



The lost opportunity of the Common Core State Standards

Until we focus on closing opportunity gaps, the Common Core will be part of the problem, and its potential benefits will never be realized.

By Kevin G. Welner

The setting is the French Revolution. A priest, a thief, and an engineer are marched up to the guillotine. The priest steps up first and is asked if he wants to lie face up or down. He requests face up, so he'll be looking toward heaven when he dies. The blade is released, but it stops just inches from his neck. The priest is summarily released, given this divine intervention. The exact same sequence takes place with the thief: face up, blade stops, and prisoner released. The engineer is next, and he also requests face up. But as the executioner slowly raises the blade of the guillotine, the engineer excitedly points up and says, "Wait! I see the problem!"

I find myself thinking about this joke when I consider the Common Core State Standards. In particular, I think about the dilemma of good engineering but harmful policy — the dilemma of focusing on technical fixes but ignoring the larger problem.

The standards were developed by a talented and well-resourced team. A good argument can be made that they are of higher quality than many former or existing

state standards. But the Common Core has become much more than the standards themselves; they are the foundational element to further entrenchment of a system that also includes new assessments, augmented accountability regimes, and marketplaces of new materials, testing supports, and professional development.

At this point, it's almost impossible to disentangle the Common Core from the larger apparatus of high-stakes, standards-based testing and accountability policies that dominate American schooling. That is, the Common Core effort is the equivalent of fixing and further developing a harmful apparatus. If everything goes well, the apparatus will run smoother and play a larger role in American schooling. But how much, if at all, should we see that as a benefit?

These accountability policies, which rely on testing to drive school improvement, have prevailed since at least the late 1990s. Standardized assessments are linked to curriculum standards and performance standards and are tied to specified consequences — some with a finality that again



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brings to mind the guillotine. Schools are closed, and teachers and principals are dismissed.

The accountability era has been marked by a destructive tempest of naming-and-shaming — of labeling schools as “failing” and of propelling the nation into a cluster of market-based privatization policies with little or no support from research evidence. In fact, a large body of research demonstrates that this increasingly unpopular approach to school reform is counterproductive and unwise, but most politicians have not changed course.

To be clear, the Common Core standards themselves are fine. They’re set forth at a fairly general level. The task of putting curricular flesh on these bones is left to the states and, as a practical matter, to the developers of the high-stakes tests that operationalize the Common Core.

To understand how and why the new standards are so inextricably linked to accountability policies, it’s helpful to first understand that the primary impetus behind the Common Core effort was the concern that under No Child Left Behind, many states were lax in creating challenging

standards along with rigorous thresholds for proficiency. Holding students across the nation to the same high standards could, the argument goes, ramp up expectations and result in the ability to compare results across states, and perhaps internationally. From the perspective of many Common Core supporters, another anticipated advantage of widespread adoption is the creation of economies of scale for vendors to supply items such as professional development, instructional materials, and standardized testing. As Common Core detractors have pointed out, corporate vendors have helped fund Common Core advocacy and stand to make a great deal of money.

The Common Core policy package should, however, be judged on its own merits, notwithstanding advocates or beneficiaries. Here’s how I evaluate those merits:

- If policies associated with the Common Core were only about creating challenging and generally thoughtful academic standards that schools could use to develop curriculum and guide instruction, we might reasonably consider them a beneficial contribution.
- If we combined those academic standards with deep, challenging assessments used as part of a feedback loop for educators, we might again think of them as a beneficial contribution.
- If we then used that feedback process to provide supports and resources to students and their teachers, as well as to inform teaching and curriculum, the Common Core and those associated policies would deserve praise as a very beneficial contribution.

But the unfortunate reality is that whatever its potential benefits, the actual Common Core package will almost certainly exacerbate the policy failures of the past decade. Further, the linking of the Common Core to accountability regimes is a feature, not a bug. It is what was intended from the outset.

Importantly, the *status quo* approach involves a choice of one set of policies to the exclusion of another. When politicians opt for accountability and market-based privatization policies, they supersede policies that are grounded in best practices — evidence-based reforms that have succeeded in enhancing opportunities to learn.

In doing so, politicians seem willfully ignorant of the direct connection between opportunity and achievement. Our national opportunity gaps lead inexorably to our achievement gaps. Yet the test-based accountability policies still advocated by politicians disregard the opportunity side of the equation. Capacity building and supports are relegated to a small footnote within a long diatribe about mandated performance. The Marie Antoinettes of today proclaim, “Let them take tests,” callously brushing aside the needs of our children for intellectual nourishment.

Standards can be beneficial elements of a high-functioning educational system; so can assessments. Moreover, many well-intentioned and smart people are working to advance the Common Core and make it successful. But unless and until our politicians reverse course and focus on closing opportunity gaps, the Common Core will be part of the problem, and its potential benefits will never be realized.

