# Democracy and National Education Standards

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This article intervenes in the debate about whether democracies should adopt national education standards. For many democrats, national education standards may promote economic growth, social justice, and a common set of interests. In this article, I reconstruct John Dewey's warning against oligarchs using standardization to control the schools as well as his argument that democracy requires student, teacher, and community autonomy. The article argues that the Common Core State Standards Initiative has been a top-down policy that aims to prepare children for the economy rather than democracy, and for the foreseeable future, economic elites will tend to dominate efforts to create national education standards. In the conclusion, I make a pragmatic argument for local education control and address objections such as that democracies need national educational standards to ensure racial equity.

America will not succeed in the 21st century unless we do a far better job of educating our sons and daughters. . . . And the race starts today. I am issuing a challenge to our nation's governors and school boards, principals and teachers, businesses and nonprofits, parents and students: if you set and enforce rigorous and challenging standards . . . your state can win a Race to the Top grant.
—President Barack Obama, July 24, 2009

A democratic society must, in consistency with its ideal, allow for intellectual freedom and the play of diverse gifts and interests in its educational measures.
—John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* ([1916] 2008c)

In 2009, the US Department of Education used $4.35 billion in discretionary funds from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act to administer Race to the Top. Race to the Top was a competitive grant program that awarded grants to states that satisfied certain criteria, including the adoption of "college and career ready" standards, widely understood to be the Common Core standards in math and English language arts (Layton 2014). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 had required states to adopt academic standards, as well as a connected testing and accountability system, but the discrepancies between states frustrated education reformers who thought that America needed a national education system. Though Race to the Top acknowledged the principles of federalism and the Constitutional responsibility of states to direct education policy, the program empowered federal and state actors to fashion de facto national education standards in two key subject areas (Howell 2015; Weiss 2015). In the next few years, Americans will likely debate whether the country should adopt national education standards in the areas of social studies, science, and sexuality education (Engebretson 2014; Pruitt 2014; Schmidt, Wandersman, and Hills 2015). Though the context of this article is the United States, similar debates are happening in democracies around the world (Hartong 2015).

There is an economic explanation for the ascendancy of the idea of national education standards (Hanushek, Peterson, and Woessman 2013; Spring 2015). For over 50 years, Chicago School economists such as Milton Friedman and Gary Becker have argued that schools should teach children the skills needed to compete in the global economy. The World Economic Forum, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the World Bank embrace the "human capital" argument and have been strategizing on how to redesign schools to serve this function. One way is to pressure governments to adopt national standards that are internationally benchmarked to the "hard skills" of literacy and numeracy. In this way, corporations may decide, based on national and international tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), where they may get the best return on investment from the workforce. As we will see below, one cannot make sense of America's first experiment with national education standards without understanding

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human capital arguments and the role of multinational corporations.

The economic explanation, however, does not fully capture the support for national education standards evinced, for example, by certain civil rights organizations (McDonnell and Weatherford 2013; Rhodes 2012; Wolbrecht and Hartney 2014). For the past 20 years, organizations such as Education Trust, the National Council of La Raza, and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund have pushed for national education standards. These organizations shape educational discourse, recruit allies in the legislative and executive branch, and forge coalitions with the business community. Beginning with the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 and continuing through No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, civil rights organizations for standards and accountability (CROSAs) maintain that national education standards are necessary to raise the education bar for all children and ensure that they are ready for college and careers. These civil rights organizations are not "simply the handmaidens of regnant conservative forces, or in the thrall of well-heeled corporate campaign contributors"; their approach is "genuine, internally coherent, and inspired by an egalitarian vision" (Rhodes 2011, 520). Though the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 prohibits the US Secretary of Education from attempting to coerce states to adopt the Common Core standards, the law still empowers the Secretary to withhold Title I funds—used to supplement the budgets of schools serving historically disadvantaged and poor students—from states that have not adopted "challenging state academic standards" such as the Common Core (Klein 2015). America remains embroiled in a debate about whether national education standards are a good idea, and many Americans from across the political spectrum remain committed and think that the problems, and backlash, arise primarily from inconsistent implementation.

This article challenges the idea of national education standards from a democratic perspective. Initially, the article considers how prominent education scholar Linda Darling-Hammond defends the idea of national education standards. Then the article reconstructs John Dewey's work in the philosophy of education and democratic theory to gain a fresh perspective on the question of national education standards. Though Dewey may be amenable to a strong federal policy that helps public schools generate a great community, he also warns against oligarchs using standardization to gain control of the school and insists that teachers and local communities should generate the aims of the school. I subsequently make a Deweyan argument against the Common Core State Standards Initiative on the grounds that it has been coordinated by business groups to make schools focus on predetermined, marketable skills rather than permit, or encourage, community, teacher, and student autonomy. Unlike critics of the Common Core who still support the idea of national education standards, I contend that the economic elite will tend to dominate the project of national education standards for the foreseeable future. In the conclusion, I present a pragmatic argument for local education control and address objections such as that racial equity demands national education standards.

## DEMOCRATIC ARGUMENTS FOR NATIONAL EDUCATION STANDARDS

Linda Darling-Hammond, Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford University, served as director of President Barack Obama's educational policy transition team in 2008 and in 2015 became president and CEO of the Learning Policy Institute. In *The Flat World and Education* (2010), Darling-Hammond explains how national education standards may improve the economy, advance social justice, and generate common interests and thereby strengthen the fabric of American democracy.[1]

According to Darling-Hammond, national education standards may improve the economy and raise the standard of living for many people, including those in communities with a poor track record of educating children. At the beginning of the last century, only a small percentage of jobs required specialized knowledge and skills; now, that number is at least 70%. With the proper training, children will enter the global workforce ready to compete; without it, they face dim prospects for themselves and their communities. With a smart and equitable education system, the country could save hundreds of billions it now loses in low wages, low taxes, social costs, prison construction, and education gimmicks (2010, 2, 328).

Darling-Hammond's next argument for national education standards is that they may remedy America's enduring legacy of racial injustice. The history of American education has been one of exclusion, from the antebellum states that prohibited teaching enslaved people to read to the de facto and de jure exclusion from public schools of Native Americans and Mexican Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Darling-Hammond 2000). Even today, there are wide gaps between the test scores of Asian and white students and black and Hispanic students, and many impoverished minority children attend "apartheid schools." Fortunately, for Darling-Hammond, the big-

1. Unless otherwise noted, internal citations in this section refer to Darling-Hammond (2010).

gest problem in creating the "opportunity gap" between different groups is one that is amenable to solution: the quality of the curriculum. If American public schools offer all students, of whatever racial and economic background, a "thinking curriculum," or one that rich, white communities offer their students as a matter of course, then minority children should be able to close the achievement gap. Citing W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, Darling-Hammond asserts that high academic standards expose children to the liberal arts and launch meaningful careers (28).

Finally, Darling-Hammond contends that national education standards may facilitate the formation of a democratic community of shared interests and concerns. In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey says "in order to have a large number of values in common, all the members of the group must have an equitable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences" (2010, 62). National education standards constitute a "shared undertaking and experience," one that brings together people from across the country and within local communities, lowering the boundaries that have separated rich children from poor ones, white children from minorities, and so forth.[2]

According to Darling-Hammond, curriculum scholars, learning experts, and practitioners should write the kindergarten through 12th grade education standards, and the federal government should help nationalize them. Local education control is a remnant of America's racist, inegalitarian past. "To survive and prosper, our society must finally renounce its obstinate commitment to educational inequality and embrace full and ambitious opportunities to learn for all of our children. . . . Federal education funding to states should be tied to each state's movement toward equitable access to education resources," including curricula aligned to research-based standards (309). Our country is not "50 separate fiefdoms," and there should be one consistent set of academic expectations for all the nation's children, as is the norm in Europe and Asia (316).

In *The Flat World and Education* (2010), Darling-Hammond stipulates several features of high-quality education standards. They should overcome the distinction between a basic skills curriculum for poor and middle-class, or minority, kids and a thinking-oriented curriculum for privileged kids (5). They should identify skills that prepare children for new jobs, technologies, and social conditions such as "critical thinking and problem solving; collaboration; agility and adaptability; initiative and entrepreneurialism; effective and oral communication; accessing and analyzing information; curiosity and imagination" (54). The standards should be based on theoretical and empirical knowledge of how children progress in learning how "to read and write effectively, reason mathematically, inquire scientifically, play music, draw and paint, and understand and analyze history, geography, and social phenomena in the world around them" (297). Ideally, professional associations in the disciplines would develop the standards, revise them over time based on feedback from educators, and, once and for all, end the curriculum wars, for example, over how to teach mathematics (281, 293).

Darling-Hammond acknowledges that standards-based education may narrow the curriculum, make school about test prep, particularly for schools in financially stressed communities, and even facilitate the school-to-prison pipeline if many students do not reach the standards (71, 72, 74). That is why Darling-Hammond insists that standards-based reform must be part of a system that includes many interlocking parts. The country should build a teaching and learning system that trains teachers how to use the standards to improve instruction (80). There should be a professional accountability system based on "high and rigorous standards for teachers" (302); and there should also be standards to hold school administrators accountable, as well as standards for the system itself, based on international assessments (304–5). Finally, the system should provide sufficient financial resources for professional development, well-designed assessments, hiring and retaining teachers, and so forth (73).

Darling-Hammond concludes *The Flat World and Education* with a call to build an education system on the foundation of national standards. "As the fate of individuals and nations is increasingly interdependent, the quest for access to an equitable, empowering education for all people has become a critical issue for the American nation as a whole. As a country, we can and must enter a new era" (328). For Darling-Hammond, the new era of American education should be based on writing high-quality standards, designing thoughtful assessments, structuring fair accountability systems, and funding the whole system so that all American children receive the kind of education that has hitherto been available to children of privilege.

2. One could argue that Linda Darling-Hammond's invocation of Dewey is rhetorical rather than substantive. Yet David Steiner (1994) shows that a close reading of Dewey's philosophy may support education reform, and scholars such as Melvin Rogers (2009) demonstrate that Dewey thinks that experts serve a vital function in modern democracies. We can hear a Deweyan resonance in certain progressive arguments for the Common Core, including its very name. The point of this article, however, is that Dewey offers timely arguments why democrats should oppose top-down, standardizing education reforms in favor of empowering local communities to run the schools.

## DEMOCRATIC ARGUMENTS AGAINST NATIONAL EDUCATION STANDARDS

The notion that democracies should have national education standards has become common sense among policy makers, scholars, and American citizens, many of whom support the idea even if they oppose the Common Core (Henderson, Peterson, and West 2015). Up to now, many of the most prominent critics of the idea of national education standards have been educational conservatives, or libertarians, who want states, or families, to take the lead in educating children (e.g., McCluskey 2010). In this section, I articulate a democratic critique of the idea of national education standards by reconstructing ideas from arguably America's most important philosopher of education and democratic theorist: John Dewey (1859–1952).[3] Dewey wrote before the current debate about standards took shape, and one must translate his ideas for our historical milieu. Yet Dewey challenged the administrative progressives in his own day who wanted to create a factory model of education in large urban school districts (Mehta 2013) and the trend in which wealthy children receive a liberal arts education and the masses get vocational training (Page 2007). Our education debates are analogous to the ones in Dewey's time, and democrats may turn to his work for ideas about how to challenge the consensus that America must have national education standards. This section re-presents Dewey's ideas about the purpose of education, the role of aims, the product of education, and the threat that oligarchs pose to public education.

Dewey acknowledges that a purpose of education is to prepare children for jobs. "If an individual is not able to earn his own living and that of the children dependent upon him, he is a drag or parasite upon the activities of others. . . . No scheme of education can afford to neglect such basic considerations." At the same time, Dewey articulates at least three reasons why schools should not concentrate on training workers or raising human capital. Educators should exercise humility that we do not know precisely what skills will help children succeed in occupations that they will pursue as adults. The purpose of schools is not to perpetuate "unfair privilege and unfair deprivation" by preparing wealthy children for thinking careers and poorer children for industrial vocations ([1916] 2008c, 125–26).[4] And democratic education needs to cultivate an expansive notion of occupations as encompassing "the development of artistic capacity of any kind, of special scientific ability, [and] of effective citizenship" (317). In his moment, Dewey was contesting the notion that public education should prepare poor children to work in factories. That is not the exact same debate as today. And yet Dewey warns democrats that placing too much weight on the economic rationale for education reinforces "existing economic conditions and standards" (126).

Dewey wrote *Democracy and Education* "to detect and state the ideas implied in a democratic society and to apply these ideas to the problems of the enterprise of education" (3). In chapter 9, "Natural Development and Social Efficiency as Aims," he identifies a key idea upon which he will build his philosophy of education: "if democracy has a moral and ideal meaning, it is that a social return be demanded from all and that opportunity for development of distinctive capacities be afforded all" (129). The challenge for democratic education is to reconcile the individual and the community. On the one hand, Dewey believes that schools should nurture each individual child's distinctive talents and interests; on the other hand, schools should prepare children to contribute to the community as well-adjusted, civic-minded adults. A democratic education enables each "individual to make his own special contribution to a group interest, and to partake of his activities in such ways that social guidance shall be a matter of his own mental attitude" (310). Democratic schools strive to educate all children to be unique individuals pursuing their own life plans and socialized individuals concerned about near and distant others.

One task of democratic education is to cultivate the autonomy of the child. In "The School and Society," Dewey announces a "Copernican revolution" in education whereby "the child becomes the sun around which the appliances of education revolve; he is the center about which they are organized" ([1899] 2008a, 23). Rather than express the teacher's desires—to pass on an inherited body of knowledge, to maintain order in the classroom, or to satisfy powerful outsiders—the teacher must discover and cultivate the interests of each child in the classroom. "In the concrete, the value of recognizing the dynamic place of interest in an educative development is that it leads to considering individual children in their specific capabilities, needs, and preferences" (137). Dewey differs from Rousseau and certain self-styled education progressives by insisting that the job of good teachers is to connect the child's interest with the appropriate curricular materials that will advance the child's knowledge and abilities. As much as possible, skilled educators take advantage of a child's curiosity so that school does not feel like drudgery. In this

3. On how Tocqueville provides democratic grounds for local education control, see Tampio (2016).

4. Unless otherwise noted, internal citations in this section refer to Dewey ([1916] 2008c).

way, schools teach children that their own thoughts and desires matter and should influence the social world.

A complementary task of democratic education is to amplify the autonomy of society. "All that society has accomplished for itself is put, through the agency of the school, at the disposal of its future members. All its better thoughts of itself it hopes to realize through the new possibilities thus opened to its future self (Dewey [1899] 2008a, 5). Democrats may reform society through education. Schools are not bound to transmit all aspects of the past, nor should schools act independently of the society that houses them. Society may shape the schools to preserve the best elements of the past and nourish the budding individual and social interests that herald a new democratic community. In his own day, Dewey thought that society, in the throes of the Industrial Revolution, should introduce children to the physical realities of life. The University of Chicago Laboratory School, for instance, taught children to garden and sew in order that they might know the source of food and clothing. As the term "laboratory" suggests, however, Dewey thinks that other communities may experiment with other ways to link school and society.

It is a challenge for schools to reconcile the individual and the community, the school and society, and the child and the curriculum. Schools need aims. "An aim implies an orderly and ordered activity, one in which the order consists in the progressive completing of a process" ([1916] 2008c, 108). An aim identifies a goal: "To foresee a terminus of an act is to have a basis upon which to observe, to select, and to order objects and our own capacities. To do these things means to have a mind—for mind is precisely intentional purposeful activity controlled by perception of facts and their relationships to one another" (110). On one influential definition, standards identify goals (what should be done) and measures of progress toward that goal (how well it is done) (Ravitch 1995, 7). Dewey's conception of aims differs from this notion of standards. Dewey maintains that an aim must be flexible, "a mere tentative sketch," that "must be capable of alteration to meet circumstances" (111). In addition, aims must express the interests, talents, needs, and desires of the student body rather than be an imposition from outside the school.[5]

Who should generate educational aims or standards? Dewey's multiple answers to this question may reflect the tension in his own thinking between a commitment to scientific inquiry and a belief in participatory democracy (Kaufman-Osborn 1984). Dewey wants American public schools to train children to use the scientific method, cultivate their own talents and interests, and make connections with people of different classes, races, genders, and religions.[6] To accomplish this goal seems to require specialists to make the curriculum scaffolds—whether they are called standards or aims—and institute certain procedures to make sure that all children receive an education that prepares children for democratic citizenship. It also seems to justify a strong federal policy to ensure the adequate education of poor and historically disadvantaged communities. Dewey sometimes expresses a rationalist liberalism (Levy 2015) that places more trust in technocrats, experts, and scientists—buttressed by the power of the centralized state—than in localities that have historically been home to racism, sexism, and economic stratification.

Throughout Dewey's writings, however, one also finds calls to place the locus of education decision making in the community and the classroom. According to Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems* ([1927] 2012), "democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (157). For democracy to be a way of life, rather than merely a matter of voting for distant authorities, communities must make important decisions for themselves in "face-to-face intercourse." That is especially the case in education, for "the family and neighborhood, with all their deficiencies, have always been the chief agencies of nurture, the means by which dispositions are stably formed and ideas acquired which laid hold on the roots of character" (156, 157). In "Democracy in Education" (1903), Dewey explains that his conception of local control means, as much as possible, the spreading of individual initiative and decision making throughout the school, and in "The Classroom Teacher" Dewey contests modes of standardization, based on business practices, that hinder "the development of the teacher's individuality and . . . the teacher's cooperating in the development of the pupil's individuality" ([1922] 1983, 181). As much as possible, Dewey wants teachers and students to take charge of the education

5. Garrison et al. (2016, 124) advocate the concept of competencies to signal "a shift of perspectives away from predefined contents or skills towards capabilities of learners as resources in and for their own experiences." Whatever term education progressives use for the focal point of educational endeavors—standards, aims, or competencies—they will have to contest neoliberals who advocate fixed goals to amplify human capital rather than flexible goals that express individual and communal interests.

6. Dewey struggles with the question of who should be responsible for advocating progressive education on a national scale and sometimes suggests that the federal government should play its part. See the paragraph beginning: "Is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by a national state and yet the full social ends of the educative process not be restricted, constrained, and corrupted?" ([1916] 2008c, 104).

process that will be better—intrinsically, pedagogically, democratically—for its having been led by its participants. Dewey often evinces tendencies toward a pluralist liberalism (Levy 2015) that values intermediary associations, such as locally controlled schools, for their ability to protect individuals from a centralized state.

Dewey thinks that democracy means teachers and students—and to a lesser extent local and distant outsiders—exercising power to run the schools. A public school principal expresses Dewey's intuition thusly: "School, family, and community must forge their own [standards], in dialogue with and in response to the larger world of which they are a part. There will always be tensions; but if the decisive, authoritative voice always comes from anonymous outsiders, then kids cannot learn what it takes to develop their own voice" (Meier 2000, 23–24). Dewey thinks schools should teach students in democracy, not just for democracy; that is, schools should model democracy as a way of life in which ordinary people—and not just the rich, learned, or powerful—contribute to the discussion of how to raise the next generation and thereby create a new world.

The purpose of democratic education is to raise children who become confident, assertive citizens and not just skilled or diligent workers. "The criterion of the value of school education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact" ([1916] 2008c, 58). Democratic schools should "endeavor to shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement on their own" (85). There are many such passages in Dewey's corpus. For Dewey, democratic schools prepare young people to exercise power and not just trust or delegate authority to economic and political elites, even if in some cases citizens have voted for them. At the end of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey makes clear that democratic education may raise children who contest capitalism and oligarchy: "Above all, it would train power of readaptation to changing conditions so that future workers would not become blindly subject to a fate imposed upon them. This ideal has to contend not only with the inertia of existing educational traditions, but also with the opposition of those who are entrenched in command of the industrial machinery, and who realize that such an educational system if made general would threaten their ability to use others for their own ends" (328–29). Dewey's pedagogical project, then, prepares children for democracy in the radical sense that they will challenge capitalist mechanisms and state practices that hinder the emergence of a fair and equitable democratic society (Garrison, Neubert, and Reich 2016, 195–209).

To recap: Dewey maintains that the purpose of education is to empower children and communities and thereby make democracy a way of life rather than merely a system of voting for leaders. To coordinate efforts, people in and around the local school may generate aims that specify what and how children should be learning. In this sense, Dewey sees a place for standards as provisional guideposts that educators may revise in the course of instruction.[7] Given his desire to forge a great community that connects interests across the nation, Dewey might even have supported a strong federal policy to encourage states and localities, for instance, to inculcate the scientific spirit, one of "the best tools which humanity has so far devised for effectively directed reflection" ([1916] 2008c, 197). At the same time, Dewey anticipates the effort by business interests to control schools to serve their own ends. "The notion that the 'essentials' of elementary education are the three R's mechanically treated, is based upon ignorance of the essentials needed for realization of democratic ideals" (200). Dewey would have opposed national education standards if they meant that most American children were to study primarily the three R's—that is, reading, writing, and arithmetic. He also would have been worried if economic and political elites led the effort with the help of, for example, companies that stood to profit from the standards (Vasquez Heilig 2014). The main criterion for Dewey to decide the question of national education standards is not whether they will tend to make Americans smarter, judged by, say, international assessments, nor by whether they grow the economy, nor by whether they preserve traditional moral values. Rather, the relevant question for Dewey is whether national education standards enrich democracy as a way of life—that is, whether they increase the self-governing power of the individual and society. To answer this kind of question, Dewey insists, we must look to experience.

## AMERICA'S FIRST EXPERIMENT WITH NATIONAL EDUCATION STANDARDS

"Every a priori conception must be arbitrary," Dewey announces in *Democracy and Education* ([1916] 2008c, 63). "The formation of states must be an experimental process," Dewey elaborates in *The Public and Its Problems* ([1927] 2012, 57). Though Dewey extols the ideal of democracy, he refrains from specifying what institutions or policies will actualize it, entrusting democratic publics with the responsibility of making, destroying, or reforming institutions

7. On the two senses of standards—one as "determined within the process of valuation" and the other determined outside of it and "capable of being employed ready-made"—see Dewey ([1915] 2008b, 39–46).

to serve democratic ends (Sabel 2012). An idea such as national education standards is a tool that must be evaluated by how it serves democratic needs in practice. Surveying the history and consequences of the Common Core State Standards Initiative may help democrats decide whether to support or oppose the project of national education standards. A democrat may ask these kinds of questions when evaluating the Common Core: Who organized the standards-writing process? What philosophy of education do the standards express? What kinds of citizens do the standards create? And do political and economic elites send their own children to a school that follows the standards?

"Common Core might not exist without the corporate community," the cover story of the January 2016 issue of *Fortune* magazine observes (Elkind 2016). The extant scholarship on the history of the Common Core bears out this assessment. Since the publication of "A Nation at Risk" ([1922] 1983), business entrepreneurs have tried to take control of the schools away from educational liberals, or progressives, who hold Deweyan sentiments about child-centered pedagogy (Mehta 2013; Rhodes 2012). In 1989, business entrepreneurs attended an education summit at the University of Virginia with President George H. W. Bush and many of the nation's governors that consolidated elite support for the notion of national education standards (Klein 2014). In 1996, IBM CEO Louis Gerstner, Jr., along with other business leaders, founded Achieve to serve as a national clearinghouse for research on and strategies to promote standards-based education reform (Schneider 2015). In 2001, Achieve helped launch the American Diploma Project that identified literacy and numeracy skills in demand by higher education and employers. Over the next decade, Achieve coordinated meetings and published reports that built support for national educational standards, and in 2009, Achieve partnered with the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State Schools Officer to write the Common Core standards. Achieve's financial backers include the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, ExxonMobil, JP Morgan Chase Foundation, and State Farm Insurance (Achieve 2016). To be clear, many civil rights entrepreneurs and democrats see no problem as such with business support for the Common Core if it makes possible "progressive policy making in a conservative age" (Rhodes 2011).[8] For a Deweyan, however, democracy does not mean rule by enlightened elites for the benefit of the people; democracy means rule by the people, and Achieve and the "secret sixty" that wrote the standards preferred to work out of the public eye (Cody 2009; Ravitch 2014).

Regarding the Common Core standards themselves, we need to understand their role in "systemic education reform." Systemic education reform requires the alignment of standards to fixed cognitive benchmarks, tests to measure how well students are reaching the benchmarks, and accountability mechanisms to gauge the quality of the teachers, schools, and systems (Smith and O'Day 1990, 243). Thus, Race to the Top encouraged states to join a testing consortium such as Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) or Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and use a teacher and school accountability system based on student test scores (US Department of Education 2009). Many of the Common Core standards writers worked for testing companies or nonprofits such as Pearson, McGraw-Hill, and the College Board, and the standards themselves lend themselves to testing (Cody 2009). For instance, the Common Core emphasizes a skill called "close reading" that requires students to use textual evidence from an assigned passage to answer questions; a skill, as it turns out, that makes it possible for computers to grade essays (Winterhalter 2013). The Common Core narrows the curriculum to the tested subjects and requires students to answer questions using evidence, and only the evidence, from the text (White 2015). In 1916, Dewey fights a version of this philosophy of education whereby adults fix the parameters of what kids should know and do: "it exaggerates beyond reason the possibilities of consciously formulated and used methods, and underestimates the role of vital, unconscious attitudes. It insists upon the old, the past, and passes lightly over the operation of the genuinely novel and unforeseeable. It takes, in brief, everything educational into account save its essence—vital energy seeking opportunity for effective exercise" ([1916] 2008c, 77). Again, the question for Dewey is not whether the standards prepare children for high-paying jobs or even to enter higher education; the question is whether the standards nurture democratic sensibilities, and the early answer to that question appears to be no (Neem 2015).

Though the Common Core literature mentions democracy, the focus is on preparing children for the modern economy. Take the National Center on Education and the Economy report, "What Does It Really Mean to Be College and Work Ready?" The report—funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the primary financial backers of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (Layton

8. Layton (2014) details the grants—over $230 million at the time of the article—that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation awarded to various groups, including civil rights organizations for standards and accountability (CROSAs), to promote the Common Core. See also Reckhow (2013).

2014)—explains, "being ready to be successful in the first year of a typical community college program is tantamount to being ready for both college and work." The report collects data from popular community college majors such as accounting, automatic technology, business, criminal justice, and nursing. Then the report identifies how the Common Core standards teach children the skills they need to succeed in those majors, such as "the ability to read and understand tables, charts, maps, lists, and other documents." The report also chastises community colleges for teaching material that will not directly contribute to the identified careers and that may be a hurdle to graduation (NCEE 2013, 1, 5, 7). Though the Common Core does not prohibit students from pursuing the liberal arts or careers that require creative intelligence, the focus is inculcating those skills, and only those skills, that will lead to graduating from community college and getting a middle-class job such as nurse or police officer. The problem, from a Deweyan perspective, is not with learning basic reading, writing, and math skills, nor preparing for a job, but the schools abdicating their responsibility to inculcate in children the disposition to pursue their own interests, form publics, and challenge political and economic elites. "Democracy cannot flourish where the chief influences in selecting subject matter of instruction are utilitarian ends narrowly conceived for the masses" (Dewey [1916] 2008c, 200).

A notable feature of the Common Core is that several prominent advocates send their children to elite private schools that do not closely follow the standards. On her blog, the education scholar Diane Ravitch calls out political and economic elites who advocate the standards for other people's kids but send their own to Phillips Exeter Academy, Sidwell Friends School, Lakeside Academy, and the Dalton School (2013b). According to Ravitch, there is a general consensus among scholars and parents about what makes a good school: "full curricula, experienced staffs, rich programs in the arts, libraries, well-maintained campuses, and small classes" (2013a, 6). Ravitch cites Dewey's "The School and Society" ([1899] 2008a) to explain why a double standard is a problem: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy" (2013a, vii). By itself, the fact that political and economic elites exit the public school system does not prove oligarchic intent. The problem is that all families, upper as well as middle and lower class, suffer when some children are encouraged to cultivate their talents and interests and other children are primarily taught basic literacy and numeracy skills. That is one of the main arguments of *Democracy and Education*: everyone suffers when schools offer a liberal arts curriculum to the rich and the three R's to the middle class and poor: "In order to have a large number of values in common, all the members of the group must have an equable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences. Otherwise, the influence which educate some into masters, educate others into slaves" (Dewey [1916] 2008c, 90). The democratic conception of education is that all children, not just those of the wealthy and powerful, may cultivate their own interests and participate in collective self-governance.[9]

This section has argued that the Common Core State Standards Initiative facilitates the business community's capture of American public education. But does that mean that the idea of national education standards has been compromised? Might it make sense for democrats to relaunch the project of national education standards, this time with more involvement of parents, educators, and the public? In the near future in American politics, I contend, another experiment in national education standards would likely achieve the same results. The political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page show that "economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on US government policy, while mass-interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence" (2014, 565). In an era of "economic-elite domination," the affluent often get their way, in legislation or government action, even when their policy preferences differ from the majority, but the majority almost never gets its way if the economic elite disagree. The story of the Common Core State Standards Initiative cannot be told without mentioning the outsized influence of the billionaires Bill and Melinda Gates and the organizations that they have funded (Layton 2014; Reckhow 2013; Schneider 2015). According to Gilens and Page, this scenario will likely play out even if the characters change. If there is one wheel on the ship of America's education policy, then plutocrats will likely grab it. It is time that democrats explore other options to improve America's schools without relying on the notion of national education standards.

9. Should democracies permit private schools that do not teach to the national standards? Saying no might pressure political and economic elites to fund and improve the public schools where they send their own children. This strategy could backfire, however, if teachers trained in progressive pedagogy are fired or forced to teach to the standards. In that case, democracies will have eliminated the warehouses where seeds for another paradigm are stored.

## CONCLUSION: A PRAGMATIC CASE FOR EDUCATION PLURALISM

A great question in American politics is what level of government should decide what transpires in schools across the country. For much of American history, local governments and school boards made core decisions about standards, curriculum, and teaching, but the 1983 report, "A Nation at Risk," jump-started a movement to transfer that decision-making power to states, with No Child Left Behind, and the federal government, with Race to the Top (Rhodes 2012). As we have seen, business entrepreneurs and civil rights entrepreneurs, key constituencies in the Republican and Democratic parties, believe in national education standards for economic, social justice, and democratic reasons. Between February 2010 and November 2011, nearly all states adopted the Common Core education standards in math and English language arts, even ones that were in relatively strong fiscal health (Lavenia, Cohen-Vogel, and Lang 2015). In subsequent years, however, public support for the Common Core has dropped significantly, particularly among teachers (see table 1).

Many democrats, however, still believe in national education standards and the Common Core. Danielle Allen and Rob Reich, for instance, agree with Dewey that schools should build "civic cultures where citizens can bridge difference and where opportunity is equitably distributed." Differences between Dewey's time and ours, on their account, demand a rethinking of his policy prescriptions. The federal government plays an ever larger role in setting education policy. And the civil rights struggle, the end of the massive wave of immigration from Europe, and the abandonment of the "melting pot" paradigm prompt a rethinking of social difference. Today, democrats view the schools as a necessary institution "for achieving equal standing for all members of a diverse and highly socially differentiated polity" (Allen and Reich 2013, 2–4). Allen furthermore praises the Common Core for setting a "humanistic baseline" for children across the country. The basic literacy curriculum, particularly if it is supplemented with other skills such as prophetic and adversarial speech, will prepare children for civic participation in American life, including voting, interpreting events, connecting interests among diverse people, and articulating a sense of the common good (2016).

Table 1. Percentage Support for Common Core Standards

| | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Public | 65 | 53 | 49 |
| Teachers | 76 | 46 | 40 |
| Republicans | 57 | 43 | 37 |
| Democrats | 64 | 63 | 57 |

Source. Henderson, Peterson, and West (2016).

A democratic critic of national education standards could respond, first, that the experiment with the Common Core has betrayed many of the initial hopes. The Common Core standards were written in 2010 and never field-tested before they were adopted across the United States (Ravitch 2014). Above I argued that the Common Core skill of close reading prepares children for standardized tests rather than any meaningful exercise of personal or collective autonomy. Other scholars have argued that the standards express an unrealistic expression of how young children learn and develop (Miller and Carlsson-Paige 2013), crowd out other worthwhile subjects such as science, history, and art (Vasquez Heilig, Cole, and Aguilar 2010), fail to teach higher-order thinking skills in English language arts (Sforza, Tienken, and Kim 2016), and do not teach children the math necessary to major in a STEM discipline in college (Milgram and Stotsky 2013).[10] At the same time, the country has spent more than $7 billion in connection with the Common Core, including $362 million on the PARCC and SBAC Common Core tests (Rothfield 2015). In short, the financial and opportunity costs of the first American experiment in national education standards are high. One may reasonably ask whether democracies should consider other ways to improve equity while still granting states and localities adequate autonomy. The original Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 gave states categorical grants to supplement the budgets of schools with children in poverty and from historically disadvantaged groups. It may be worth reviving that idea rather than insisting that federal funds include the string of national education standards.

Second, the national conversation about education standards may be an excuse to not adequately fund schools or address economic inequality more broadly. Chicago School economists and multinational corporations appreciate the human capital argument because it places the onus of success squarely on the individual who has or has not mastered the so-called marketable skills (Spring 2015). In this article, I have argued that democrats should be wary of the claim that standards-based reform will close opportunity or achievement gaps. If one takes seriously the problems of economic injustice or racism, one should address these problems more

10. For a more favorable assessment of the Common Core standards, see Salins (2014) and Supovitz and Spillane (2015).

directly rather than go through the expensive detour of national education standards.

Finally, democracy means rule by the people, including in the all-important task of running the schools. Allen and Reich (2013) observe that Dewey confronted problems a century ago that resemble ours, including the need of American workers to compete in a global economy, the challenges posed by migration to building a civic culture, and the injustice of gross economic inequality. Allen and Reich note that the federal government's role in education policy has been steadily growing since Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and applaud this trajectory away from localism and provincialism, as do many other contemporary education policy scholars (see Manna and McGuinn 2013). For Dewey, however, there is nothing inevitable about growing centralized power, and local publics should practice self-government, in part, so that they have the power to conjoin on larger scales to address bigger problems. "Unless local communal life can be restored, the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself" ([1927] 2012, 159). Recent political science has also shown that top-down standards-based education reform tends to depress parental participation in the schools and other civic activities (Rhodes 2015). Dewey's work from a century ago is a message in a bottle reminding us that democracy means entrusting local communities to set aims and run schools.

A proponent of national education standards could reply that they are merely a guardrail that prevents schools from failing to teach children basic math and writing skills, that they ensure that all American children—in public schools in economically distressed communities, in religious private schools with outdated curricula, in loosely regulated homeschooling arrangements, and so forth—may receive an education that enables them to make an informed choice about their life choices and contribute to society (cf. Gutmann 1999). For many policy makers and scholars, national education standards are a natural extension of the civil rights movement and its commitment to ensuring that all children may pursue the American dream (Hochschild and Scovronik 2003). A pragmatist would respond, however, that it is important to address the problems facing our democracy here and now, say, after the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. Though democracies might benefit from national education standards in some circumstances, presently "what is missing is balance—some power in the hands of those whose agenda is first and foremost the feelings of particular kids, their particular families, their perceived local values and needs" (Meier 2000, 28). Furthermore, standards-based education reform disproportionately erodes local control in urban school districts with high percentages of poor children, children of color, and English language learners, with pernicious consequences including high teacher turnover, low morale, and state takeovers (Joseph 2015; Trujillo 2013). In practice, national education standards harm most the communities that supposedly justify their existence.

In her classic study on *National Standards in American Education*, Diane Ravitch explains that the etymology of standards is from the Middle English, Old French, and Germanic words for "a conspicuous object (as a banner) formerly carried at the top of a pole and used to mark a rallying point, especially in battle" (1995, 7). For many democratic theorists and policy makers, national education standards may serve as a rallying point to improve the country's schools. This article has shown, however, that America's first experiment in national education standards has been led by and for business interests and that another experiment in an era of economic elite domination would likely achieve similar results. To escape the philosophical confines of the present, this article has recovered certain insights from America's foremost democratic theorist and philosopher of education, John Dewey. According to Dewey, schools should be sites of democracy where students, teachers, and communities exercise power and cultivate democratic virtues. The task for democrats then is to disillusion ourselves of the notion of national education standards and contribute to the hard work of running the local schools.

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