

Common Core: A Dream in Progress

By D. Hugh Ferguson



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My son-in-law, the father of two adult children who graduated from public schools and earned bachelor's degrees, recently asked me, "I read that our educational system is broken. What's broken? I don't get it." Common Core Initiative, a national testing program, is a large-scale attempt to answer that question and repair what's broken. Few people know much about Common Core. How common is it?

Consider two images: first, as a parent, your expectations of what the school system will have taught your child when he or she graduates from grade 12; second, as a business owner, a manufacturing director, a sales manager, a supervisor, your expectations of a young, K-12 graduate performing on his or her first job. I suspect the images are quite different. Of course, the ideal is a perfect blend of the two. Students who are ideal products of the blend will have experienced common learning experiences and achieved common standards of learning.

A child in Montana has the same right to a high quality education as a child in Maine, Minnesota, or Mississippi, but should they all learn the same information, culture, and history? Constitutionally, education falls into the responsibilities of each state, but what is the responsibility, if any, of the federal government to assure national standard quality?

America is rightly proud of its public educational system, but why don't our students demonstrate higher scores on international tests? Technology has produced a flourishing market for high quality skills and jobs, but why do employers frequently say that our students are ill equipped to succeed in

these positions? Doesn't it make sense to have a national floor for all schools in America? Of course it does. The Common Core initiative is an attempt to create one.

Summary of Common Core Goals to "Repair What's Broken"

- Improve student scores on international tests.
- Change curriculum and teaching.
- Raise the bar on achievement by testing more rigorously.
- Standardize national benchmarks on what students should know and be able to do, grades K-12.
- Change teaching concepts of mathematics—more depth, less formula learning, deeper focus on fewer topics.
- Raise levels of English Language/Literacy to enable students to understand technical texts.
- Provide consistent curricula, assessments, and teaching programs common to the entire nation.

History

Common Core is a set of "college and career-ready" standards for students from kindergarten through grade 12 in English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics "to ensure that students graduating from high school are prepared to take credit bearing introductory courses in two or four year colleges or to enter the work force" (Common Core State Standards Initiative).

In 2004, a group of governors and business leaders formed a group called “Achieve”, producing a paper entitled, “Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts.” In 2005, the National Governors’ Association (NGA), released a task force report, “Building the Foundation for Bright Futures,” a document that focused on school readiness and early education.

In 2008, the NGA and the Council of Chief School Officers (CCSO) released a report, “Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring United States Students Receive a World Class Education.” Janet Napolitano, then chair of NGA, stated succinctly, “The United States needs an internationally competitive system” (“Benchmarking for Success”). Motivation for reform was drawn from two specific concerns: low scores and low ratings of American students on international tests and implied connections with the economic status of American business in the world arena. In other words, the nation’s educational system is tied directly to the economic welfare of the nation itself.

The Benchmark report called for states to exert “a large collective influence” as “leverage” towards the adoption of a common core in English and mathematics, to revise state policies for recruiting and developing teachers, to “hold schools accountable to support high performances, drawing upon international portals,” and to “measure state level performances globally by examining student achievement and attainment in an international context” (“Benchmarking for Success”).

The report called for benchmarking the educational system against international standards, measured by international test results, to “prepare students for success in colleges and careers.”

Contrast these goals with a statement by *Washington Post* correspondent Marion Brady: “Most people think that

whatever they, and the people they like, happen to know, everybody else should be required to know. [...] Standards shouldn’t be attached to school subjects, but to the qualities of mind the study of school subjects promotes.” Thus, the door is open to a national debate among educators as to what students should know and be able to do, in this case to be measured by international test scores.

Standards

Let’s confront the question of standards, a compilation of what one should know and be able to do in terms of information and quality. In other words, establish the right things to teach (standards) and teach the students so that they perform well (raise the quality by testing).

To determine the success rate of achieving international standard quality, we must have benchmarks, and in the case of Common Core, of course, a test.

Standards, indeed, carry two meanings. The first refers to a lofty goal of how high one should set the bar. Can one set standards so high that students can never attain them? In our lives, we human beings have set lifelong moral and religious standards that are never reachable, but we continue to strive (e.g., I will not lie). The second definition examines the reality of attaining the standard and consequences that

occur if one fails (e.g., I lied. Will I lose my job?). It is this second definition that motivates the Benchmark report. The accountability issue is obvious. To determine the success rate of achieving international standard quality, we must have benchmarks, and in the case of Common Core, of course, a test.

The beginnings of an international testing program in America authorized by the federal government came with “No Child Left Behind” and have been extended through “Race to The Top,” but with different conditions. Under NCLB, each state had the responsibility to set its own standards and assessments. However, to participate in the Common Core program under “Race to the Top,” a state must agree to accept the national standards, in their entirety, for each grade level.

These standards were developed not by the federal government, but by consortia of state participants, including teachers from both K-12 and college and university faculties. National Standards in English/Language Arts and Mathematics have been copyrighted by the Council of Chief School Officers, which in turn, licenses each state individually. If a state agrees to Common Core, it must also apply for a license from CCSO. To be granted a license, a state must declare that it is in “support of Common Core State Standards.” Standards and Benchmarks have been written for all grades, K-12.

Curriculum

To meet a standard of performance, one must demonstrate what one knows and can do at an agreed upon level—for example, subtracting one number from another, consistently achieving correct responses at a variety of levels of difficulty. Students should be taught to subtract numbers, but all students do not learn to subtract by the same methods, by using the same materials, or even by having the same information. Standards are not synonymous with curriculum; curriculum refers to

subject matter, methods or modes of teaching, assessment programs, and/or other topics related to what should be taught.

One cannot presume that all students learn the same information through the same methods of learning. Raising the level of performance to meet the new standards requires a curriculum that includes clear and explicit purposes for instruction. Common Core offers only partial and very general curriculum guidelines, such as “Math instruction should focus on fewer topics and more depth” and “Understand concepts rather than sets of procedures.” Specific instructional goals listed remain, indeed, arithmetical: adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing, fractions.

For example, consider a grade three standard for multiplication in the new guidelines for Common core:

Understand properties of multiplication and the relationship between multiplication and division. [...]

5. Apply properties of operations as strategies to multiply and divide.

Examples: If $6 \times 4 = 24$ is known, then $4 \times 6 = 24$ is also known. (Commutative property of multiplication.)

$3 \times 5 \times 2$ can be found by $3 \times 5 = 15$, then $15 \times 2 = 30$, or by $5 \times 2 = 10$, then $3 \times 10 = 30$. (Associative property of multiplication.)

The English Language/Literacy standards inject a new focus, expanding the conventional term English to include new broader perspectives, such as “Understand complex ideas, less emphasis on reading and writing skills” and “More reading of non-fiction” (a feature some have labeled “the

devaluing of fiction”). Within these goals are, however, prescribed topics such as “Classic myths and stories from around the world,” “Foundations of American literature,” and “Shakespeare” (the only mention of English literature in the standards).

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The most controversial aspects of Common Core are the matching and measuring of “curriculum materials fidelity” to Common Core standards. If standards and tests are nationwide, should texts, materials, and methods become congruent over time? Can federal control of curriculum be aligned with provisions of U. S. Code 1232A that prohibits the federal government from exercising “direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum program, of instruction, curriculum, administration, materials”? Many officials and educators are disturbed that Common Core legislation appears to override the Constitution’s delegation of authority over education to the states.

Achievement of standards can occur only if an appropriate curriculum is in place, yet each state and school district

traditionally has approved its own curriculum, instructional methods, and assessment tools. Teachers are understandably upset that they must eliminate many favorite topics or teaching methods in order to conform to curriculum needs of the standards, that not enough practical training and updated materials are available, and that they are overburdened by having to administer far too many tests. Added to their stress is the increasing importance of standardized test results in the teacher evaluation process.

Assessments and Tests

How do we know that students have learned what they are supposed to have learned, and how do we judge the quality of learning? Naturally, we turn to testing, the core of Common Core. Yet when we have tested, how do we interpret the results? To reach a standard in any field test requires a cut-off point that defines success or failure to meet a standard.

Let’s recall the motivation for reform: the results of international tests and connections to the global economy. The aim of depth of instruction and testing is that students will improve on international tests. Core standards have been published for each grade level, K-12, all to be included in the exams, but achievement benchmarks have not yet been established for Common Core assessments.

Since education is a state responsibility, results will be judged on states’ performances, but how can a state be held responsible for performance on an international test without an international curriculum to match? A state can only evaluate its own performance based upon a test that affects individual school districts within the state. States, then, have generated their own school curricula, along with state exams to assess performance. For students and teachers, state tests result in still another standardized test that limits instructional time. In addition, local and state

testing is carried out in other areas, such as science, social studies, and foreign languages. Common Core Testing is an additional load for schools. To school districts and teachers, the burden of testing has become overwhelming.

In 2008, the NGA Committee based its recommendations on the results of three international tests: the Program for International Assessments (PISA), the Trends in Instructional Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which focuses on grade 4. PISA and TIMSS will be administered again in 2016 and will, in all probability, serve as the basis for comparison with Common Core Test results. However, it is best to note that results are based on samplings, and that the first year will surely demonstrate lower than expected results. Kentucky, for example, experimented with a test with dreadful results, possibly due to inadequate coordination of state programs, materials, curriculum, and teacher training, as well as students' unfamiliarity with taking computerized tests.

Beginning in February of 2015, twelve million students in 22 states began taking the Common Core tests in English Language/Literacy and Mathematics. One of the recommended tests, a computerized exam entitled "Smarter Balanced Assessment," includes a model called "Computer Adaptation Testing (CAT)" that poses progressively more difficult questions related to each standard and each student's computerized response. There will be no multiple-choice questions. School personnel have expressed a great deal of apprehension that disadvantaged students will need extra training in the use of computers to correctly take the test and obtain valid results.

Total estimated administration time for the entire test is seven and one half

hours per student. Scores will be judged and tabulated by 42,000 scorers hired by the federal government. State scores will be judged and evaluated as to how well states have measured up to Common Core standards. Rather than judging school districts individually, state results will be compiled to make national comparisons with international testing.

Follow the Money

The path to state funding of Common Core is a series of federal grants dating from "No Child Left Behind" through the current funding program, "Race to the Top." While the nuances of language within each title indicate differing attitudes toward educational results, the two programs are essentially similar: both are testing programs.

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Conditions for accepting "Race to the Top" grants include the state embracing the Common Core program in its entirety. Common Core is not the only program to be funded under "Race to the Top," but it must be included in the grant application. There are 36 categories in "Race to the Top," of which Common Core is one.

A major difference between NCLB and "Race to the Top" is the flexibility of states' use of funds. Under NCLB, each state had the opportunity to set its own standards and generate its own testing program. Under "Race to the Top", the state must conform to all provisions of the program with no variation. By providing grants rather than issuing mandates, the federal government can influence the direction of education while not infringing on state control; that the wording of the grants imperatively insists that the states conform to federal guidelines, however, leaves many feeling that control over educational methods and assessment has been removed from the hands of the states.

States can expend monies at their discretion; in Delaware, for instance, half the funds are retained by the State Department of Education, and half are distributed among the districts. Common Core grants end this year, but states are encouraged to apply for renewal.

Ongoing Debate

The Common Core has its critics. For one thing, there will be many associated costs—for establishing and maintaining computers, for standardized materials and testing software, for scoring personnel and software to compile test results, and for the time and funds to train students to take computerized tests.

Other concerns have more to do with underlying pedagogical principles and assumptions. There are as yet no standardized curricula or teacher training to support the standardized tests, and the tests themselves, some feel, are not student centered, do not measure the quality of learning, and are not curriculum specific. Some say the standards are really no different from previous ones. How will these new standards "raise the bar"? Furthermore, no benchmarks for standards have been established.

Then there is the issue of federal involvement. Since the grants are competitive, schools and state departments will or may manipulate data to receive grant renewals. The federal government is overreaching its authority, some believe, by offering incentives to states with provisions that, in effect, control the educational process. For some educators, the Common Core is just another example of wishful thinking, a blank projection of what advocates hope will occur, with no commonality of vision other than test scores, its outcomes disconnected from the actual lives of students.

Current Issues

The Common Core is a work in progress. Some states are reconsidering the Common Core testing process (time, student outcomes, expenditures, uses of scores), and parents in several states are proclaiming parent rights to authorize their children to “opt out” of Common Core testing. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development has called for a two-year moratorium on testing.

Some fear that large commercial companies will dominate or dictate educational purchase (texts, digital material, software, text materials) or that standardized tests will produce standardized students and teachers, reducing the creative thinking that comes with true education.

Other questions remain as well. Is sufficient attention being paid to the second goal, entrance into the work force? Does Common Core promote achievement among migrants when only 2% of the K-12 population crosses state lines?

Future Direction

Is the notion that a Common Core testing program will produce higher quality education in America an idea noble enough and practical enough to pursue? At this time, it is obvious that Common Core is not nearly common,

neither in curriculum, in teaching, in testing, nor in teacher preparation. Currently there is no expected outcome other than improvement in international test scores. It is difficult to draw conclusions when states can choose between two national testing companies (PARCC and Smarter Balanced Assessment). If our education system is truly broken, advocates of Common Core propose the initiative as a repair process. Critics are skeptical. Once the results of Common Core testing have been gathered, analyzed, and interpreted, one leaves with the question, “Why are we doing this?”

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Nonetheless, the dream of a simple, practical, effective national educational system is not disappearing into the atmosphere of lost yearnings. Following this first year of Common Core testing, there will be great “Common Interest” in conclusions and recommendations regarding quality and cost that will carry us into the future. As Americans, we will continue to attempt to define and fix whatever is broken in our public schools.

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