individual freedom, and prosperity.² Public dialogue on Common Core is necessary to ensure high quality and that special-interest groups don't co-opt the process to teach lessons that are tainted by ideology and other agendas. The notorious Russian communist Vladimir Lenin³ knew the power of controlling schools. He once said, "Give me four years to teach the children and the seed I have sown will never be uprooted."⁴

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¹ "Growing Awareness, Growing Support: Teacher and Voter Understanding of the Common Core State Standards & Assessments," Achieve, Inc., June 2012, www.achieve.org/files/GrowingAwarenessGrowingSupportreportFINAL72012.pdf.

² Joseph Bast, "Education in the U.S. and How to Improve It," *Somewhat Reasonable*, February 25, 2013, <http://blog.heartland.org/2013/02/education-in-the-u-s-and-how-to-improve-it/>.

³ Lenin killed between 6 and 8 million people by execution or starvation by deliberately causing famines. See <http://necrometrics.com/20c5m.htm>.

⁴ Vladimir Lenin, http://quotes.liberty-tree.ca/quote_blog/Vladimir.Lenin.Quote.57B5.

Debate should never be discouraged by appeals to what experts say they know or claims that the “general public” is somehow too stupid or lack the proper credentials to make informed choices. Parents whose children will be subject to these new requirements and citizens who will pay for the standards, associated tests, and myriad related initiatives deserve to know what they contain and to have a say in whether states adopt them.

Not Really a National Curriculum?

Some advocates of Common Core insist that Common Core is “not a curriculum” and that it will promulgate “an academic curriculum based on great works of Western civilization and the American republic.”⁵ But the standards are being used to write the tables of contents for all the textbooks used in K-12 math and English classes. This may not technically constitute a curriculum, but it certainly defines what children will be taught, especially when they and their teachers will be judged by performance on national tests that are aligned with these standards.

People who characterize Common Core as anything other than a national takeover of schooling are either unaware of these sweeping implications or are deliberately hiding this information from the public.

“These standards will form the core curriculum of every public school program, drive another stronger wave of high stakes testing, and thus become student selection criteria for K-12 school programs such as Title I services, gifted and talented programs, high school course placement, and other academic programs,” write a pair of education scholars in a recent journal article.⁶

Even if partly true, this reinforces the urgency for inspecting these standards.

Related initiatives include teacher evaluations, since many states tie teacher ratings to student performance on tests; school choice, because many school choice states require participating private schools to administer state tests; nearly all learning materials, because these must now correspond to Common Core; and college entrance exams including the SAT and ACT.

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⁵ Kathleen Porter-Magee & Sol Stern, “The Truth about Common Core,” National Review Online, April 3, 2013, <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/344519/truth-about-common-core-kathleen-porter-magee>.

⁶ Christopher H. Tienken and Yong Zhao, “Common Core National Curriculum Standards,” *Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, Vol 6. No. 4 (Winter 2012), www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/Journals/AASA_Journal_of_Scholarship_and_Practice/Winter_10_FINAL.pdf.

Do We Need National Standards?

Why should centrally controlled, taxpayer-funded, unaccountable-to-the-public committees have the power to define what nearly every U.S. school child will learn?

The most important thing to understand about education standards is that research has demonstrated they have no effect on student achievement. *That's right: no effect at all.* A series of data analyses from the left-leaning Brookings Institution found no link between high state standards and high student achievement. "Every state already has standards placing all districts and schools within its borders under a common regime. And despite that, every state has tremendous within-state variation in achievement," says the latest such report.⁷

Why, then, have many intelligent people argued for a single set of national education standards? The typical argument, voiced by Bill Gates in the *Wall Street Journal*, goes like this: "It's ludicrous to think that multiplication in Alabama and multiplication in New York are really different."⁸ With states using different standards and tests, a school with the same average student performance would be, for example, considered failing in Massachusetts yet performing well in Mississippi.

These proponents ignore that penalties and rewards created by the national government are a central reason states have such abysmal standards for K-12 performance. The 2001 No Child Left Behind law required states to get nearly all children testing "proficient" by 2014, but it allowed states to define proficient because laws prohibit the national government from determining curriculum and testing. In order to qualify for grants from the national government, most states set the bar for proficiency in each grade low so few students could fail to reach it.

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This, along with the anti-academic and anti-accountability preferences of the education establishment⁹ and the influence of special interests such as textbook publishers in determining state standards¹⁰ are central reasons state standards before Common Core were an

⁷ Tom Loveless, "How Well Are American Students Learning?" *The 2012 Brown Center Report on American Education*, Volume III, Number 1 (February 2012), Brookings Institution, www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2012/2/brown%20center/0216_brown_education_loveless.pdf.

⁸ Jason L. Riley, "Was the \$5 Billion Worth It?" *Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2011, online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903554904576461571362279948.html.

⁹ See self-described liberal and University of Virginia professor emeritus E.D. Hirsch's *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1999).

¹⁰ See Beverlee Jobrack, *Tyranny of the Textbook* (Lanham, MD: Rowman Littlefield, 2012).

embarrassment and wildly different from one another.¹¹

Common Core organizers have not revealed the “cut scores” - the test scores that determine whether a student is judged “advanced,” “proficient,” “partially proficient,” or “not proficient” - their new system will impose. They overlook or deliberately ignore the fact that the country already has a national testing program that sets cut scores: the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP. NAEP is a valid, well-respected measuring stick that already offers states and citizens the ability to compare schools’ progress across state lines without the intrusions and muddled curriculum the Core introduces.

No Track Record, Mediocre Quality

The first, astonishing thing to note about Common Core is that no state, school district, or even school has ever used the Core. It has no track record. Yet nearly every state has rushed to put the nation’s students into a test tube with no evidence of the effects. Ordinarily, changes to curriculum, even small ones, are made incrementally, giving experts, policymakers, teachers, and parents time to review and respond to them. Even so, curriculum experts and consultants continue to chant that the proposed Common Core standards are “rigorous” and “internationally benchmarked.”

Curriculum experts and consultants continue to chant that the proposed Common Core standards are “rigorous” and “internationally benchmarked.” They are neither.

The new standards are neither. The Core’s Web site labels skepticism about this as one of many Common Core “myths,” insisting “international benchmarking played a significant role in both sets of standards.”¹² To evaluate that claim, several math and ELA curriculum experts have compared the Core to the best international standards. They found

the Core deficient. To name a few, former U.S. Department of Education official and mathematician Ze’ev Wurman has said Core math standards would graduate students “below the admission requirement of most four-year state colleges.”¹³ He has particularly criticized that the Core pushes algebra back to grade 9, “contrary to the practice of the highest- achieving nations,”¹⁴ which begin algebra in grade 8.

University of Arkansas professor and reading expert Sandra Stotsky served on the Core’s validation committee but, along with four other committee members, refused to sign it. One of

¹¹ Three states resisted this tendency: Massachusetts, Indiana, and, partly, California.

¹² "Myths About Content and Quality: General," CoreStandards.org, www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/myths-vs-facts (accessed January 9, 2013).

¹³ Ze'ev Wurman and W. Stephen Wilson, "The Common Core Math Standards," *Education Next*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Summer 2012), educationnext.org/the-common-core-math-standards/ (accessed January 9, 2012).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

her reasons: The standards writers refused to provide evidence that research supports the Core and that it is benchmarked to international tests.¹⁵ She says the Core’s “hard to follow,” “low-quality” English language arts standards constitute “simply empty skill sets.”¹⁶

Leaving Students Unprepared

Another way to evaluate the rigor and quality of the Core is to compare its grade requirements to what top schools have found is necessary to equip all students for success. One such network is the Core Knowledge Foundation, which supports public and private schools across the United States - many in high-poverty, high-minority neighborhoods - and publishes books outlining what high-quality schools expect in each grade.¹⁷

Comparing the Core to the foundation’s metrics immediately reveals a quality gap. As early as kindergarten, Core Knowledge students encounter money in math class, whereas Common Core students don’t until second grade.¹⁸ In second grade, Core Knowledge students begin learning multiplication, while Common Core delays multiplication until third grade.¹⁹

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By sixth grade, Common Core students are still exploring multiplication, which Core Knowledge materials say is far too late. “By fifth grade in countries like Japan or France, students are already at work on a sophisticated curriculum, quite different in its demands from their work in third and even fourth grade. Students still learning multiplication facts in fourth grade would not be prepared for such demands.”²⁰ This quality gap only widens as students age.

Two conservative defenders of Common Core, Kathleen Porter-Magee and Sol Stern, said the new curriculum would include important books such as Tom Paine’s *Common Sense*, Abraham

¹⁵ Sandra Stotsky, "Invited Testimony on the Low Quality of the Common Core Standards," Colorado State Board of Education, December 6, 2012, www.uark.edu/ua/der/People/Stotsky/Stotsky_Testimony_for_Colorado.pdf.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Although the names are similar, the Core Knowledge Foundation is distinct from and did not participate in the development of the Common Core State Standards. Regrettably, on its Web site the Core Knowledge Foundation indicates it supports the Common Core standards initiative.

¹⁸ See E.D. Hirsch, ed., *What Your Kindergartner Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Delta, 1997) and "Common Core State Standards for Mathematics," National Governors Association and Chief Council of State School Officers, 2010.

¹⁹ See E.D. Hirsch, ed., *What Your First Grader Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Delta, 1999) and "Common Core State Standards for Mathematics," National Governors Association and Chief Council of State School Officers, 2010.

²⁰ See E.D. Hirsch, ed., *What Your Third Grader Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Delta, 2002) and "Common Core State Standards for Mathematics," National Governors Association and Chief Council of State School Officers, 2010.

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.²¹ But these books don't appear in the actual standards but on accompanying lists of book suggestions. Those suggestions also include piles of trash schools can teach instead. Calling Common Core rigorous is like calling an average high-school soccer team "world-class."

These are only a few examples demonstrating that Common Core is neither rigorous nor internationally competitive. Repeating the claim to the contrary does not make it true.

High Costs During Tight Times

No one really knows how much it will cost to implement Common Core. Most states did not estimate costs before adopting it. Estimates of the Core's phase-in cost vary from \$3 billion²² to \$16 billion²³ nationwide.

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Such analyses typically factor in new textbooks, teacher training, and some technology upgrades. These and many state analyses, however, usually do not take into account the new technology requirements for future Common Core tests.

By 2016, the test creators have said, the tests must be taken exclusively online,²⁴ which is more expensive and troublesome than current test procedures, especially for rural and poorer schools. Online testing requires not only hardware - computers, tech labs, earphones, and microphones - but Internet connections, newer operating systems, and tech support.²⁵

The new tests will also cost far more to administer each year. Georgia testing officials, for example, said previous tests cost taxpayers \$5 per student per year, but Common Core tests

²¹ Kathleen Porter-Magee & Sol Stern, *supra* note 5.

²² Patrick Murphy and Elliot Regenstein, "Putting a Price Tag on the Common Core," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, May 2012, www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2012/20120530-Putting-A-Price-Tag-on-the-Common-Core/20120530-Putting-a-Price-Tag-on-the-Common-Core-FINAL.pdf.

²³ "National Cost of Aligning States and Localities to the Common Core Standards," Pioneer Institute, February 2012, pioneerinstitute.org/download/national-cost-of-aligning-states-and-localities-to-the-common-core-standards/.

²⁴ Leonard Medlock, "EdSurge Talks Common Core Assessment with SmarterBalanced's Tony Alpert," EdSurge, December 18, 2012, www.edsurge.com/n/2012-12-18-edsurge-talks-common-core-assessment-with-smarterbalanced-s-tony-alpert.

²⁵ Sean Cavanagh, "Consortium Releases Technology Guidelines for Common-Core Tests," Education Week Digital Education blog, December 21, 2012, blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2012/12/consortium_releases_techology_.html.

would cost \$22 per student annually, more than four times as much.²⁶ Spending so much more for testing wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing if it delivered better learning results, but as we've seen this would not be the case.

Even these estimates ignore the price of frustration and revamped lesson planning for teachers, which will be massive and inestimable. And then there's the cost of reengineering teacher's colleges, which are widely known to be grossly inefficient and resistant to change. Richard Vedder, director of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity, wrote: "By and large, however, colleges of education are considered vast wastelands of mediocrity at most comprehensive universities. And it certainly seems that most of the good research on learning, educational costs, etc., is being done outside education schools by psychologists, political scientists and economists."²⁷

Anti-Knowledge Bias

Proponents expect the Core to change far more than the basic outlines of what states expect students to know in each grade. In addition to usurping nearly every standardized test, proponents expect it to entirely overhaul teacher preparation, evaluations, and methods.

In a recent panel discussion, representatives from prominent U.S. school districts, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Core's lead writing team forecasted necessary changes to teacher colleges and standardized testing apparently with the intention of evaluating students' behavior rather than content knowledge.²⁸

In addition to usurping nearly every standardized test, proponents expect the Core to entirely overhaul teacher preparation, evaluations, and methods.

California recently announced the new Common Core tests mean a shift away from fill-in-the-bubble tests and toward measuring "creative thinking."²⁹ Last time the state did that, it literally meant tests asked students to doodle and conduct group discussions.³⁰ This sort of testing and emphasis has not only been shown to particularly and permanently keep poor and minority

²⁶ Joshua Stewart, "Costs Jump for New K-12 Testing," Georgia Public Broadcasting, September 21, 2012, www.gpb.org/news/2012/09/21/costs-jump-for-new-k-12-testing.

²⁷ Richard Vedder, "Should We Abolish Colleges of Education?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 16, 2010, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/innovations/should-we-abolish-colleges-of-education/26750>.

²⁸ "Common Core: What's Next for School Systems?" American Enterprise Institute panel discussion, January 10, 2012, www.aei.org/events/2013/01/10/common-core-whats-next-for-school-systems/.

²⁹ Karen Kucher and Maureen Magee, "California May Ditch Fill-in-the-Bubble Tests," U-T San Diego, January 8, 2013, www.utsandiego.com/news/2013/jan/08/torlakson-proposes-new-statewide-testing-system/.

³⁰ Mike Antonucci, "CLAS Back in Session?" Intercepts Online, January 9, 2013, www.eiaonline.com/intercepts/2013/01/09/clas-back-in-session/.

students behind,³¹ it moves education from the pursuit of knowledge to social engineering.

A focus on “skills” and “affective” learning (e.g., emotions and values) at the expense of knowledge doomed the last attempt at national standards, Goals 2000, and the related outcomes-based education movement.³² Then, as now, tests were to shift away from measuring students’ ability to correctly answer grade-level knowledge questions to measuring students’ feelings, performance, and beliefs.

The federal government provided all the funds for these national tests and major grants to the nonprofit groups who wrote Common Core.

A 2009 stimulus bill earmark – guarantees of grants from the national government to particular recipients willing to do what the government wants – required state databases to track students’ religious affiliations, family income, family voting status, health care history, and disciplinary records. These

records will span preschool to workforce entry and will be linked to Common Core tests. The U.S. Department of Education issued regulations allowing the sharing of personally identifiable student information without parent consent, despite a U.S. law prohibiting this.³³

Loss of Local Autonomy

Defenders of Common Core standards assert that the project is state-instigated and -controlled.³⁴ Why, then, do national government officials need to review these tests? Because the federal government provided all the funds for these national tests and major grants to the nonprofit groups who wrote Common Core.³⁵ They and big funders of government expansion such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation bankrolled the entire project. Big businesses (including Microsoft) have significant financial stakes in national education markets. They are leading the effort to promote Common Core to lawmakers and business leaders.

States may not change Common Core standards, must adopt all of them at once, and may only add up to an additional 15 percent of requirements.³⁶ The standards themselves have no clear

³¹ See E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1988).

³² Robert Holland, *Not With My Child You Don't* (Richmond, VA: Chesapeake Capital Services, 1995).

³³ Emmett McGroarty and Jane Robbins, "Controlling Education from the Top," Pioneer Institute/American Principles Project, May 2012, pioneerinstitute.org/download/controlling-education-from-the-top/.

³⁴ Kathleen Porter-Magee & Sol Stern, *supra* note 5.

³⁵ Joy Pullmann, "It Doesn't Take a Tinfoil Hat to Oppose the Common Core," National Review Online, April 4, 2013, <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/344706/it-doesn-t-take-tinfoil-hat-critique-common-core-joy-pullman>.

³⁶ Willona Sloan, "Coming to Terms with Common Core Standards," ASCD InfoBrief, Vol. 16 No. 4 (December 2012), www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/policy-priorities/vol16/issue4/full/Coming-to-Terms-with-Common-Core-Standards.aspx.

governance, meaning there is no procedure for states to follow to make changes they feel are necessary. It is highly unlikely individual states would control or greatly influence any such process, given the standards' collective nature.

The Obama administration has made sure that only adoption of Common Core standards meets its definition of "college and career readiness standards." If the president has his way, states will lose federal money for setting their own standards, as they already were refused access to "Race to the Top" stimulus dollars if they refused Common Core. In his January State of the Union address, President Obama bragged that Race to the Top grants "convinced almost every state" to adopt Common Core.

Core proponents frequently assert the standards allow for great amounts of innovation because they let teachers, textbook companies, administrators, teacher colleges, and so forth all work together on the same project. Actually, the Core constrains creativity, stating exactly where it may function and how, which destroys the very definition of innovation.

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"A single set of curriculum guidelines, models, or frameworks cannot be justified at the high school level, given the diversity of interests, talents and pedagogical needs among adolescents," write the hundreds of bipartisan signatories of the Closing the Door on Innovation manifesto. "A one-size-fits-all model not only assumes that we already know the one best curriculum for all students; it assumes that one best way for all students exists."³⁷

The standards and their related tests already have shown a propensity to quash innovation in school choice programs and private schools. Voucher programs like Indiana's require students to take state tests, which will soon be Common Core tests, and private schools have begun also to implement the Core. "A very big consideration is all the textbook publishers, the testing manufacturers, are [adapting] their products" to the Core, and so are teacher training programs, a representative of the National Catholic Educational Association told *Education Week*.³⁸

A Bad Choice for America

Special interests are the only ones to have had a seat at the table in developing Common Core: Parents and elected officials were largely shut out. Common Core represents an improvement over most state standards only because those standards were so awful. It replaces low

³⁷ Closing the Door on Innovation, May 9, 2011, www.k12innovation.com/Manifesto/_V2_Home.html.

³⁸ Erik Robelen, "Common Core Catches On with Private Schools," *Education Week*, October 8, 2012, www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/10/10/07private_ep.h32.html.

benchmarks with barely better benchmarks, is confusing and of poor quality itself, and introduces a host of privacy and curricular concerns.

Firms that earn significant income by selling tests, textbooks, and professional development sponsor the entities that developed the Core and own its copyright (the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers). Earning money isn't bad, but a centralized education market is a significant boon to big companies, giving them a large financial stake in getting it and keeping it that way regardless of the instructional effects and costs to taxpayers. "Everybody's excited about it," a Chicago investment firm founder told Reuters.³⁹

U.S. schools obviously need to improve. But will Common Core help? No.

"We're on the cusp of a whole new way of doing schooling," Joanne Weiss, chief of staff to U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, recently said about Common Core.⁴⁰ That is certainly true, and U.S. schools obviously need to improve.

But will Common Core help? No. On the contrary, it's a bad choice for America.

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³⁹ Stephanie Simon, "Privatizing Public Schools: Big Firms Eyeing Profits From U.S. K-12 Market," Reuters, August 2, 2012, www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/02/private-firms-eyeing-prof_n_1732856.html.

⁴⁰ *Supra* note 28.

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