

Connecticut Debate Association

October 12, 2013

AITE and Farmington High School

Resolved: All schools in the United States should be required to teach to a common academic standard.

Common Core State Standards Initiative

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The **Common Core State Standards Initiative** is a U.S. education initiative that seeks to bring diverse state curricula into alignment with each other by following the principles of [standards-based education reform](#). The initiative is sponsored by the [National Governors Association](#) (NGA) and the [Council of Chief State School Officers](#) (CCSSO).

Development

In the 1990s the "Accountability Movement" began in the US as states started being held to mandatory tests of student achievement, which were expected to demonstrate a common core of knowledge that all citizens should have to be successful.[1] As part of this overarching education reform movement, the nation's governors and corporate leaders founded Achieve, Inc. in 1996 as a bi-partisan organization to raise academic standards, graduation requirements, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability in all 50 states.[2] The initial motivation for the development of the Common Core State Standards was part of the American Diploma Project (ADP).[3]

A report titled, "Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts," from 2004 found that both employers and colleges are demanding more of high school graduates than in the past.[4] According to Achieve, Inc., "current high-school exit expectations fall well short of [employer and college] demands." [5] The report explains that the major problem currently facing the American school system is that high school graduates were not provided with the skills and knowledge they needed to succeed.[5] "While students and their parents may still believe that the diploma reflects adequate preparation for the intellectual demands of adult life, in reality it falls far short of this common-sense goal." (page 1). The report continues that the diploma itself lost its value because graduates could not compete successfully beyond high school.[5] and that the solution to this problem is a common set of rigorous standards.

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Forty-five of the fifty states in the United States are members of the Common Core State Standards Initiative, with the states of [Texas](#), [Virginia](#), [Alaska](#), and [Nebraska](#) not adopting the initiative at a state level.[10] [Minnesota](#) has adopted the English Language Arts standards but not the Mathematics standards.[11]

Standards were released for mathematics and English language arts on June 2, 2010, with a majority of states adopting the standards in the subsequent months. States were given an incentive to adopt the Common Core Standards through the possibility of competitive federal [Race to the Top](#) grants. President Obama and Secretary of Education [Arne Duncan](#) announced the Race to the Top competitive grants on July 24, 2009, as a motivator for education reform.[12] To be eligible, states had to adopt "internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the work place." [13]

Should All U.S. Students Meet a Single Set of National Proficiency Standards?

The Wall Street Journal, June 25, 2012

The U.S. has a problem: Today's young Americans are falling behind their peers in other countries when it comes to academic performance. What makes the situation particularly concerning is research showing a close link between economic competitiveness and the knowledge and skills of a nation's workforce.

What's the solution?

One school of thought says the U.S. needs to set clear standards about what schools should teach and students should learn -- and make it uniform throughout the country. These advocates say our decentralized approach to education isn't preparing students for the demanding challenges they will face in a global economy.

Others say be careful what you wish for. Proposing that all children meet the same academic standards, they say, is essentially proposing a nationalized system of education, where everyone is taught the same thing at the same time and

in the same way. The best way to improve student performance, they argue, is to give schools the ability to experiment with different standards, assessments and curricula to see what does and doesn't work.

Yes: It Sets High Expectations, By Chester E. Finn Jr.

There is a reason big, modern countries care about education: Decades of experience and heaps of research have shown a close tie between the knowledge and skills of a nation's workforce and the productivity of that nation's economy.

One way to ensure that young people develop the skills they need to compete globally is to set clear standards about what schools should teach and students should learn -- and make these standards uniform across the land. Leaving such decisions to individual states, communities and schools is no longer serving the U.S. well.

We know from multiple sources that today's young Americans are falling behind their peers in other countries when it comes to academic performance. We also know that U.S. businesses are having trouble finding the talent they need within this country and, as a result, are outsourcing more and more of their work.

One major reason for this slipshod performance is the disorderly, dysfunctional way we've been handling academic standards for our primary- and secondary-school students. Yes, an effective education system also requires quality teachers, effective administrators and a hundred other vital elements. But getting the expectations right, and making them the same everywhere, is important and getting more so.

Every state has gone through the motions of developing standards in core subject areas such as reading, math and science, but few have done it with care and rigor. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, where I work, has been evaluating these state standards for 15 years, and our findings are grim. In science, the subject our reviewers most recently appraised, just 12 states and the District of Columbia earned A's or B's. More than twice that number have standards that deserve grades of D or F.

Uncle Sam is partly to blame for pressing in ways that reward low standards. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, for example, coerces states into deeming the maximum number of kids "proficient" on their tests, but leaves it up to the individual states to determine what score qualifies as passing.

Some argue that Washington could solve the problem by butting out. But the issues plaguing American education -- low achievement, poor technical skills, too many dropouts, etc. -- are nationwide, and so is the challenge of economic competitiveness. The federal government's screwy incentives are just part of the problem, and straightening them out needs to be part of a larger solution.

Perhaps most damaging to our international scores and economic competitiveness has been our reluctance to follow the example of nearly every other successful modern country and establish rigorous national standards for our schools and students. States, districts, schools and individuals would, of course, be free to surpass those expectations -- but not to fall below them.

We need rigorous national standards because we live in a mobile society where a fourth-grader in Portland, Maine, may find herself in fifth grade in Portland, Ore., just as a high-school senior in Springfield, Ill., may enter college in Springfield, Mass. We need them because our employers increasingly span the entire country -- and globe -- and require a workforce that is both skilled and portable. This is no longer a country where children born in Cincinnati should expect to spend their entire lives there. They need to be ready for jobs in Nashville and San Diego, if not Singapore and Sao Paulo.

Yet our education system hasn't kept pace with these fundamental changes. It is still organized as if we were living in 1912.

Opponents contend that different youngsters need to learn different things in different ways, and that national standards will go too far in homogenizing curriculum and standardizing instruction. I would argue that good teachers, the imaginative use of technology and widening school choice will allow for ample individualization.

Just as important, uniform standards don't need to originate in Washington. Indeed, 45 states have recently signaled they will shift over to new so-called Common Core standards for English and math developed by a consortium of governors and state-level school chiefs. (A similar project is now under way in science, with no federal involvement whatsoever.)

To be sure, much progress in education can be made through choice and competition. But decentralization also makes it easier for states and school districts to lower their expectations, pander to interest groups such as teacher unions and hide their own mediocrity.

In time, we'll be able to compare the achievement of the states that adopted the Common Core with those that chose to go it alone. But setting the right expectations is at least a first step in giving our entire K-12 education system the makeover it sorely needs.

Mr. Finn is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and chairman of the Hoover Institution's Koret Task Force on K-12 Education.

No: Let Progress Trickle Up, By Jay P. Greene

When it comes to education, one size doesn't fit all. Yet that is exactly the kind of system we would get if the U.S. required all students to meet a single set of national academic standards.

Proposing that all children meet the same standards is essentially proposing a nationalized system of education. Some reformers may argue otherwise, but the truth is that standards drive testing, which in turn drives what material is covered, as well as how and when it is taught.

Such uniformity would only make sense if: 1) there was a single best way for all students to learn; 2) we knew what it was; 3) we could be sure the people running this nationalized education system would adopt that correct approach; and 4) they would remain in charge far into the future. But that isn't how things are. There is no consensus on what all students need to know. Different students can best be taught and assessed in different ways.

Even if we could identify a single, best way to educate all children, who is to say the people controlling the nationalized education system would pursue those correct approaches? Reformers would do well to remember that they are politically weaker than teacher unions and other entrenched interests. Minority religions shouldn't favor building national churches because inevitably it won't be their gospel being preached.

A number of prominent reformers nevertheless seem determined to lay the foundations for this nationalized education church. What might be inspiring them to do so?

Some are convinced that national standards will be more rigorous than what most states and districts have today. Yet independent evaluations of a proposed set of national standards, known as Common Core, show that they are rather mediocre and significantly worse than those in several states.

Supporters say states, districts and individual schools would be free to surpass the national standards, just not fall below them. But testing would constrain what was taught and when. Say California wanted to maintain its more rigorous standard of covering algebra in eighth grade, rather than teaching it in ninth grade as required in Common Core. If national assessments aligned with Common Core call for children to be tested on their knowledge of algebra in ninth grade, California students who had already moved on to geometry would fare poorly being tested on material they hadn't covered for a year. States would be penalized with lower scores on the national test if they taught subjects at a different time and in a different manner than what Common Core requires.

It is also a mistake to believe that progress can only occur with a mandate from above. This ignores how advances historically were made in education. Consider this: A little more than a century ago, many communities didn't offer high-school education. Eighth-grade skills were considered sufficient. But over time, as local communities sought to attract residents and capital, they began offering higher-level schooling. Virtually every community in the U.S. ended up building high schools and over the years steadily raised the bar for graduation without any central authority ordering it.

Interestingly, this system of choice and competition resulted in a fair amount of uniformity across U.S. school systems. But because schools don't have to be completely uniform they can still experiment with different approaches and customize their efforts for the specific students they serve. It is that possibility of experimenting with different standards, assessments and curricula that allows us to learn about what does and doesn't work and make progress.

Unfortunately, that progress largely stalled; student achievement has been flat for four decades. But this lack of progress wasn't caused by a lack of national standards. Instead, unionization of educators and the resulting imposition of uniformity and restraints on competition are largely to blame. Imposing even more uniformity with national standards will only compound that problem.

Countries with national standards generally don't have higher achievement. Canada and Australia are large, diverse countries like the U.S., with significantly stronger student performance as measured on international tests. Yet neither has national standards, tests or curricula. It is true that some high-achieving countries do have national standards -- examples include Singapore and Finland -- but these countries contain small homogeneous populations that might be more comparable to one of our states or large districts than to the U.S. as a whole. And many lower-achieving countries, such as Greece and Thailand, have national standards and curricula.

The way to improve our students' performance is to reinvigorate choice and competition, not stifle it. We should be as wary of central planning for our education system as we would for our economy.

Dr. Greene is head of the department of education reform at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Ark.

The Common Core and the Common Good

By CHARLES M. BLOW, *The New York Times*, August 21, 2013

America, we have a problem.

Our educational system is not keeping up with that of many other industrialized countries, even as the job market becomes more global and international competition for jobs becomes steeper.

We have gone from the leader to a laggard.

According to the [Broad Foundation](#), an educational reform group, “American students rank 25th in math, 17th in science and 14th in reading compared to students in 27 industrialized countries.”

And we have gone from No. 1 in high school graduation to 22nd among industrialized countries, according to [a report](#) last year by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

That same report found that fewer than half of our students finished college. This ranked us 14th among O.E.C.D. countries, below the O.E.C.D. average. In 1995 we were among the Top 5.

Some rightly point to the high levels of poverty in our public schools to adjust for our lagging performance, but poverty — and affluence — can’t explain all the results away.

As Amanda Ripley, an investigative journalist, explains in her [new book](#), “The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way,” American students are not performing at the same level of their peers internationally.

She writes: “American kids are better off, on average, than the typical child in Japan, New Zealand, or South Korea, yet they knew far less math than those children. Our most privileged teenagers had highly educated parents and attended the richest school in the world, yet they ranked 18th in math compared to their privileged peers around the world, scoring well below affluent kinds in New Zealand, Belgium, France and Korea, among other places. The typical child in Beverly Hills performed below average, compared to all kids in Canada.”

A report this month by the company that administers ACT, the college admissions test, found that only a fourth of those tested were ready for college. And that was among motivated students who want to go to college, from all sorts of schools, not just public school students.

Any way you slice it, we’re not where we want or need to be.

One strategy of changing our direction as a nation is the adoption of Common Core State Standards, meant to teach children the skills they need to be successful in college and careers — skills like critical thinking and deep analysis.

These are things that Americans recognize that our schools need to teach. According to a [Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll](#) released Wednesday, 80 percent of Americans strongly agree that schools should teach critical thinking skills, 78 percent agree that they should teach communication skills, 57 percent agree that they should teach students how to collaborate and 51 percent believe that they should help build student’s character.

The Obama administration strongly supports the Common Core, and the American Federation of Teachers [endorses it](#). The president of the United Federation of Teachers says that most teachers agree it should be implemented. And, according to [CoreStandards.org](#), “45 states, the District of Columbia, four territories and the Department of Defense Education Activities have adopted the Common Core State Standards.”

This seemed like a sure thing. The problem is that, in some states, Common Core testing has been implemented before teachers, or the public for that matter, have been instructed in how to teach students using the new standards.

This means that, when students score poorly on the more rigorous Common Core-based tests, it threatens to cause a backlash among parents, who increasingly see testing as the problem, not the solution.

That Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll also found that most Americans had not heard of the Common Core. Only 22 percent thought increased testing helped school performance, and most rejected the use of student test scores to evaluate teachers.

Because we insist on prioritizing testing over teaching — punishments over preparation — we run the risk of turning Americans off one of the few educational strategies in recent memory that most people say we need.

That’s so American.

We have to decide as a country — politicians and parents, corporations and communities — that high-performance education is not only valuable to our sense of self, but essential to our future prosperity. Today’s students are tomorrow’s workers and leaders and innovators and entrepreneurs.

In all the discussions I have with educational leaders and reformers on improving our educational outcomes, there seems to be some level of agreement — though obviously not full agreement — on strategies that work: attracting, supporting and keeping the best teachers and investing in their development; providing “wrap-around” services for poor and struggling students; making schools safe, welcoming, fun places with recess and art and music and nutritious food; and strongly promoting parental engagement.

And we need a national standard for what the kind of education that we want our children to receive. Our educational system has become so tangled in experiments and exams and excuses that we've drifted away from the basis of what makes education great: learning to think critically and solve problems.

We have drifted away from the fundamentals of what makes a great teacher: the ability to light a fire in a child, to develop in him or her a level of intellectual curiosity, the grit to persevere and the capacity to expand. Great teachers help to activate a small thing that breeds great minds: thirst.

The Common Core is meant to help bolster those forms of learning and teaching.

The Common Core is for the common good, if only we can get our act together and properly implement it.

Eight problems with Common Core Standards

The Washington Post, August 21, 2012

(This was written by [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author.)

E.D. Hirsch, Jr.'s book, "[Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know](#)," was published March 1, 1987.

So it was probably in March of that year when, sitting at a dining room table in an apartment on Manhattan's Upper East Side, my host — a publishing executive, friend, and fellow West Virginian — said he'd just bought the book. He hadn't read it yet, but wondered how Hirsch's list of 5,000 things he thought every American should know differed from a list we Appalachians might write.

I don't remember what I said, but it was probably some version of what I've long taken for granted: Most people think that whatever they and the people they like happen to know, everybody else should be required to know.

In education, of course, what it's assumed that everybody should be required to know is called "the core."

Responsibility for teaching the core is divvied up between teachers of math, science, language arts, and social studies.

Variouly motivated corporate interests, arguing that the core was being sloppily taught, organized a behind-the-scenes campaign to super-standardize it. They named their handiwork the [Common Core State Standards](#) to hide the fact that it was driven by policymakers in Washington D.C., who have thus far shoved it into every state except Alaska, Minnesota, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia.

This was done with insufficient public dialogue or feedback from experienced educators, no research, no pilot or experimental programs — no evidence at all that a floor-length list created by unnamed people attempting to standardize what's taught is a good idea.

It's a bad idea. Ignore the fact that specific [Common Core State Standards](#) will open up enough cans of worms to keep subject-matter specialists arguing among themselves forever. Consider instead the merit of Standards from a general perspective:

One: Standards shouldn't be attached to school subjects, but to the qualities of mind it's hoped the study of school subjects promotes. Subjects are mere tools, just as scalpels, acetylene torches, and transits are tools. Surgeons, welders, surveyors — and teachers — should be held accountable for the quality of what they produce, not how they produce it.

Two: The world changes. The future is indiscernible. Clinging to a static strategy in a dynamic world may be comfortable, even comforting, but it's a Titanic-deck-chair exercise.

Three: The [Common Core Standards](#) assume that what kids need to know is covered by one or another of the traditional core subjects. In fact, the unexplored intellectual terrain lying between and beyond those familiar fields of study is vast, expands by the hour, and will go in directions no one can predict.

Four: So much orchestrated attention is being showered on the Common Core Standards, the main reason for poor student performance is being ignored—a level of childhood poverty the consequences of which no amount of schooling can effectively counter.

Five: The Common Core kills innovation. When it's the only game in town, it's the only game in town.

Six: The Common Core Standards are a set-up for national standardized tests, tests that can't evaluate complex thought, can't avoid cultural bias, can't measure non-verbal learning, can't predict anything of consequence (and waste boatloads of money).

Seven: The word "standards" gets an approving nod from the public (and from most educators) because it means "performance that meets a standard." However, the word also means "like everybody else," and standardizing minds is what the Standards try to do. Common Core Standards fans sell the first meaning; the Standards deliver the second meaning. Standardized minds are about as far out of sync with deep-seated American values as it's possible to get.

Eight: The Common Core Standards' stated aim — “success in college and careers”— is at best pedestrian, at worst an affront. The young should be exploring the potentials of humanness.

I've more beefs, but like these eight, they have to do with the quality of education, and the pursuit of educational quality isn't what's driving the present education reform farce.

An illustration: As I write, my wife is in the kitchen. She calls me for lunch. The small television suspended under the kitchen cabinets is tuned to CNN, and Time cover girl Michelle Rhee is being interviewed.

“On international tests,” she says, “the U.S. ranks 27th from the top.”

Michelle Rhee, three-year teacher, education reactionary, mainstream media star, fired authoritarian head of a school system being investigated for cheating on standardized tests, is given a national platform to misinform. She doesn't explain that, at the insistence of policymakers, and unlike other countries, America tests every kid — the mentally disabled, the sick, the hungry, the homeless, the transient, the troubled, those for whom English is a second language. That done, the scores are lumped together. She doesn't even hint that when the scores of the disadvantaged aren't counted, American students are at the top.

If Michelle Rhee doesn't know that, she shouldn't be on CNN. If she knows it but fails to point it out, she shouldn't be on CNN...

My View: Why we need the Common Core Standards

By Jon Wray, Special to CNN, August 20, 2012

Editor's note: Jonathan Wray is the instructional facilitator for secondary mathematics curricular programs in the Howard County (Maryland) Public School System and is an elected member of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics board of directors. He is co-founder of the [Core Challenge](#), a program to support teacher collaboration and execution of the [Common Core Standards in math](#).

(CNN) – The United States' worldwide ranking in mathematics education is a common lament among teachers, parents, students, politicians and just about anybody else who has a stake in our nation's future. The United States recently [ranked](#) 25th out of 34 developing countries in mathematics falling behind countries such as Japan, Germany and France. Ask a hundred people the cause of this situation and you'll get a hundred different answers. One reason in particular, however, is that we have hundreds – if not thousands - of different ways of teaching our students, and different ideas of what they ought to be taught.

As an educator, I would love to tell you that I have the magic formula to teach every single student to succeed. While I don't, I do believe a key step is for all educational stakeholders to approach our mathematics challenges in a more collaborative manner.

One problem is that each state in our country has developed its own criteria for measuring student success. Imagine being a student or teacher who has to move across the country or find a new teaching job, only to be told that, by their new school's standards, their approach to math or reading is suddenly wrong – or even more likely, that a student's “A” performance at his last school now only merits a “C.”

I may have a brilliant system for teaching mathematics to primary school students in my home state of Maryland, but if I try to apply it to kids in Pennsylvania, suddenly I'm trying to prepare and grade students under different standards.

This will soon change thanks to the collaborative efforts of motivated teachers, parents and government entities across the country. The [Common Core State Standards](#) initiative is an effort by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers designed to eliminate inconsistencies among states, districts and schools. The aim of this state-led program is to develop practices and criteria the entire nation can rally behind, so students can prepare for success in a global society.

In other words, a student can expect to graduate from a school in Florida and not have to worry about whether he or she has the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to get a job in Oregon or Maine or anywhere else.

So far, 45 out of 50 states have put their support behind the program, along with three U.S. territories. This is a great start, but it's only that – just a start.

The Common Core State Standards represent an admirable set of standards, but implementing them has its challenges. With the willingness of so many to adopt the standards for mathematics, this means teachers everywhere are suddenly saddled with a broad spectrum of new standards to teach. Some of these standards are unfamiliar even to the teachers.

Funding for teacher training is limited and many teachers don't have the time needed to develop a deep understanding of new concepts included in the standards. Worse still, given the usual pace at which school reform typically unfolds,

developing high quality teaching materials that map to these standards could take several years. That's far too long to wait; we can't afford to let an entire generation of students miss out on these improvements...

Working from those goals, we created the Common Core Learning Community, a network of 150 passionate teachers willing to share their ideas. Based on the notion that teachers overwhelmingly prefer resources created by fellow teachers, we asked each participating educator to supply just one exemplary teaching idea to an online library.

The results were phenomenal. Already, dozens of teachers have submitted simple methods and illustrations, while some have found that other forms of rich media are more effective. Most teachers have submitted [Livescribe](#) "pencasts," using innovative smartpen technology to create interactive written material that displays in sync with recorded audio lessons. For subjects like mathematics, where having visual and symbolic representations on the page is vital, these pencasts have proven especially effective, with 160 such submissions to date.

Better still, these materials are available not just to teachers everywhere, but to parents and students as well. Parents who are curious about how their children are being taught have the chance to view lessons for themselves, and students who need a little bit of extra review or who want to learn further can access them [here](#).

The program is off to an amazing start in Maryland, and we've already received interest from mathematics educators in other states such as Wisconsin, New Jersey, New York and Delaware to share content for the Core Challenge. Our goal isn't to try to pigeonhole educators into a single, narrow approach to teaching, but instead to ensure as many educators as possible have access to the tools they need to be truly effective in teaching concepts that meet the Common Core State Standards. To make this goal a reality, it is important to share ideas and collaborate.

Now with common standards, we'll all be on the same page, so teachers, parents and students across the country can discuss and share ideas to help each other teach and learn better.

Why I oppose Common Core Standards

By Diane Ravitch, The Washington Post 26 Feb 2013.

(Education historian Diane Ravitch, the leading voice in the movement opposing corporate-based school reform, has for several years said she has no definitive opinion on the Common Core State Standards. Now she has come out against them, in this post, which appeared today on her blog.)

I have thought long and hard about the Common Core State Standards.

I have decided that I cannot support them. In this post, I will explain why.

I have long advocated for voluntary national standards, believing that it would be helpful to states and districts to have general guidelines about what students should know and be able to do as they progress through school. Such standards, I believe, should be voluntary, not imposed by the federal government; before implemented widely, they should be thoroughly tested to see how they work in real classrooms; and they should be free of any mandates that tell teachers how to teach because there are many ways to be a good teacher, not just one.

I envision standards not as a demand for compliance by teachers, but as an aspiration defining what states and districts are expected to do. They should serve as a promise that schools will provide all students the opportunity and resources to learn reading and mathematics, the sciences, the arts, history, literature, civics, geography, and physical education, taught by well-qualified teachers, in schools led by experienced and competent educators.

For the past two years, I have steadfastly insisted that I was neither for nor against the Common Core standards. I was agnostic. I wanted to see how they worked in practice. I wanted to know, based on evidence, whether or not they improve education and whether they reduce or increase the achievement gaps among different racial and ethnic groups.

After much deliberation, I have come to the conclusion that I can't wait five or ten years to find out whether test scores go up or down, whether or not schools improve, and whether the kids now far behind are worse off than they are today.

I have come to the conclusion that the Common Core standards effort is fundamentally flawed by the process with which they have been foisted upon the nation.

The Common Core standards have been adopted in 46 states and the District of Columbia without any field test. They are being imposed on the children of this nation despite the fact that no one has any idea how they will affect students, teachers, or schools. We are a nation of guinea pigs, almost all trying an unknown new program at the same time.

Maybe the standards will be great. Maybe they will be a disaster. Maybe they will improve achievement. Maybe they will widen the achievement gaps between haves and have-nots. Maybe they will cause the children who now struggle to give up altogether. Would the Federal Drug Administration approve the use of a drug with no trials, no concern for possible harm or unintended consequences?

President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan often say that the Common Core standards were developed by the states and voluntarily adopted by them. This is not true. They were developed by an organization called Achieve and the National Governors Association, both of which were generously funded by the Gates Foundation. There was minimal public engagement in the development of the Common Core.

Their creation was neither grassroots nor did it emanate from the states. In fact, it was well understood by states that they would not be eligible for Race to the Top funding (\$4.35 billion) unless they adopted the Common Core standards. Federal law prohibits the U.S. Department of Education from prescribing any curriculum, but in this case the Department figured out a clever way to evade the letter of the law. Forty-six states and the District of Columbia signed on, not because the Common Core standards were better than their own, but because they wanted a share of the federal cash. In some cases, the Common Core standards really were better than the state standards, but in Massachusetts, for example, the state standards were superior and well tested but were ditched anyway and replaced with the Common Core.

The former Texas state commissioner of education, Robert Scott, has stated for the record that he was urged to adopt the Common Core standards before they were written.

The flap over fiction vs. informational text further undermined my confidence in the standards. There is no reason for national standards to tell teachers what percentage of their time should be devoted to literature or information. Both can develop the ability to think critically. The claim that the writers of the standards picked their arbitrary ratios because NAEP has similar ratios makes no sense. NAEP gives specifications to test-developers, not to classroom teachers.

I must say too that it was offensive when Joel Klein and Condoleezza Rice issued a report declaring that our nation's public schools were so terrible that they were a "very grave threat to our national security." Their antidote to this allegedly desperate situation: the untried Common Core standards plus charters and vouchers.

Another reason I question the Common Core standards is that I am worried that they will cause a precipitous decline in test scores, based on arbitrary cut scores, and this will have a disparate impact on students who are English language learners, students with disabilities, and students who are poor and low-performing. A principal in the Mid-West told me that his school piloted the Common Core assessments and the failure rate rocketed upwards, especially among the students with the highest needs. He said the exams looked like AP exams and were beyond the reach of many students.

When Kentucky piloted the Common Core, proficiency rates dropped by 30 percent. The Chancellor of the New York Board of Regents has already warned that the state should expect a sharp drop in test scores. What is the purpose of raising the bar so high that many more students fail?

Rick Hess opined that reformers were confident that the Common Core would cause so much dissatisfaction among suburban parents that they would flee their public schools and embrace the reformers' ideas (charters and vouchers). Rick was appropriately doubtful that suburban parents could be frightened so easily.

Jeb Bush, at a conference of business leaders, confidently predicted that the high failure rates sure to be caused by Common Core would bring about "a rude awakening." Why so much glee at the prospect of higher failure rates?. I recently asked a friend who is a strong supporter of the standards why he was so confident that the standards would succeed, absent any real-world validation. His answer: "People I trust say so." That's not good enough for me.

Now that David Coleman, the co-lead author of the Common Core standards, has become president of the College Board, we can expect that the SAT will be aligned to the standards. No one will escape their reach, whether they attend public or private school.

Is there not something unseemly about placing the fate and the future of American education in the hands of one man?

I hope for the sake of the nation that the Common Core standards are great and wonderful. I wish they were voluntary, not mandatory. I wish we knew more about how they will affect our most vulnerable students. But since I do not know the answer to any of the questions that trouble me, I cannot support the Common Core standards.

I will continue to watch and listen. While I cannot support the Common Core standards, I will remain open to new evidence. If the standards help kids, I will say so. If they hurt them, I will say so. I will listen to their advocates and to their critics. I will encourage my allies to think critically about the standards, to pay attention to how they affect students, and to insist, at least, that they do no harm.

Who's Minding the Schools?

By ANDREW HACKER and CLAUDIA DREIFUS, *The New York Times*, June 8, 2013

IN April, some 1.2 million New York students took their first Common Core State Standards tests, which are supposed to assess their knowledge and thinking on topics such as "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" and a single matrix equation in a vector variable.

Students were charged with analyzing both fiction and nonfiction, not only through multiple-choice answers but also short essays. The mathematics portion of the test included complex equations and word problems not always included in students' classroom curriculums. Indeed, the first wave of exams was so overwhelming for these young New Yorkers that some parents refused to let their children take the test.

These students, in grades 3 through 8, are taking part in what may be the most far-reaching experiment in American educational history. By the 2014-15 academic year, public schools in 45 states and the District of Columbia will administer Common Core tests to students of all ages. (Alaska, Nebraska, Texas and Virginia have so far held out; Minnesota will use only the Common Core English test.) Many Catholic schools have also decided to implement the Common Core standards; most private, nonreligious schools have concluded that the program isn't for them.

Many of these "assessments," as they are called, will be more rigorous than any in the past. Whether the Common Core is called a curriculum or not, there's little doubt that teachers will feel pressured to gear much of their instruction to this annual regimen. In the coming years, test results are likely to affect decisions about grade promotion for students, teachers' job status and school viability.

It is the uniformity of the exams and the skills ostensibly linked to them that appeal to the Core's supporters, like Education Secretary Arne Duncan and Bill and Melinda Gates. They believe that tougher standards, and eventually higher standardized test scores, will make America more competitive in the global brain race. "If we've encouraged anything from Washington, it's for states to set a high bar for what students should know to be able to do to compete in today's global economy," Mr. Duncan wrote to us in an e-mail.

But will national, ramped-up standards produce more successful students? Or will they result in unintended consequences for our educational system?

By definition, America has never had a national education policy; this has indeed contributed to our country's ambivalence on the subject. As it stands, the Common Core is currently getting hit mainly from the right. Tea Party-like groups have been gaining traction in opposition to the program, arguing that it is another intrusion into the lives of ordinary Americans by a faceless elite. While we don't often agree with the Tea Party, we've concluded that there's more than a grain of truth to their concerns.

The anxiety that drives this criticism comes from the fact that a radical curriculum — one that has the potential to affect more than 50 million children and their parents — was introduced with hardly any public discussion. Americans know more about the events in Benghazi than they do about the Common Core.

WHAT became the Common Core began quite modestly. Several years ago, many organizations, including the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, whose members are top-ranking state education officials, independently noticed that the content and scoring of high school "exit" tests varied widely between states. In 2006, for instance, 91 percent of students in Mississippi passed a mathematics exit exam on the first attempt, while only 65 percent did so in Arizona. At the same time, students' performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress often differed from the state results.

This was not just embarrassing: it looked unprofessional. The governors and the school chiefs decided to work together to create a single set of standards and a common grading criteria. Private funding, led by some \$35 million in grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, allowed the coalition to spread its wings. Aligning tests became an opportunity to specify what every American child should know.

In 2009, an education consultant named David Coleman was retained to help develop the program, and he and other experts ended up specifying, by our count, more than 1,300 skills and standards. Mr. Coleman, a Rhodes scholar and the son of Bennington College's departing president, is known as a driven worker as well as for his distaste for personal memoir as a learning tool. Last year, he was selected to lead the College Board, which oversees A.P. exams and the SATs.

Of course, the 45 states that have decided to implement the Common Core did so willingly. While federal agencies did not have a role in the program's creation, the Obama administration signaled to states in 2009 that they should embrace the standards if they hoped to win a grant through the federal program known as Race to the Top.

For all its impact, the Common Core is essentially an invisible empire. It doesn't have a public office, a board of directors or a salaried staff. Its Web site lists neither a postal address nor a telephone number.

On its surface, the case for the Common Core is compelling. It is widely known that American students score well below their European and Asian peers in reading and math, an alarming shortfall in a competitive era. According to the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment, the United States ranks 24th out of 34 countries in "mathematics literacy," trailing Sweden and the Czech Republic, and 11th in "reading literacy," behind Estonia and Poland. (South Korea ranks first in both categories.) Under the Common Core, students in participating states will immediately face

more demanding assignments. Supporters are confident that students will rise to these challenges and make up for our country's lag in the global education race. We are not so sure.

Students in Kentucky were the first to undergo the Common Core's testing regimen; the state adopted the standards in 2010. One year later, its students' scores fell across the board by roughly a third in reading and math. Perhaps one cannot blame the students, or the teachers — who struggle to teach to the new, behemoth test that, in some cases, surpasses their curriculums — for the drop in scores....

More affluent students, as always, will have parental support. Private tutoring, already a growth industry, will become more important if passing scores on the Common Core are required for graduation. Despite worthy aims, the new standards may well deepen the nation's social divide.

The Common Core is not oblique in its aim: to instill "college and career readiness" in every American teenager — in theory, a highly democratic ideal. In the past, students were unabashedly tracked, which usually placed middle-class students in academic courses and their working-class peers in vocational programs. New York City had high schools for cooking, printing and needle trades. (There was even one in Brooklyn called Manual Training.) Indeed, the aim of these schools was to prepare a slice of society for blue-collar life. Since the 1960s, this has been seen as undemocratic. Today, students are typically required to take algebra, so they will have more options upon graduation (should they graduate). The irony — and tragedy — is that students who don't surmount these hurdles now fall even further.

Already, almost one-quarter of young Americans do not finish high school. In Utah and Oklahoma, roughly 20 percent don't; the proportion rises to 32 percent in South Carolina and 42 percent in Nevada. What does the Common Core offer these students?

The answer is simple. "College and career skills are the same," Ken Wagner, New York State's associate commissioner of education for curriculum, assessment and educational technology, told us. The presumption is that the kind of "critical thinking" taught in classrooms — and tested by the Common Core — improves job performance, whether it's driving a bus or performing neurosurgery. But Anthony Carnevale, the director of Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce, calls the Common Core a "one-size-fits-all pathway governed by abstract academic content."

IN sum, the Common Core takes as its model schools from which most students go on to selective colleges. Is this really a level playing field? Or has the game been so prearranged that many, if not most, of the players will fail?

Debate is now stirring within partisan circles. Glenn Beck sees the Common Core as "leftist indoctrination." The Republican National Committee calls it "an inappropriate overreach to standardize and control the education of our children." Republican governors and legislators in Indiana, Kansas, Georgia and several other states are talking about reconsidering their participation. Yet conservative scholars at the Manhattan and Fordham institutes laud it as promising "a far more rigorous, content-rich, cohesive K-12 education." Some corporate C.E.O.'s favor it because they say it will upgrade the work force. Mr. Duncan is one of the lone liberal voices in support of the program. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, supports the plan, which she calls "revolutionary." That said, she has called for a moratorium on judging teachers and schools by the first round of assessments, which she fears are sometimes being implemented hastily and without needed support.

For Diane Ravitch, a historian of education and former assistant education secretary, the program is predicated on "the idea that you can't trust teachers." If we want our children taught from standardized scripts, she told us, let's say so and accept the consequences.

For our part, we're tired of seeing teachers cast as scapegoats, of all the carping over unions and tenure. It is time teachers are as revered in society as doctors or scientists, and allowed to work professionally without being bound by reams of rules.

Still, there's an upside to the Common Core's arrival. As the public better appreciates its sweep, there is likely to be much discussion about schools and what we want them to do. Ideally, this will involve a reconsideration of the contours of knowledge and the question of how we can become a better-educated nation.

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