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Does the Common Core Matter?

By Tom Loveless

The **2012 Brown Center Report on American Education** includes a study of the Common Core State Standards project. It attempts to predict the effect of the common core on student achievement. The study focuses on three arguments: that the quality of the common core is superior to that of existing standards, that the tests tied to the common core will be rigorous, and that having common standards will reduce differences across the United States by "putting all states on the same page." It summarizes the current debate on the common core, but takes no stand on the merits of the arguments.

For example, the study does not attempt to determine whether the common-core standards are of high or low quality, only whether the quality of state standards has mattered to student achievement in the past. The finding is clear: The quality of standards has not mattered. From 2003 to 2009, states with terrific standards raised their National Assessment of Educational Progress scores by roughly the same margin as states with awful ones.

The analysis of rigor takes the same tack. It investigates whether it has mattered to state NAEP scores if cut points for proficiency on state tests were set at high or low levels. There is evidence at 4th grade that raising cut points, no matter where they were set originally, is associated with increased achievement. But the effect is not large, and it is difficult to determine the direction of causality. At 8th grade, states with lenient cut points have made NAEP gains similar to those of states with rigorous ones.

The third analysis points out a statistical fact about NAEP scores: Test-score differences within states are about four to five times greater than differences in state means. We all know of the huge difference between Massachusetts and Mississippi on NAEP. What often goes unnoticed is that every state in the nation has a mini-Massachusetts-Mississippi contrast within its own borders. Common state standards might reduce variation between states, but it is difficult to imagine how they will reduce variation within states. After all, districts and schools within the same state have been operating under common standards for several years and, in some states, for decades.

Critics of the study make several points. The most popular is that no one should be surprised that standards by themselves are inconsequential. Standards that simply sit on a shelf are certain to have no effect. Solid curricula, excellent teaching, good assessment, sound accountability systems, and many other things must fall into place for the promise of standards to be realized.

I don't know anyone who believes something as silly as the power of standards to effect change from the shelf. The people who raise this point are really asserting something about implementation: that past



standards-setters in education didn't appreciate the importance of implementation, that they employed the wrong implementation strategies, or that they did not possess today's new, more powerful strategies.

As both a former practitioner and a current scholar, I am skeptical of these assertions. Past standards-setters were neither as naive nor as passive as the portrait suggests. Professional development, curriculum, assessment, and accountability were not invented yesterday—nor was alignment. As a 6th grade teacher in California for most of the 1980s, I experienced the adoption of several sets of new standards (called "frameworks") and new textbooks in all of the academic subjects. I was professionally developed up one side and down the other. Once a year, my school's test scores were published in the local newspaper. In case we teachers ignored the scores—or the standards—a "program quality review" team visited the school every three years to remind us of what the state recommended. And the team wrote reports that suggested curricular materials and teaching strategies as alternatives to those we were using.

Similar stories can be told in many states. Standards have been a central activity of education reform for the past three decades. I have studied education reform and its implementation since I left the classroom in 1988. I don't know of a single state that adopted standards, patted itself on the back, and considered the job done. Not one. States have tried numerous ways to better their schools through standards. And yet, good and bad standards and all of those in between, along with all of the implementation tools currently known to policymakers, have produced outcomes that indicate one thing: Standards do not matter very much.

Several commentators on the Brown Center study—including Richard Lee Colvin, Chester E. Finn Jr., and Sandy Kress—disagree with this interpretation and argue that the empirical evidence means that standards are necessary but not sufficient. No, the evidence does not support that notion. Consider the "sitting on the shelf" reasoning. It only applies to the states with good standards, not the states with bad ones. You want the states with bad standards to walk right past the shelf and toss their standards out with the trash. You certainly don't want anything important downstream to be aligned with bad standards. But states with bad standards have succeeded in making NAEP gains that are statistically indistinguishable from those of states with good standards. How can that be if good standards are necessary?

We all agree that a huge number of policy pieces must fall into place for standards to affect classrooms. It is quite possible that states with bad standards made better decisions in other areas. Maybe they were inept at standards but good at improving teaching and curriculum. If it's good teaching, strong curriculum, robust accountability, and a dozen other policy pieces that must snap into place for significant improvement to occur, and standards are a net neutral on those events' occurrence, then perhaps standards need not be the starting point. Maybe those other policies are better at driving improvement. Perhaps strong curriculum should be developed first and then all of the other pieces could be built around it. I don't know that this is necessarily so, but we should be open to the possibility.

I do not mention curriculum accidentally. Advocates place great faith that the common core will spawn new and better curricula. Such faith is misplaced. Kathleen Porter-Magee notes that the Brown Center study ignored a very important evaluation of elementary math curricula. Actually, that evaluation, conducted by Mathematica, should give common-core advocates pause. Four programs were randomly assigned to schools with large disadvantaged populations. Two programs emerged as significantly more effective than the other two. But today if you visit the four programs' websites, all of them declare that their texts—after some tweaking perhaps—are in alignment with the common core. My hunch is that every new curriculum developed in the next few years, whether effective or not, will make the same claim.

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Effectiveness, not alignment, should be the primary criterion for selecting curricula, disseminating promising instructional strategies, and pursuing all of the other implementation strategies on which common-core advocates are betting so much. They steadfastly believe that "effectiveness" and "alignment with standards" are synonymous. The empirical evidence indicates that they are not.

On the basis of past experience with standards, the most reasonable prediction is that the common core will have little to no effect on student achievement.



Tom Loveless is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and the author of the annual Brown Center Report on American Education, which is published by Brookings. He is a member of the Hoover Institution's Koret Task Force on K-12 Education at Stanford University. He previously served as an associate professor of public policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and as a 6th grade teacher in the San Juan Unified School District in Sacramento, Calif.