

EDUCATION MATTERS

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By Chester E. Finn, Jr.

The Fordham Foundation's Case for the Common Core Standards



Let me lay on the table a few facts regarding the Common Core state Standards: These Standards are clear, rigorous, and nationally and internationally benchmarked. They emphasize reading rigorous, high-quality literature in English class, plus nonfiction in history, science, and other courses. They also emphasize the fundamentals of mathematics. Properly taught and successfully learned, they will indeed produce high school graduates who are ready for college-level courses and modern jobs.

The Common Core effort is, and has always been, a state-led effort to improve the quality and rigor of K-12 academic standards, an effort in

which state leaders have participated. By adopting and implementing the Common Core, states benefit from strong standards while retaining full control over curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy where it belongs—at the local level.

Now, let me offer you eight reasons why I believe the states would be well advised to stick with their initial decision to replace their previous English and math standards with the Common Core.

First, these Standards are solid, content rich, rigorous, better than what the great majority of states came up with on their own. At Fordham, we've been evaluating K-12 academic standards for fifteen years. According to our expert reviewers, the Common Core Standards for English and math

are superior, on their substantive merits, to those of about three-quarters of the states.

Second, these Standards were developed by the states, although here I surely understand the source of concern among critics. It's a fact that President Obama deployed federal Race to the Top dollars to induce states to adopt them. In retrospect, that was a bad idea, and it got worse when the president took credit for the Common Standards every time he had a chance on the campaign trail, and did it again in this year's State of the Union address.

Still and all, the Standards themselves were and remain a state effort, housed at the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. It was the

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governors and state superintendents who voluntarily came together to draft higher common standards because they acknowledged that their own standards were set too low, and discrepant across state lines, and also made it impossible to compare student achievement and school performance beyond one’s own state.

Third, the Common Core Standards offer not just comparability across state lines but also economies of scale that in the long run will enable states to save money on instructional materials, assessments, teacher preparation, and more, as well as the costs of remediation by universities and employers. They protect scarce taxpayer dollars by setting world-class academic standards for student achievement—and taxpayers and families deserve real results for their money.

Fourth, the Common Standards are compatible with serious results-based accountability up and down the system, from individual students to educators to schools to districts. These standards are pegged at a high

level, which will bring a healthy dose of reality to the education reform conversation. The truth may be painful but, in the long run, it will serve your children, your educators, and your state economy far better.

Fifth, the Common Core Standards are good for school choice, which I strongly favor. We at Fordham are often asked how to reconcile our enthusiasm for the Common Core with our support for school choice. Doesn’t the Common Core tend to force a “one-size-fits-all” approach onto schools? The short answer is no. Standards describe what students are expected to know and be able to do at various points on the K-12 continuum. Written correctly, they do not dictate any particular curriculum or pedagogy.

Sixth, competitively, while the U.S. dithers, other countries are eating our lunch. If we don’t want to cede the twenty-first century to our economic and political rivals—China especially—we need to ensure that many more young Americans emerge from high school truly ready for college and careers that enable them to compete in the global marketplace. This is why business groups support the standards—because they will help ensure that students are ready to succeed on the job.

Seventh, Common Core Standards are encouraging a huge amount of investment from philanthropic groups and private firms to produce Common Core-aligned textbooks, e-books, professional development, online learning, and more. Online and blended learning, especially, will open up a world of new opportunities for students and families to seek a high-quality, individualized education at relatively low cost. Common

academic standards and assessments, and the efficiencies of scale and comparability that come with them, will accelerate the R & D process and foster further innovation in our stodgy K-12 enterprise.

Eighth and finally, let me salute Common Core’s embrace of what I’ll call traditional education values. These standards are educationally solid. They are rigorous and, while revolutionary in some ways, they are deeply conservative in others. They expect students to know their math facts, to read the nation’s founding documents, and to evaluate evidence and come to independent judgments. In all of these ways, they are miles better than three-quarters of the state standards they will replace.

In the end, Common Core is meant to refocus lesson planning, curriculum, and instruction on the things that matter most to reading comprehension: books that are worth reading; content that is worth learning; and reading and writing that are tied directly to both. Whether the promise of the Common Core is realized depends on whether leaders and educators are able to look past the politics and make decisions that are in the best interest of the students we all hope to serve. ■

This article was derived from Chester E. Finn, Jr.’s testimony to the Michigan House Education Subcommittee on Common Core Standards.



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Another View from the Education Action Group: Common Core is Wrong for America?

Even though most states signed on to the Common Core experiment back in 2010, most Americans are only now finding out about the new, nationalized learning standards. That's because Common Core is finally taking root in their neighborhood schools, and their local media are reporting on the chaos and confusion the new standards are causing in classrooms.

Common Core supporters assure us the “college- and career-ready” Standards—which tell schools which concepts to teach students and when—will be worth it in the end when America’s K-12 system is restored as a world leader.

Opponents say the Standards represent a dumbing down of the education system, and will eventually lead to the federalization of America’s public education system.

We at *EAGnews* side with the Common Core opponents, but we have to make an admission: I don’t know with absolute certainty how this experiment is going to end. Nobody else knows, either. That’s because Common Core has never been field tested anywhere in the United States.

We seldom like to quote Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis (at least not in a favorable way), but she made a good point when she likened Common Core’s implementation to building a plane while it’s the air: how that flight is going to end is anyone’s guess.

With that caveat duly stated, here are the three major problems we see with the Common Core learning standards:

- **They’re not as rigorous as advertised.** Despite all the clever marketing behind Common Core as “rigorous” and “world class,” a lot of really smart thinkers—Dr. Sandra Stotsky, Dr. Ze’ev Wurman, Dr. William Evers, Dr. James Milgram, to name a few—have concluded the new Standards aren’t all that good. In fact, they’re a step down from the ones currently used in six states and Washington, D.C.

The math experts among that group of thinkers also warn that Common Core will leave American students two years behind their international peers. An example: Common Core directs students to take algebra in ninth grade, but experts note students should study algebra in eighth grade if they’re to have any real hope of earning a college degree in a STEM field (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics).

Even some Common Core supporters concede the new Standards are more geared for preparing students for a community college than a highly selective four-year university. It seems to us that if the goal is to give children a world class education, then Common Core represents a major step in the wrong direction.

“...the new Standards are more geared for preparing students for a community college than a highly selective four-year university.”

- **States and local school boards will gradually lose decision-making power.** States that have signed on to the Common Core are required to teach the standards as written. It’s true that states have the option of adding to the standards by 15 percent, but as many critics have noted, those additions won’t be on Common Core-aligned assessments. Anyone who’s been involved with education policy for any significant amount of time knows that if something isn’t going to show up on the state standardized tests, most teachers won’t cover it. That suggests the Common Core test-writers will have ultimate control over what gets taught in our schools.

If that doesn’t trouble you, perhaps you’ll be interested to know the federal government is financing the development of the Common Core assessments.

If that still doesn’t get your attention, maybe you’ll be interested in knowing that U.S. Department of Education officials are “vetting”





the test questions to ensure quality, according to Neal McCluskey of the Cato Institute.

The potential for D.C. interference in public education through Common Core is too great. If you doubt that, you're ignoring a long history of federal undertakings that have started out limited and (seemingly) well-intentioned endeavors, only to morph into out-of-control bureaucratic monsters.

- **They compromise student privacy.** At the heart of this Common Core experiment is the expectation that educators—with help from K-12 technology companies—will soon be able to tailor the learning process to each individual student.

That sounds great, doesn't it? There's just one little problem: To pull that off, schools are going to need reams of personal information about each child. Common Core is designed to facilitate this collection process by creating apples-to-apples data that techies can use to design personal learning software.

When one starts discussing the dangers of government data collection programs, it's really easy to wander into "black helicopter" territory. So we'll stick with the facts.

It's a fact the federal government has helped states create a uniform coding system for student data, including data points for hobbies, medical conditions, learning disabilities, religious affiliations, family income range, behavioral problems, at-risk status,

homework completion, overall health status, dwelling arrangement, and career goals.

It's also a fact the feds used stimulus money to provide each state with a longitudinal database in which to store potential student data.

And, like the cherry atop the sundae, it's a fact that U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan amended the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) in late 2011 to facilitate data-sharing between school districts and outside contractors.

Granted, none of this means that students' sensitive personal information is going to be collected, stored, and shared. But isn't certainly possible, isn't it? (We think former NSA analyst Edward Snowden would agree with us on this point, if we could only find him.)

There are other reasons to oppose the new national standards, namely how they impose huge financial burdens on school districts and distract attention from proven K-12 reform proposals.

As far as *EAGnews* is concerned, the potential problems of Common Core far outweigh any of their promised benefits. ■



Ben Velderman has written about education reform issues since joining the Education Action Group in 2010. Before that, he worked for two years as a teacher in an alternative middle school. He holds a degree in journalism from Michigan State University.

Fact-checking Attacks on Common Core Standards

By Cara Fitzpatrick, Amy Sherman, Jeffrey S. Solochek

New standards for schools—called the Common Core—have been getting a lot of attention lately. As states surge toward full implementation of Common Core State Standards for public schools, the din is rising from some fronts to pull back.

In Florida, Gov. Rick Scott, whose tea party base offers perhaps the most strident opposition, is listening. In open forums Scott requested last week, people stepped forward to give their views. Criticism ranged from what's taught in English class all the way to conspiracy theories involving iris scans.

“Common Core refers to a set of national education standards adopted by 45 states, including Florida. They came out of years of discussion between private nonprofit groups and state education departments.”

PolitiFact Florida reviewed comments from the hearings and found that several of the most dramatic criticisms aren't backed up by the facts. Here is a brief review of some of their findings (see individual reports for more details).

Common Core refers to a set of national education standards adopted by forty-five states, including Florida. They came out of years of discussion between private nonprofit groups and state education departments.

The goals: to better prepare students for college and careers and to ensure that students in different states learn the same academic concepts.

The Obama administration has used its education grant process, Race to the Top, to encourage states to use the new Standards, but no state is required to adhere to Common Core.

One frequent complaint at the hearings is that tea party groups were not involved in developing the standards.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative, the official group that organizes the standards, says that's not the case.

We wanted more evidence, so we talked to teachers who actually participated in the process.

Becky Pittard, a Volusia County elementary math teacher, served on a team that developed math standards. She said she was puzzled by any suggestion that teachers were left out.

“I can tell you the equal sign standard is there because I insisted,” she said, referring to a first-grade guideline on understanding the meaning of the symbol. “There was impact.”

Many states assembled teams of teachers to review the new standards, including Florida. Deputy Chancellor Mary Jane Tappen sent an email to selected teachers in November 2009 expressly for that purpose.

“You are receiving this email because you are a trusted and respected expert in your field,” Tappen wrote. “Florida must provide input on this very first draft of the Common Core National Standards by December 4. ...I will be collecting and compiling all our work into one Florida response.”

PolitiFact Florida rated the claim that teachers weren't involved in creating the standards as FALSE.

Another claim: Common Core Standards will dramatically increase the amount of personal information the federal government collects.

“There are over 300 data elements the government is going to be collecting about your children and about you,” Tim Curtis, an activist with the tea party group 9/12, said in Tampa.





His claim has a kernel of truth: Florida requires school districts to keep student information. Some of it is required by the state, while other elements are optional, or only kept at the local level, such as bus stop numbers. The list includes students' race, test scores, attendance, and many more factors.

However, those requirements have existed for decades—long before Common Core came along. States collect the data to help them make decisions.

The U.S. Department of Education has routine access to some data, but that data is aggregated and stripped of personally identifiable information.

In fact, laws predating Common Core prohibit a federal database of personally identifiable information on students.

“Florida has no plans to change the data it collects that is linked to Common Core,” said Florida Department of Education spokeswoman Cheryl Etters.

We told Curtis that multiple educational experts said Common Core doesn't require new data collection.

“I can shoot down that claim with a single explanation,” Curtis said. “The Polk County school district began to do iris screening on school children and they did so without notifying their parents. They did so as a result of the beginning of the implementation of Common Core.”

According to the Florida Department of Education, the screening was intended to route children onto the proper bus and wasn't related to Common Core.

We rated the claim that Common Core means 300 points of data being collected as MOSTLY FALSE.

Another criticism of Common Core Standards is that they will reduce the reading of fiction and literature.

“Common Core expects English teachers to spend **at least half of their reading instructional time** at every grade level on informational texts,” said Sandra Stotsky, an education professor at the University of Arkansas and staunch critic of the Common Core. Stotsky didn't respond to a request for comment.

Common Core Standards do emphasize informational texts, particularly in history, social studies, science, and other technical subjects.

News reports suggest that English teachers are using more informational texts in their classrooms as they move to the Common Core. An October 15 story in “The Hechinger Report” found one teacher replaced the novel *The Great Gatsby*, with a memoir, *The Glass Castle*.

However, the idea that English teachers must spend half their time on informational texts misreads the Standards.

Common Core follows a framework that spells out percentages of literary versus informational texts by grade level. It calls for a 50 percent/50 percent split in grade four, with an increasing emphasis on informational texts in later grades. In grade 12, the split is 30 percent/70 percent.

However, those percentages are meant to reflect the sum of student reading, not just in English.

To meet the 30-percent threshold for literary reading at grade 12, an English teacher would have to focus on stories, novels, and plays, said Timothy Shanahan,

a retired education professor and a member of the English Language Arts Work Team for the Common Core State Standards Initiative.

PolitiFact Florida rated the claim that English teachers must spend half their time on informational texts as FALSE.

One of the most dramatic claims we found against Common Core came from published materials from the Florida Stop Common Core Coalition. The standards aim “to instill federally determined attitudes and mindsets in students **including political and religious beliefs,**” states a report on the group’s website.

We found nothing in the standards that suggested any level of government was telling students what political or religious beliefs they should personally hold.

So what evidence do the critics have for saying the Common Core will instill political and religious beliefs?

The Coalition’s report zeroes in on lists of hundreds of data elements a school district might keep on its students. The report linked to a screen grab it created of data elements from the National Education Data Model.

The list shown includes “voting status,” and “religious consideration,” and “religious affiliation.”

But this is not a required list of data for all states or school districts to collect.

So why are the fields on voting and religion even there?

We interviewed Alexander Jackl, chief architect of Choice Solutions, Inc., an education data software company. He’s also one of the original authors of the National Education Data Model.

The data fields are all optional, and the fields for religion are useful for private, religious schools, he said.

We contacted several Florida school districts to ask if they collect data on voting status, political affiliation, or religious affiliations, or if they plan to start doing that with Common Core. They all said no.

The Florida Department of Education does not require school districts to ask about those subjects and has no plan to do so under Common Core, Etters said.

So the evidence—a computer model that has a data field for voting status or religion, typically used by a private school—is a far cry from the federal government attempting to instill particular religious or political beliefs. ■

This article first appeared on the *Tampa Bay Times’* Politifact.com, on Monday, October 21st, 2013.

AAE and the Common Core State Standards

Teachers, administrators, education reformers, and parents across the country have varying opinions on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Opinions range from “*the common core is ruining education*” to “*the common core is the country’s best innovation in education.*” It can be hard to weed through the hype and form an educated opinion about CCSS.

AAE has not taken a position on the issue because our members have not expressed a super majority opinion either way. As a member-driven organization we polled members on the merits of CCSS in 2013. Overall, while the jury is still out on the implementation process and its effect on the flexibility of curriculum, AAE members appear to be moving in the direction of support for consistent standards:

- Thirty-six percent of respondents believe the CCSS will make the U.S. more competitive on a global scale. Fifty-three percent believed they would have no effect, and 11 percent assert that CCSS will have an adverse effect on global competitiveness.
- However, 64 percent of survey respondents believe that CCSS will provide more consistency in the quality of education between school districts and between states.
- Forty-eight percent of teachers believe CCSS implementation is running smoothly, while 41 percent of teachers are neutral, and 11 percent believe implementation in their state is going poorly.

Ninety percent of our member educators are in the process of implementing CCSS. AAE seeks to give members the opportunity to voice their views on the subject and participate in a process that will work to establish best practices for these Standards. While AAE does not outright endorse CCSS as an organization, we support teachers, and are interested in providing educators with a seat at the table.

In February 2014, AAE will release the annual membership survey, revealing further statistics regarding AAE member opinions on the Common Core. Look for the data in the February edition! ■





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Merry Christmas and
Happy Holidays from all
of us at the Association
of American Educators

