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Common Core vs. Common Sense

By Ronald A. Wolk

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The headline in a recent edition of *Education Week* read, "Hopes Pinned on Standards to Boost College Readiness: SAT results show no improvement in any tested subject."

We've been pinning our hopes on standards for more than two decades with little to show for it. About half of our high school graduates are no better prepared for college or work than they were 20 years ago, when standards and testing became the nation's school improvement strategy.

Now, all but a few states are on the verge of implementing the ultimate phase of that strategy: the new common-core standards in mathematics and English/language arts for grades K-12, soon to be followed by new assessments supported by $500 million in federal grant money.

The Common Core State Standards are much better than the state standards they replace because they focus on analysis, understanding, concepts, and skills more than specific content. A great deal of thought has gone into formulating them. They are championed by business leaders, politicians, foundations, and educators.

If a majority of American youngsters were to graduate from school with the knowledge and skills embodied in these standards, they and the larger society would benefit enormously.

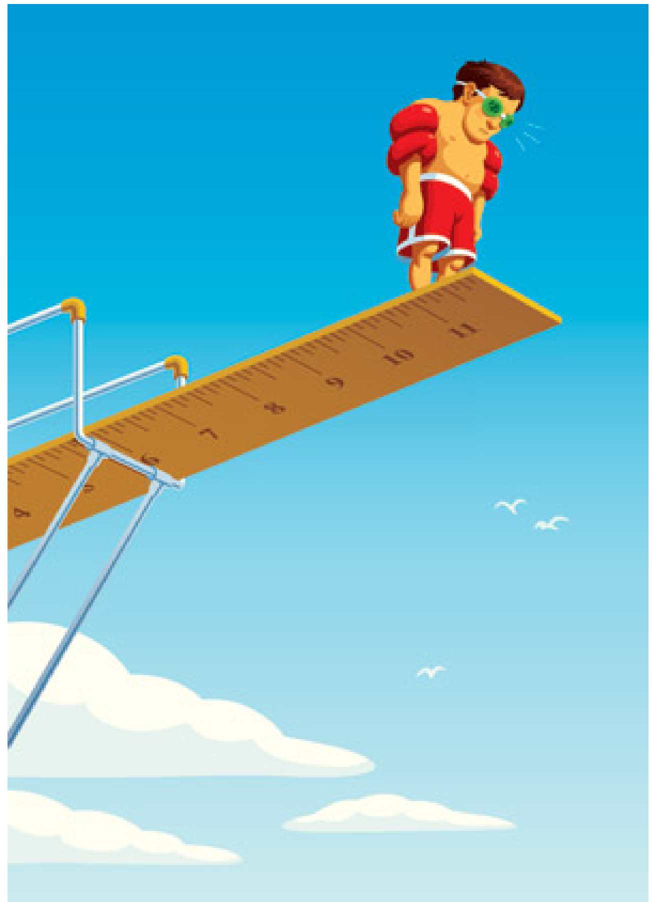
But that would require a miracle.

Here's why:

• We still do not have the opportunity-to-learn standards called for by the founders of the standards movement in the late 1980s. We still have not eradicated the glaring and persistent discrimination that condemns millions of low-income, minority, and immigrant students to a poor or mediocre education that does not prepare them to meet the new common standards. Last year, nearly half of the nation's schools failed to make "adequately yearly progress" under the **No Child Left Behind Act**. The evidence shows that efforts to "turn around" failing schools seldom work and often are counterproductive.

• Our present teacher workforce has not been trained to teach the way the new standards require,

and prospective teachers are not being adequately prepared for the challenge. Moreover, we need at least 200,000 additional math and science teachers to replace those retiring or leaving for other jobs or who did not major in math or science. According to a 2007 **report** from the National Academies Press, more than two-thirds (69 percent) of 5th to 8th graders are being taught math by teachers without a mathematics degree or certificate, and 93 percent of those same students are being taught physical sciences by teachers with no physical science degree or certificate.



—Illustration by Chris Whetzel

• The organization and scheduling of the traditional school are incompatible with the kind of teaching and learning required by the new standards. Time is still the constant, and learning is the variable. Traditional schools largely ignore the diversity of today's students—their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, the way they learn, their strengths and weaknesses, their interests and aspirations—and deliver the same education to all students in the same way at the same time.

• Society would have to commit substantially more financial resources—not just to provide more teachers, up-to-date science labs, renovated school buildings, and adequate learning materials, but to address more effectively the rampant poverty in society that undermines our educational efforts.

To have even a hope of overcoming those problems, we would need a couple of decades, a herculean effort, and incredible luck.

So, at this critical point, the nation's governors and legislators should pause to consider the unintended consequences of fully implementing these new standards in the near future.

By compelling schools, teachers, and students to meet standards they are not equipped to meet, we are likely to do serious harm to millions of young people and the larger society.

Some 27 percent of our high school students now **drop out of school**—many because they fall behind early, never catch up, and come to accept failure as inevitable. Half of those who earn a diploma are not adequately prepared for college or the modern workplace. And half of those who enter college drop out by the end of senior year without a degree.

Even though student scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in math have steadily improved since 1992 and are at their highest point in 20 years, about 60 percent of our students are still not proficient. Reading scores have remained virtually flat during that period, and the percentage of students not proficient in reading is also about 60 percent.

Is it reasonable to expect that just because the new common-core standards are better and more demanding, these lagging students will suddenly rise to meet them?

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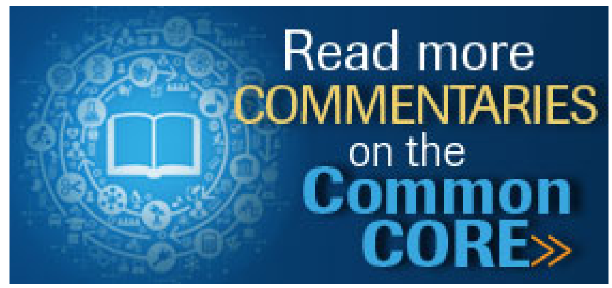
larger society."

We know from experience that standards do not educate people. Without the organization, resources, and trained workforce necessary to meet them, standards are worth little, and people cannot be compelled to meet them. Keep in mind that the U.S. Congress mandated that every student would be proficient in reading and math by 2014. How's that working out?

The common standards would be more likely to succeed ultimately if they were initially limited to grades K-6, where the necessary foundation must be laid for meeting the middle and high school standards. Many students now in grades 7-12 cannot read for comprehension and have not learned basic math. They have not been prepared to meet the demands of the common core, and it is unfair to raise the bar for them at this point. If we do, we will either lose more of them or, as has been the case in the past, we will lower test cutoff scores and pass them through the system without the skills and knowledge that standards-makers deem to be indispensable.



During the next seven years that it takes a whole generation of elementary students to meet the K-6 standards, educators and policymakers should concentrate on redesigning the last six years of school to align with reality and the needs of students and society and to be compatible with the kind of teaching and learning embodied in the new standards.

A dedicated minority of educators and policymakers have been working over the past few decades to do just that. They have worked to create schools where the student is at the center; where education is personalized for each student and is anchored in the real world; where teachers are "advisers" and students are busy educating themselves under their guidance; where new technology is integral to education.

The best hope for the success of the common-core standards is to first redesign schools so they provide the kind of learning environment where the spirit of the new standards can flourish, and their objectives are most likely to be met.

Ronald A. Wolk is the founder and former editor of Education Week *and the chair emeritus of the board of its nonprofit publisher, Editorial Projects in Education. He is also the chairman of Big Picture Learning, a nonprofit organization in Providence, R.I., that creates innovative schools, and the author of* Wasting Minds: Why Our Education System Is Failing and What We Can Do About It *(ASCD, 2011). The views expressed in this Commentary are his own.*

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