

Why I Cannot Support the Common Core Standards

By Diane Ravitch's blog -- [dianerav](http://dianeravitch.net/2013/02/26/why-i-cannot-support-the-common-core-standards/) -- February 26, 2013 // 304

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I have thought long and hard about the Common Core standards.

I have decided that I cannot support them.

In this post, I will explain why.

I have long advocated for voluntary national standards, believing that it would be helpful to states and districts to have general guidelines about what students should know and be able to do as they progress through school.

Such standards, I believe, should be voluntary, not imposed by the federal government; before implemented widely, they should be thoroughly tested to see how they work in real classrooms; and they should be free of any mandates that tell teachers how to teach because there are many ways to be a good teacher, not just one. I envision standards not as a demand for compliance by teachers, but as an aspiration defining what states and districts are expected to do. They should serve as a promise that schools will provide all students the opportunity and resources to learn reading and mathematics, the sciences, the arts, history, literature, civics, geography, and physical education, taught by well-qualified teachers, in schools led by experienced and competent educators.

For the past two years, I have steadfastly insisted that I was neither for nor against the Common Core standards. I was agnostic. I wanted to see how they worked in practice. I wanted to know, based on evidence, whether or not they improve education and whether they reduce or increase the achievement gaps among different racial and ethnic groups.

After much deliberation, I have come to the conclusion that I can't wait five or ten years to find out whether test scores go up or down, whether or not schools improve, and whether the kids now far behind are worse off than they are today.

I have come to the conclusion that the Common Core standards effort is fundamentally flawed by the process with which they have been foisted upon the nation.

The Common Core standards have been adopted in 46 states and the District of Columbia without any field test. They are being imposed on the children of this nation despite the fact that no one has any idea how they will affect students, teachers, or schools. We are a nation of guinea pigs, almost all trying an unknown new program at the same time.

Maybe the standards will be great. Maybe they will be a disaster. Maybe they will improve achievement. Maybe they will widen the achievement gaps between haves and have-nots. Maybe they will cause the children who now struggle to give up altogether. Would the Federal Drug

Administration approve the use of a drug with no trials, no concern for possible harm or unintended consequences?

President Obama and Secretary Duncan often say that the Common Core standards were developed by the states and voluntarily adopted by them. This is not true.

They were developed by an organization called Achieve and the National Governors Association, both of which were generously funded by the Gates Foundation. There was minimal public engagement in the development of the Common Core. Their creation was neither grassroots nor did it emanate from the states.

In fact, it was well understood by states that they would not be eligible for Race to the Top funding (\$4.35 billion) unless they adopted the Common Core standards. Federal law prohibits the U.S. Department of Education from prescribing any curriculum, but in this case the Department figured out a clever way to evade the letter of the law. Forty-six states and the District of Columbia signed on, not because the Common Core standards were better than their own, but because they wanted a share of the federal cash. In some cases, the Common Core standards really were better than the state standards, but in Massachusetts, for example, the state standards were superior and well tested but were ditched anyway and replaced with the Common Core. The former Texas State Commissioner of Education, Robert Scott, has stated for the record that he was urged to adopt the Common Core standards before they were written.

The flap over fiction vs. informational text further undermined my confidence in the standards. There is no reason for national standards to tell teachers what percentage of their time should be devoted to literature or information. Both can develop the ability to think critically. The claim that the writers of the standards picked their arbitrary ratios because NAEP has similar ratios makes no sense. NAEP gives specifications to test-developers, not to classroom teachers.

I must say too that it was offensive when Joel Klein and Condoleezza Rice issued a report declaring that our nation's public schools were so terrible that they were a "very grave threat to our national security." Their antidote to this allegedly desperate situation: the untried Common Core standards plus charters and vouchers.

Another reason I cannot support the Common Core standards is that I am worried that they will cause a precipitous decline in test scores, based on arbitrary cut scores, and this will have a disparate impact on students who are English language learners, students with disabilities, and students who are poor and low-performing. A principal in the Mid-West told me that his school piloted the Common Core assessments and the failure rate rocketed upwards, especially among the students with the highest needs. He said the exams looked like AP exams and were beyond the reach of many students.

When Kentucky piloted the Common Core, proficiency rates dropped by 30 percent. The Chancellor of the New York Board of Regents has already warned that the state should expect a sharp drop in test scores.

What is the purpose of raising the bar so high that many more students fail?

Rick Hess opined that reformers were confident that the Common Core would cause so much dissatisfaction among suburban parents that they would flee their public schools and embrace the reformers' ideas (charters and vouchers). Rick was appropriately doubtful that suburban parents could be frightened so easily.

Jeb Bush, at a conference of business leaders, confidently predicted that the high failure rates sure to be caused by Common Core would bring about "a rude awakening." Why so much glee at the prospect of higher failure rates?.

I recently asked a friend who is a strong supporter of the standards why he was so confident that the standards would succeed, absent any real-world validation. His answer: "People I trust say so." That's not good enough for me.

Now that David Coleman, the architect of the Common Core standards, has become president of the College Board, we can expect that the SAT will be aligned to the standards. No one will escape their reach, whether they attend public or private school.

Is there not something unseemly about placing the fate and the future of American education in the hands of one man?

I hope for the sake of the nation that the Common Core standards are great and wonderful. I wish they were voluntary, not mandatory. I wish we knew more about how they will affect our most vulnerable students.

But since I do not know the answer to any of the questions that trouble me, I cannot support the Common Core standards.

I will continue to watch and listen. While I cannot support the Common Core standards, I will remain open to new evidence. If the standards help kids, I will say so. If they hurt them, I will say so. I will listen to their advocates and to their critics.

I will encourage my allies to think critically about the standards, to pay attention to how they affect students, and to insist, at least, that they do no harm.

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She shares a blog called Bridging Differences with Deborah Meier, hosted by Education Week. She also blogs for Politico.com/arena and the Huffington Post. Her articles have appeared in many newspapers and magazines.

From 1991 to 1993, she was Assistant Secretary of Education and Counselor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander in the administration of President George H.W. Bush. She was responsible for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of

Education. As Assistant Secretary, she led the federal effort to promote the creation of voluntary state and national academic standards.

From 1997 to 2004, she was a member of the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the federal testing program. She was appointed by the Clinton administration's Secretary of Education Richard Riley in 1997 and reappointed by him in 2001. From 1995 until 2005, she held the Brown Chair in Education Studies at the Brookings Institution and edited *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*. Before entering government service, she was Adjunct Professor of History and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University.