

The Problems with the Common Core

By Stan Karp

This is a revised version of a talk on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) delivered in Portland, Oregon, Sept. 20, 2013. The CCSS have been adopted by 46 states and are currently being implemented in school districts throughout the United States.

The trouble with the Common Core is not primarily what is in these standards or what's been left out, although that's certainly at issue. The bigger problem is the role the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are playing in the larger dynamics of current school reform and education politics.

Today everything about the Common Core, even the brand name—the Common Core State Standards—is contested because these standards were created as an instrument of contested policy. They have become part of a larger political project to remake public education in ways that go well beyond slogans about making sure every student graduates “college and career ready,” however that may be defined this year. We're talking about implementing new national standards and tests for every school and district in the country in the wake of dramatic changes in the national and state context for education reform. These changes include:

A 10-year experiment in the use of federally mandated standards and tests called No Child Left Behind (NCLB) that has been almost universally acknowledged as a failure.

The adoption of test-based teacher evaluation frameworks in dozens of states, largely as a result of federal mandates.

Multiple rounds of budget cuts and layoffs that have left 34 of the 50 states providing less funding for education than they did five years ago, and the elimination of more than 300,000 teaching positions.

A wave of privatization that has increased the number of publicly funded but privately run charter schools by 50 percent, while nearly 4,000 public schools have been closed in the same period.

An appalling increase in the inequality and child poverty surrounding our schools, categories in which the United States leads the world and that tell us far more about the source of our educational problems than the uneven quality of state curriculum standards.

A dramatic increase in the cost and debt burden of college access.

A massively well-financed campaign of billionaires and politically powerful advocacy organizations that seeks to replace our current system of public education—which, for all its many flaws, is probably the most democratic institution we have and one that has done far more to

address inequality, offer hope, and provide opportunity than the country's financial, economic, political, and media institutions—with a market-based, non-unionized, privately managed system.

I think many supporters of the Common Core don't sufficiently take into account how these larger forces define the context in which the standards are being introduced, and how much that context is shaping implementation. As teacher-blogger Jose Vilson put it:

People who advocate for the CCSS miss the bigger picture that people on the ground don't: The CCSS came as a package deal with the new teacher evaluations, higher stakes testing, and austerity measures, including mass school closings. Often, it seems like the leaders are talking out of both sides of their mouths when they say they want to improve education but need to defund our schools. . . . It makes no sense for us to have high expectations of our students when we don't have high expectations for our school system.

My own first experience with standards-based reform was in New Jersey, where I taught English and journalism to high school students for many years in one of the state's poorest cities. In the 1990s, curriculum standards became a central issue in the state's long-running funding equity case, *Abbott v. Burke*. The case began by documenting how lower levels of resources in poor urban districts produced unequal educational opportunities in the form of worse facilities, poorer curriculum materials, less experienced teachers, and fewer support services. At a key point in the case, in an early example of arguments that today are painfully familiar, then-Gov. Christine Whitman declared that, instead of funding equity, what we really needed were curriculum standards and a shift from focusing on dollars to focusing on what those dollars should be spent on. If all students were taught to meet “core content curriculum standards,” Whitman argued, then everyone would receive an equitable and adequate education.

At the time, the New Jersey Supreme Court was an unusually progressive and foresighted court, and it responded to the state's proposal for standards with a series of landmark decisions that speak to some of the same issues raised today by the Common Core. The court agreed that standards for what schools should teach and students should learn seemed like a good idea. But standards don't deliver themselves. They require well-prepared and supported professional staff, improved instructional resources, safe and well-equipped facilities, reasonable class sizes, and—especially if they are supposed to help schools compensate for the inequality that exists all around them—a host of supplemental services like high quality preschools, expanded summer and after-school programs, health and social services, and more. In effect, the court said adopting “high expectations” curriculum standards was like passing out a menu from a fine restaurant. Not everyone who gets a menu can pay for the meal. So the court tied New Jersey's core curriculum standards to the most equitable school funding mandates in the country.

And though it's been a constant struggle to sustain and implement New Jersey's funding equity mandates, a central problem with the Common Core is the complete absence of any similar credible plan to provide—or even to determine—the resources necessary to make every student “college and career ready” as defined by the CCSS.

Funding is far from the only concern, but it is a threshold credibility issue. If you're proposing a dramatic increase in outcomes and performance to reach social and academic goals that have never

been reached before, and your primary investments are standards and tests that serve mostly to document how far you are from reaching those goals, you either don't have a very good plan or you're planning something else. The Common Core, like NCLB before it, is failing the funding credibility test before it's even out of the gate.

The Lure of the Common Core

Last winter, the Rethinking Schools editorial board held a discussion about the Common Core; we were trying to decide how to address this latest trend in the all-too-trendy world of education reform. Rethinking Schools has always been skeptical of standards imposed from above. Too many standards projects have been efforts to move decisions about teaching and learning away from educators and schools, and put them in the hands of distant bureaucracies and politicians. Standards have often codified sanitized versions of history, politics, and culture that reinforce official myths while leaving out the voices and concerns of our students and communities. Whatever potentially positive role standards might play in truly collaborative conversations about what schools should teach and children should learn has repeatedly been undermined by bad process, suspect political agendas, and commercial interests.

Although all these concerns were raised, we also found that teachers in different districts and states were having very different experiences with the Common Core. There were teachers in Milwaukee who had endured years of scripted curriculum and mandated textbooks. For them, the CCSS seemed like an opening to develop better curriculum and, compared to what they'd been struggling under, seemed more flexible and student-centered. For many teachers, especially in the interim between the rollout of the standards and the arrival of the tests—a lot of the Common Core's appeal is based on claims that:

It represents a tighter set of smarter standards focused on developing critical learning skills instead of mastering fragmented bits of knowledge.

It requires more progressive, student-centered teaching with strong elements of collaborative and reflective learning.

It will help equalize the playing field by raising expectations for all children, especially those suffering the worst effects of “drill and kill” test prep.

Viewed in isolation, the debate over the Common Core can be confusing; who doesn't want all students to have good preparation for life after high school? But, seen in the full context of the politics and history that produced it—and the tests that are just around the bend—the implications of the Common Core project look quite different.

Emerging from the Wreckage of No Child Left Behind

The CCSS emerged from the wreckage of NCLB. In 2002, NCLB was passed with overwhelming bipartisan support and presented as a way to close long-standing gaps in academic performance. NCLB marked a dramatic change in federal education policy—away from its historic role as a

promoter of access and equity through support for things like school integration, extra funding for high-poverty schools, and services for students with special needs, to a much less equitable set of mandates around standards and testing, closing or “reconstituting” schools, and replacing school staff.

NCLB required states to adopt curriculum standards and to test students annually to gauge progress toward reaching them. Under threat of losing federal funds, all 50 states adopted or revised their standards and began testing every student, every year, in every grade from 3–8 and again in high school. The professed goal was to make sure every student was on grade level in math and language arts by requiring schools to reach 100 percent passing rates on state tests for every student in 10 subgroups.

By any measure, NCLB was a failure in raising academic performance and narrowing gaps in opportunity and outcomes. But by very publicly measuring the test results against arbitrary benchmarks that no real schools have ever met, NCLB succeeded in creating a narrative of failure that shaped a decade of attempts to “fix” schools while blaming those who work in them. The disaggregated scores put the spotlight on gaps among student groups, but the law used these gaps to label schools as failures without providing the resources or supports needed to eliminate them.

By the time the first decade of NCLB was over, more than half the schools in the nation were on the lists of “failing schools” and the rest were poised to follow. In Massachusetts, which is generally considered to have the toughest state standards in the nation—arguably more demanding than the Common Core—80 percent of the schools were facing NCLB sanctions. This is when the NCLB “waivers” appeared. As the number of schools facing sanctions and intervention grew well beyond the poor communities of color where NCLB had made “disruptive reform” the norm and began to reach into more middle-class and suburban districts, the pressure to revise NCLB's unworkable accountability system increased. But the bipartisan coalition that passed NCLB had collapsed and gridlock in Congress made revising it impossible. So U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, with dubious legal justification, made up a process to grant NCLB waivers to states that agreed to certain conditions.

Forty states were granted conditional waivers from NCLB: If they agreed to tighten the screws on the most struggling schools serving the highest needs students, they could ease up on the rest, provided they also agreed to use test scores to evaluate all their teachers, expand the reach of charter schools, and adopt “college and career ready” curriculum standards. These same requirements were part of the Race to the Top program, which turned federal education funds into competitive grants and promoted the same policies, even though they have no track record of success as school improvement strategies.

Who Created the Common Core?

Because federal law prohibits the federal government from creating national standards and tests, the Common Core project was ostensibly designed as a state effort led by the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, a private consulting firm.

The Gates Foundation provided more than \$160 million in funding, without which Common Core would not exist.

The standards were drafted largely behind closed doors by academics and assessment “experts,” many with ties to testing companies. Education Week blogger and science teacher Anthony Cody found that, of the 25 individuals in the work groups charged with drafting the standards, six were associated with the test makers from the College Board, five with the test publishers at ACT, and four with Achieve. Zero teachers were in the work groups. The feedback groups had 35 participants, almost all of whom were university professors. Cody found one classroom teacher involved in the entire process. According to teacher educator Nancy Carlsson-Paige: “In all, there were 135 people on the review panels for the Common Core. Not a single one of them was a K–3 classroom teacher or early childhood professional.” Parents were entirely missing. K–12 educators were mostly brought in after the fact to tweak and endorse the standards—and lend legitimacy to the results.

College- and Career-Ready Standards?

The substance of the standards themselves is also, in a sense, top down. To arrive at “college- and career-ready standards,” the Common Core developers began by defining the “skills and abilities” they claim are needed to succeed in a four-year college. The CCSS tests being developed by two federally funded multistate consortia, at a cost of about \$350 million, are designed to assess these skills. One of these consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, claims that students who earn a “college ready” designation by scoring a level 4 on these still-under-construction tests will have a 75 percent chance of getting a C or better in their freshman composition course. But there is no actual evidence connecting scores on any of these new experimental tests with future college success.

And it will take far more than standards and tests to make college affordable, accessible, and attainable for all. When I went to college many years ago, “college for all” meant open admissions, free tuition, and race, class, and gender studies. Today, it means cutthroat competition to get in, mountains of debt to stay, and often bleak prospects when you leave. Yet “college readiness” is about to become the new AYP (adequate yearly progress) by which schools will be ranked.

The idea that by next year Common Core tests will start labeling kids in the 3rd grade as on track or not for college is absurd and offensive.

Substantive questions have been raised about the Common Core's tendency to push difficult academic skills to lower grades, about the appropriateness of the early childhood standards, about the sequencing of the math standards, about the mix and type of mandated readings, and about the priority Common Core puts on the close reading of texts in ways that devalue student experience and prior knowledge.

A decade of NCLB tests showed that millions of students were not meeting existing standards, but the sponsors of the Common Core decided that the solution was tougher ones. And this time, instead of each state developing its own standards, the Common Core seeks to create national tests

that are comparable across states and districts, and that can produce results that can be plugged into the data-driven crisis machine that is the engine of corporate reform.

Educational Plan or Marketing Campaign?

The way the standards are being rushed into classrooms across the country is further undercutting their credibility. These standards have never been fully implemented in real schools anywhere. They're more or less abstract descriptions of academic abilities organized into sequences by people who have never taught at all or who have not taught this particular set of standards. To have any impact, the standards must be translated into curriculum, instructional plans, classroom materials, and valid assessments. A reasonable approach to implementing new standards would include a few multi-year pilot programs that provided time, resources, opportunities for collaboration, and transparent evaluation plans.

Instead we're getting an overhyped all-state implementation drive that seems more like a marketing campaign than an educational plan. And I use the word marketing advisedly, because another defining characteristic of the Common Core project is rampant profiteering.

Joanne Weiss, Duncan's former chief of staff and head of the Race to the Top grant program, which effectively made adoption of the Common Core a condition for federal grants, described how it is opening up huge new markets for commercial exploitation:

The development of common standards and shared assessments radically alters the market for innovation in curriculum development, professional development, and formative assessments. Previously, these markets operated on a state-by-state basis, and often on a district-by-district basis. But the adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets where the best products can be taken to scale.

Who Controls Public Education?

Having financed the creation of the standards, the Gates Foundation has entered into a partnership with Pearson to produce a full set of K–12 courses aligned with the Common Core that will be marketed to schools across the country. Nearly every educational product now comes wrapped in the Common Core brand name.

The curriculum and assessments our schools and students need will not emerge from this process. Instead, the top-down, bureaucratic rollout of the Common Core has put schools in the middle of a multilayered political struggle over who will control education policy—corporate power and private wealth or public institutions managed, however imperfectly, by citizens in a democratic process.

The web-based news service Politico recently described what it called “the Common Core money war,” reporting that “tens of millions of dollars are pouring into the battle over the Common Core. . . . The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation already has pumped more than \$160 million into developing and promoting the Common Core, including \$10 million just in the past few months,

and it's getting set to announce up to \$4 million in new grants to keep the advocacy cranking. Corporate sponsors are pitching in, too. Dozens of the nation's top CEOs will meet to set the plans for a national advertising blitz that may include TV, radio, and print.”

At the same time, opposing the Common Core is “an array of organizations with multimillion-dollar budgets of their own and much experience in mobilizing crowds and lobbying lawmakers, including the Heritage Foundation, Americans for Prosperity, the Pioneer Institute, FreedomWorks, and the Koch Bros.” These groups are feeding a growing right-wing opposition to the Common Core that combines hostility to all federal education initiatives and anything supported by the Obama administration with more populist sentiments.

Tests, Tests, Tests

But while this larger political battle rages, the most immediate threat for educators and schools remains the new wave of high-stakes Common Core tests.

Duncan, who once said “The best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans was Hurricane Katrina” and who called Waiting for Superman “a Rosa Parks moment,” now tells us, “I am convinced that this new generation of state assessments will be an absolute game-changer in public education.”

The problem is that this game, like the last one, is rigged. Although reasonable people have found things of value in the Common Core standards, there is no credible defense to be made of the high-stakes uses planned for these new tests. Instead, the Common Core project threatens to reproduce the narrative of public school failure that just led to a decade of bad policy in the name of reform.

Reports from the first wave of Common Core testing provide evidence for these fears. Last spring, students, parents, and teachers in New York schools responded to new Common Core tests developed by Pearson with outcries against their length, difficulty, and inappropriate content. Pearson included corporate logos and promotional material in reading passages. Students reported feeling overstressed and underprepared—meeting the tests with shock, anger, tears, and anxiety. Administrators requested guidelines for handling tests students had vomited on. Teachers and principals complained about the disruptive nature of the testing process and many parents encouraged their children to opt out.

Only about 30 percent of students were deemed “proficient” based on arbitrary cut scores designed to create new categories of failure. The achievement gaps Common Core is supposed to narrow grew larger. Less than 4 percent of students who are English language learners passed. The number of students identified by the tests for “academic intervention” skyrocketed to 70 percent, far beyond the capacity of districts to meet.

The tests are on track to squeeze out whatever positive potential exists in the Common Core:

The arrival of the tests will pre-empt the already too short period teachers and schools have to review the standards and develop appropriate curriculum responses before that space is filled by the assessments themselves.

Instead of reversing the mania for over-testing, the new assessments will extend it with pre-tests, interim tests, post-tests, and computer-based “performance assessments.” It's the difference between giving a patient a blood test and draining the patient's blood.

The scores will be plugged into data systems that will generate value-added measures, student growth percentiles, and other imaginary numbers for what I call psychometric astrology. The inaccurate and unreliable practice of using test scores for teacher evaluation will distort the assessments before they're even in place, and has the potential to make Common Core implementation part of the assault on the teaching profession instead of a renewal of it.

If the Common Core's college- and career-ready performance levels become the standard for high school graduation, it will push more kids out of high school than it will prepare for college. The most vulnerable students will be the most at risk. As FairTest put it: “If a child struggles to clear the high bar at 5 feet, she will not become a ‘world-class’ jumper because someone raised the bar to 6 feet and yelled ‘jump higher,’ or if her ‘poor’ performance is used to punish her coach.”

The costs of the tests, which have multiple pieces throughout the year and must be given on computers many schools don't have, will be enormous and will come at the expense of more important things. The plunging scores will be used as an excuse to close more public schools and open more privatized charters and voucher schools, especially in poor communities of color.

This is not just cynical speculation. It is a reasonable projection based on the history of the NCLB decade, the dismantling of public education in the nation's urban centers, and the appalling growth of the inequality and concentrated poverty that remains the central problem in public education.

Fighting Back

Common Core has become part of the corporate reform project now stalking our schools. As schools struggle with these new mandates, we should defend our students, our schools, and ourselves by pushing back against implementation timelines, resisting the stakes and priority attached to the tests, and exposing the truth about the commercial and political interests shaping this false panacea for the problems our schools face.

There are encouraging signs that the movement we need is growing. Last year in Seattle, teachers led a boycott of district testing that drew national support and won a partial rollback of the testing. In New York this fall, parents sent score reports on new Common Core tests back to the state commissioner of education with a letter declaring “This year's test scores are invalid and provide NO useful information about student learning.” Opt-out efforts are growing daily. Even some supporters of the CCSS have endorsed a call for the moratorium on the use of tests to make policy decisions. It's not enough, but it's a start.

It took nearly a decade for NCLB's counterfeit “accountability system” to bog down in the face of its many contradictions and near universal rejection. The Common Core meltdown may not take that long. Many of Common Core's myths and claims have already lost credibility with large numbers of educators and citizens. We have more than a decade of experience with the negative and unpopular results of imposing increasing numbers of standardized tests on children

and classrooms. Whether this growing resistance will lead to better, more democratic efforts to sustain and improve public education, or be overwhelmed by the massive testing apparatus that NCLB left behind and that the Common Core seeks to expand, will depend on the organizing and advocacy efforts of those with the most at stake: parents, educators, and students. As usual, organizing and activism are the only things that will save us, and remain our best hope for the future of public education and the democracy that depends on it.