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Common Core Standards: Ten Colossal Errors

By Anthony Cody on November 16, 2013 6:18 AM

A recent book described the **"Reign of Errors"** we have lived through in the name of education reform. I am afraid that the Common Core continues many of these errors, and makes some new ones as well.

The Business Roundtable announced last month that its **#1 priority** is the full adoption and implementation of the Common Core standards. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is likewise making a full-court press to **advance the Common Core**. Major corporations have taken out full-page ads to insist that the Common Core must be adopted. Many leading figures in the Republican party, like Jeb Bush, have **led the charge** for Common Core, as have entrepreneurs like **Joel Klein**. And the project has become a centerpiece for President Obama's Department of Education.

Yet in New York, the first large state to implement the tests associated with the new standards, students, parents and principals are **expressing grave concerns** about the realities of the Common Core. Common Core proponents like Arne Duncan have been quick to **ridicule critics** as misinformed ideologues or delusional paranoiacs. Defenders of the common standards, like Duncan and Commissioner John King in New York, insist that only members of the Tea Party oppose the Common Core. In spite of this, the opposition is growing, and as more states begin to follow New York's lead, resistance is sure to grow.

With this essay, I want to draw together the central concerns I have about the project. I am not reflexively against any and all standards. Appropriate standards, tied to subject matter, allow flexibility to educators. Teachers ought to be able to tailor their instruction the needs of their students. Loose standards allow educators to work together, to share strategies and curriculum, and to build common assessments for authentic learning. Such standards are necessary and valuable; they set goals and aspirations and create a common framework so that students do not encounter the same materials in different grades. They are not punitive, nor are they tethered to expectations that yield failure for anyone unable to meet them.

The Common Core website has a section devoted to **debunking "myths"** about the Common Core—but many of these supposed myths are quite true. I invite anyone to provide factual evidence that disproves any of the information that follows. (And for the sake of transparency, I ask anyone who disputes this evidence to disclose any payments they or their organization has received for promoting or implementing the Common Core.)

Here are ten major errors being made by the Common Core project, and why I believe it will do more harm than good.

Error #1: The process by which the Common Core standards were developed and adopted was undemocratic.

At the state level in the past, the process to develop standards has been a public one, led by committees of educators and content experts, who shared their drafts, invited reviews by teachers, and encouraged teachers to try out the new standards with real children in real classrooms, considered the feedback, made alterations where necessary, and held public hearings before final adoption.

The Common Core had a very different origin. When I first learned of the process to write new national standards underway in 2009, it was a challenge to figure out who was doing the writing. I eventually learned that a "confidential" process was under way, **involving 27 people on two Work Groups**, including a significant number from the testing industry. Here are the affiliations of those 27: ACT (6), the College Board (6), Achieve Inc. (8), Student Achievement Partners (2), America's Choice (2). Only three participants were outside of these five organizations. ONLY ONE classroom teacher WAS involved—on the committee to review the math standards.

This committee was expanded the next year, and additional educators were **added to the process**. But the process to write the standards remained secret, with few opportunities for input from parents, students and educators. No experts in language acquisition or special education were involved, and no effort was made to see how the standards worked in practice, or whether they were realistic and attainable.

David Coleman is credited publicly as being the **"architect" of the process**. He, presumably, had a large role in writing the English Language Arts standards; Jason Zimba of Bennington College was the **lead author for the math standards**. Interestingly, David Coleman and Jason Zimba were also members of Michelle Rhee's **StudentsFirst original board of directors**.

The organizations leading the creation of the Common Core invited public comments on them. We were told that 10,000 comments were submitted, but they were never made public. The **summary of public feedback** quotes only 24 of the responses, so we are left only with the Common Core sponsors' interpretation of the rest.

The process for adopting the Common Core was remarkably **speedy and expedient**. Once the standards were finalized and copyrighted, all that was required for states to adopt them were two signatures: the governor and the state superintendent of education. Two individuals made

that was required for states to adopt them were two signatures: the governor and the state superintendent of education. Two individuals made this decision in state after state, largely without public hearings or input. Robert Scott, former state Commissioner of Education in Texas, **said that he was asked to approve** the standards before there was even a final draft.

The Common Core process could not have been directly paid for by the federal Department of Education, which is prevented by law from enacting or promoting national standards. So **Bill Gates footed the bill**. The Gates Foundation has, so far, paid $191 million to develop and promote the Common Core. Of that sum, $33 million was earmarked for the development of the Common Core. The remaining $158 million was spent on myriad organizations to buy their active support for the standards—with **$19 million awarded just in the past month**. Many of the voices in the public arena, including teacher unions, the national PTA, journalistic operations like John Merrow's Learning Matters, and the National Catholic Educational Association, have received grants for such work.

Although specifically prohibited from interfering in the curriculum or instruction in the nation's classrooms, the federal Department of Education has used threats and bribes to coerce states to adopt Common Core. Indeed, the active role of the U.S. Department of Education in supporting, advocating for, and defending the Common Core **may be illegal**, as may the Department's award of $350 million to develop tests for the Common Core. The Department might reasonably argue that it was appropriate to encourage the development of "better" tests, but in this case the tests were specifically intended to support only one set of standards: the Common Core.

Public Law 103-33, General Education Provisions Act, sec 432, reads as follows:

> No provision of any applicable program shall be construed to authorize any department, agency, officer, or employee of the United States to exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, [or] administration...of any educational institution...or over the selection of library resources, textbooks, or other printed or published instructional materials...

In spite of this prohibition, Race to the Top gave major points to states that adopted "college and career ready standards" such as Common Core.

Here is what the **Memorandum of Understanding** that state officers were asked to sign said about federal support:

> ...the federal government can provide key financial support for this effort in developing a common core of state standards and in moving toward common assessments, such as through the Race to the Top Fund authorized in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Further, the federal government can incentivize this effort through a range of tiered incentives, such as providing states with greater flexibility in the use of existing federal funds, supporting a revised state accountability structure, and offering financial support for states to effectively implement the standards.

When the Department of Education announced Race to the Top there was a complex application process with a short timeline. The Gates Foundation created a process where their staff would assist states in applying for RttT grants. In order to receive this help, state leaders had to fill out a qualifying questionnaire. The first question on the **qualifying criteria questionnaire** is, "Has your state signed the MOA regarding the Common Core Standards currently being developed by NGA/CCSSO? [Answer must be "yes"]"

Thus, the Gates Foundation worked within the Race to the Top process to apply additional pressure on states to sign on to the Common Core.

Coming at a time when state education budgets were under great pressure, these inducements were significant in overcoming any hesitations on the part of most governors. The pressure continues, as NCLB waivers depend on the adoption of "college and career ready standards," which are most readily provided by the Common Core.

It is also worth noting that alongside the adoption of Common Core standards, both Race to the Top and NCLB waivers being issued by the Department of Education require states to include test scores in the evaluations of teachers and principals. This is a package deal.

Error #2: The Common Core State Standards violate what we know about how children develop and grow.

One of the problems with the blinkered development process described above is that **no experts on early childhood** were included in the drafting or internal review of the Common Core.

In response to the Common Core, more than 500 experts signed the Joint Statement of Early Childhood Health and Education Professionals on the Common Core Standards Initiative. This statement now seems prophetic in light of what is happening in classrooms. The key **concerns they raised were**:

1.   Such standards will lead to long hours of instruction in literacy and math.

2.   They will lead to inappropriate standardized testing

3.   Didactic instruction and testing will crowd out other important areas of learning.

4.   There is little evidence that such standards for young children lead to later success.

 Many states are now developing standards and tests for children in kindergarten, 1st grade, and 2nd grade, to "prepare" them for the Common Core. Early childhood education experts agree that this is developmentally inappropriate. Young children do not need to be subjected to standardized tests. Just recently, the parents of a k-2 school refused to allow their children to be tested. They were right to do so.

Error #3: The Common Core is inspired by a vision market-driven innovation enabled by standardization of curriculum, tests, and ultimately, our children themselves.

There are two goals here that are intertwined. The first is to create a system where learning outcomes are measurable, and students and their teachers can be efficiently compared and ranked on a statewide and national basis. The second is to use standardization to create a national market for curriculum and tests. The two go together, because the collection of data allows the market to function by providing measurable outcomes. Bill Gates has not spoken too much recently about the Common Core, but in 2009, he was **very clear about the project's goals**.

He said that

> ...identifying common standards is just the starting point. We'll only know if this effort has succeeded when the curriculum and tests are aligned to these standards. Secretary Arne Duncan recently announced that $350 million of the stimulus package will be used to create just these kinds of tests - "Next Generation assessments," aligned to the Common Core. When the tests are aligned to the common standards, the curriculum will line up as well. And it will unleash a powerful market of people providing services for better teaching. For the first time, there will be a large, uniform base of customers looking at using products that can help every kid learn, and every teacher get better.

 This sentiment was shared by the U.S. Department of Education, as was made clear when Arne Duncan's Chief of Staff, Joanne Weiss, **wrote this in 2011**:

> 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.

In the market-driven system enabled by the Common Core, the "best products" will be those which yield the highest test scores. As Gates said: "The standards will tell the teachers what their students are supposed to learn, and the data will tell them whether they're learning it."

Thus, the overriding goal of the Common Core and the associated tests seems to be to create a national marketplace for products. As an educator, I find this objectionable. The central idea is that innovation and creative change in education will only come from entrepreneurs selling technologically based "learning systems." In my 24 years in high poverty schools in Oakland, the most inspiring and effective innovations were generated by **teachers collaborating with one another**, motivated not by the desire to get wealthy, but by their dedication to their students.

Error #4: The Common Core creates a rigid set of performance expectations for every grade level, and results in tightly controlled instructional timelines and curriculum.

At the heart of the Common Core is standardization. Every student, without exception, is expected to reach the same benchmarks at every grade level. Early childhood educators know better than this. Children develop at different rates, and we do far more harm than good when we begin labeling them "behind" at an early age.

The Common Core also emphasizes measurement of every aspect of learning, leading to absurdities such as the ranking of the "complexity" of novels according to an **arcane index called the Lexile score**. This number is derived from an algorithm that looks at sentence length and vocabulary. Publishers submit works of literature to be scored, and we discover that Mr. Popper's Penguins is more "rigorous" than Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath. Cue the **Thomas B. Fordham Institute to moan** that teachers are not assigning books of sufficient difficulty, as the Common Core mandates.

This sort of ranking ignores the real complexities within literature, and is emblematic of the reductionist thinking at work when everything must be turned into a number. To be fair, the **Common Core English Language Arts standards** suggest that qualitative indicators of complexity be used along with quantitative ones. However in these systems, the quantitative measures often seem to trump the qualitative.

Carol Burris recently **shared a 1st grade Pearson math test** that is aligned to the Common Core standards for that grade level.

Would (or should) a 6 year old understand the question, "*Which is a related subtraction sentence?*" My nephew's wife, who teaches Calculus, was stumped by that one.

Keep in mind that many New York State first graders are still 5 years old at the beginning of October, when this test was given.

You can **review the first grade module for yourself**, and imagine any five or six year olds you might know grappling with this.

 The most alarming thing is the explanation Burris offers for how these standards were defined:

If you read Commissioner John King's Powerpoint slide 18, which **can be found here,** you see that the Common Core standards were "backmapped" from a description of 12th grade college-ready skills. There is no evidence that early childhood experts were consulted to ensure that the standards were appropriate for young learners. Every parent knows that their kids do not develop according to a "back map"--young children develop through a complex interaction of biology and experience that is unique to the child and which cannot be rushed.

Error #5: The Common Core was designed to be implemented through an expanding regime of high-stakes tests, which will consume an unhealthy amount of time and money.

It is theoretically possible to separate the Common Core standards from an intensified testing regime, and leaders in California are attempting to do just that. However, as Bill Gates' remarks in 2009 indicate, the project was conceived as a vehicle to expand and rationalize tests on a national basis. The expansion is in the form of ever-more frequent benchmark and "formative" tests, as well as exams in previously untested subjects.

Most estimates of cost focus only on the tests themselves. The Smarter Balanced Common Core tests require the use of relatively new computers. Existing computers are often inadequate and cannot handle the "computer adaptive tests," or the new Common Core aligned curriculum packages. This was one of the reasons given to justify the expenditure of $1 billion of construction bonds on iPads and associated Pearson Common Core aligned curriculum software in Los Angeles. The Pioneer Institute **pegs the cost of full implementation** of the Common Core at $16 billion nationally - but if others follow the Los Angeles model those costs could go much higher.

The cost in terms of instructional time is even greater, so long as tests remain central to our accountability systems. Common Core comes with a greatly expanded set of tests. In New York City, a typical 5th grade student this year will spend 500 minutes (ten fifty-minute class periods) taking baseline and benchmark tests, plus another 540 minutes on the Common Core tests in the spring. Students at many schools will have to spend an additional 200 minutes on NYC Performance Assessments, being used to evaluate their teachers. Students who are English learners take a four-part ESL test on top of all of the above.

Thus testing under the Common Core in New York will consume at least two weeks worth of instructional time out of the school year. And time not spent taking tests will be dominated by preparing for tests, since everyone's evaluation is based on them.

Error #6: Proficiency rates on the new Common Core tests have been dramatically lower—by design.

Given that we have attached all sorts of consequences to these tests, this could have disastrous consequences for students and teachers. Only 31 percent of students who took Common Core aligned tests in New York **last spring were rated proficient**. On the English Language Arts test, about 16 percent of African American students were proficient, five percent of students with disabilities, and 3% of English Learners. Last week, the state of North Carolina announced a **similar drop in proficiency rates**. Thus we have a system that, in the name of "rigor," will **deepen the achievement gaps**, and condemn more students and schools as failures.

Because of the "rigor," many students—as many as 30 percent—will not get a high school diploma. What will our society do with the large numbers of students who were unable to meet the Common Core Standards? Will we have a generation of hoboes and unemployables? Many of these young people might find trades and jobs that suit them, but they may never be interviewed due to their lack of a diploma. This repeats and expands on the error made with high school exit exams, which have been found to significantly **increase levels of incarceration** among the students who do not pass them—while offering no real educational benefits.

It should be noted that the number of students (or schools) that we label as failures is not some scientifically determined quantity. The number is a result of where the all-important "cut score" is placed. If you want more to pass, you can lower that cut score, as was **done in Florida in 2012**. The process to determine cut scores in New York was likewise highly political, and officials **knew before the tests were even given** the outcome they wanted.

Error #7: Common Core relies on a narrow conception of the purpose of K-12 education as "career and college readiness."

When one reads the official rationales for the Common Core there is little question about the utilitarian philosophy at work. Our children must

be prepared to "compete in the global economy." This runs against the grain of the historic purpose of public education, which was to prepare citizens for our democracy, with the knowledge and skills to live fruitful lives and improve our society.

A group of 130 Catholic scholars recently sent a letter expressing their opposition to the Common Core. They wrote,

> The sad facts about Common Core are most visible in its reduction in the study of classic, narrative fiction in favor of "informational texts." This is a dramatic change. It is contrary to tradition and academic studies on reading and human formation. Proponents of Common Core do not disguise their intention to transform "literacy" into a "critical" skill set, at the expense of sustained and heartfelt encounters with great works of literature.

Error #8: The Common Core is associated with an attempt to collect more student and teacher data than ever before.

Parents are rightfully alarmed about the massive collection of their children's private data, made possible by the US department of education's decision in 2011 to loosen the regulations of FERPA , so that student data could be collected by third parties without parental consent.

There are legitimate privacy concerns, for both students and teachers, as data, once collected, can be used for all sorts of purposes. The vision that every student's performance could be tracked from preschool through their working lives may be appealing to a technocrat like Bill Gates, but it is a bit frightening to many parents.

This is one aspect of the project that is already in big trouble. The Gates Foundation invested about $100 million to create inBloom, a nonprofit organization that would build a system to store the massive amount of student data their reform project requires. However, as parent concerns over privacy have grown, seven of the nine states that had signed up to use the system have withdrawn. Only Illinois and New York remain involved, and in New York this week a lawsuit was filed to block the project.

Error #9: The Common Core is not based on any external evidence, has no research to support it, has never been tested, and worst of all, has no mechanism for correction.

The Memorandum of Understanding signed by state leaders to opt in to the Common Core allows the states to change a scant 15 percent of the standards they use. There is no process available to revise the standards. They must be adopted as written. As William Mathis (2012) points out,

"As the absence or presence of rigorous or national standards says nothing about equity, educational quality, or the provision of adequate educational services, there is no reason to expect CCSS or any other standards initiative to be an effective educational reform *by itself*."

Error #10: The biggest problem of American education and American society is the growing number of children living in poverty. As was recently documented by the Southern Education Fund (and reported in the Washington Post) across the American South and West, a majority of our children are now living in poverty.

The Common Core does nothing to address this problem. In fact, it is diverting scarce resources and time into more tests, more technology for the purpose of testing, and into ever more test preparation.

In conclusion: Common standards, if crafted in a democratic process and carefully reviewed by teachers and tested in real classrooms, might well be a good idea. But the Common Core does not meet any of those conditions.

The Common Core has been presented as a paradigmatic shift beyond the test-and-punish policies of NCLB. However, we are seeing the mechanisms for testing, ranking, rewarding and punishing simply refined, and made even more consequential for students, teachers and schools. If we use the critical thinking the Common Core claims to promote, we see this is old wine in a new bottle, and it turned to vinegar long ago.

For all these reasons, I believe any implementation of the Common Core should be halted. The very corporations that are outsourcing good jobs are promoting the Common Core, which deflects attention from their failure to the nation's economy and their failure as good citizens. I do not believe the standards themselves are significantly better than those of most states, and thus they do not offer any real advantages. The process by which they were adopted was undemocratic, and lacking in meaningful input from expert educators. The early results we see from states that are on the leading edge provide evidence of significant damage this project is causing to students already. No Child Left Behind has failed, and we need a genuine shift in our educational paradigm, not the fake-out provided by Common Core.

The frustration evident in recent public hearings in New York is a powerful indicator of a process gone badly awry. The public was not consulted in any meaningful way on decisions to fundamentally alter the substance of teaching and learning in the vast majority of schools in our nation. This process and the content of these standards are deeply flawed, and the means by which student performance is measured

continues to damage children.

This did not happen by accident. Powerful people have decided that because they have the money and influence to make things happen, they can do so. But in a democracy, the people ought to have the last word. Decisions such as this ought not be made at secret gatherings of billionaires and their employees. The education of the next generations of Americans is something we all have a stake in.

And so, fellow citizens: Speak Up, Opt Out, Teach On!

What do you think? Is it time to end the reign of Common Core errors?

Update, 11/18: I have posted **two responses from educators** who believe there are positive aspects to the Common Core, and we should avoid throwing them out entirely, and **my response**, explaining how I think defeating the Common Core could open the door to a better process.

Continue the dialogue with **Anthony on Twitter.**

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