



Common Core in the real world

Created to fix problems that NCLB either started or couldn't fix itself, the Common Core faces its own challenges – seen and unseen – during implementation.

By **Frederick M. Hess** and **Michael Q. McShane**



The Common Core has been in the news quite a bit of late. Conservatives have attacked it as a “Nanny State racket,” while liberals denounced Common Core test results as “bunk” (Gewertz, 2013b). This year, legislators in nine states introduced legislation to drop the Common Core or to cut funding for its implementation (Bill Status Tracker, 2013). U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan felt called upon to defend the standards in a speech to the American Society of News Editors saying, “The federal government didn’t write them, didn’t approve them, and doesn’t mandate them, and we never will” (McNeil, 2013).

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Amid the resulting hubbub, it's been all too easy for the practical questions of the Common Core to fall by the wayside. This is a shame, as the standards are slated to become the backbone for student, teacher, and school accountability systems and will play an increasingly prominent role in the American educational ecosystem. Given the fact that the 2013 PDK/Gallup poll found that only 38% of American citizens had ever heard of the Common Core, it is an especially propitious time to begin to take a hard look at what the standards mean for schools (Bushaw & Lopez, 2013).

This is not to say that folks haven't already been talking about the challenges of implementing the standards. Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, said, "the biggest potential pothole, by far, is failed implementation" (Gewertz, 2013a). William McCallum, the University of Arizona professor who cowrote the math standards, similarly said, "implementation is everything" (Weingarten, 2013).

They are undoubtedly right, but implementation is a word that obscures all manner of sins (Hess & McShane, 2013). Its very ambiguity allows any number of policy missteps, dumb decisions, or miscalculations to be dismissed as nothing more than "implementation challenges." Yet the last half-century of school reform includes a remarkably long list of once celebrated now discarded ideas accompanied by the common lament that they were undone by implementation. Using such a broad term bundles together missteps produced by a lack of forethought, political and institutional resistance, the innate diffi-

culty in scaling new programs, insufficient attention to the nuts and bolts of change, or unforeseen and unforeseeable surprises and treats these missteps as if they were the same.

This all matters immensely when it comes to the Common Core. After all, on the one hand, the Common Core is simply a set of standards — a listing of what students should know, aspirational words on a page. On the other, delivering on the promise of the Common Core will require states, districts, and schools to make a slew of complementary changes to curriculum, tests, teacher training, and the like.

More to the point, the Common Core has huge capability to do harm if it doesn't work out. While previous initiatives that fell apart in implementation — including site-based management, block scheduling, or comprehensive school reform — created headaches, disruption, and frustration at individual campuses or in certain districts, their reach was limited. The Common Core will affect state assessments and accountability, revamp K-12 instruction, force changes in teacher preparation and professional development, and more. If the Common Core falls apart, it runs the risk of taking all of those down with it, and the costs in terms of time, dollars, and disruption will be enormous.

The Common Core intersects with current efforts to improve education in the United States in at least four key places. Understanding those intersections can help educators, parents, and policy makers maximize the chance that the Common Core is helpful to these efforts and, perhaps more important, not harmful.

#1. New tests

In President Obama's 2009 economic stimulus package, the Department of Education granted about \$330 million to two consortia of states to develop tests aligned to the Common Core. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) was joined by 22 of the participating states and the remainder joined the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). SBAC and PARCC have been developing tests for several years and released their assessments for the first time this spring. If all goes according to plan, students will take one of these two assessments instead of their state-level exam in the 2014-15 school year.

When these new tests were introduced, Secretary Duncan set a remarkably high bar. He said the new assessments would "be an absolute game changer in public education" and would "help drive the development of a rich curriculum, instruction that is tailored to student needs, and multiple opportunities throughout the school year to assess student learning" (Duncan, 2010).

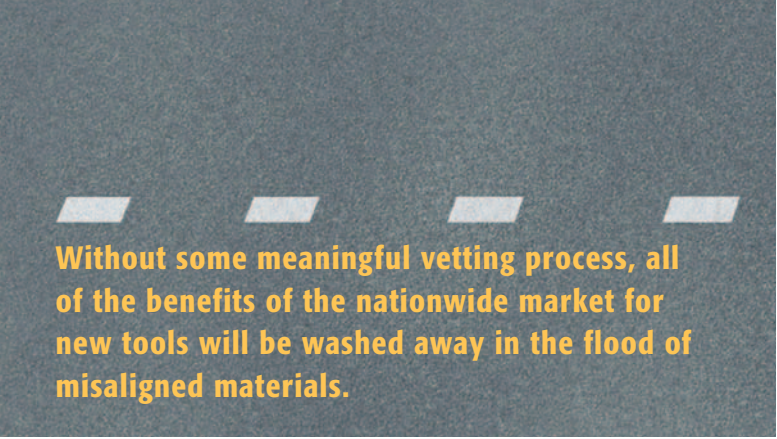
Will these new tests live up to their billing?

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Duncan was certainly right that standardized tests have ample room to improve. Tests borne of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are designed to measure proficiency for a given grade and subject. As a result, while they're extremely accurate around the cut point between "proficient" and "not proficient," they don't tell us much about students in the tails of the distribution. Similarly, they don't tell us how much a student grew in a particular year, something all teachers would like to know. But, most of all, because each state is allowed to develop its own test to its own standards, cross-state comparisons are difficult, and ample evidence shows that there is wide variation in what different states define as proficient (Gewertz, 2013c).

Will these new tests live up to their billing? It is hard to say, but recent fractures in the coalitions developing the tests portend problems. Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania have decided to not use PARCC's assessments, and Florida and Kentucky have not committed to field test the assessments in the upcoming school year. If states drop out of the consortia to develop their own tests, the 50-states, 50-systems problem the Common Core was designed to solve will remain.

There are also more prosaic issues, the most pressing of which is cost. PARCC's price of \$29 per student for its assessments is more than the assessment costs of half of the states participating in the consortium. SBAC's \$22.50 per student was more than the costs of a third of the states of its consortium (Gewertz, 2013b). Critics were quick to point out that those prices didn't include the additional costs of computer-based assessments like upgrades in hardware, software, and Internet bandwidth. So far, there are no reliable nationwide estimates for the cost of these upgrades, but 46% of the more than 500 school administrators surveyed last summer said their districts are delaying technology purchases due to budget cuts driven by the sequester (Ellerson, 2013).



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#2. Materials and professional development

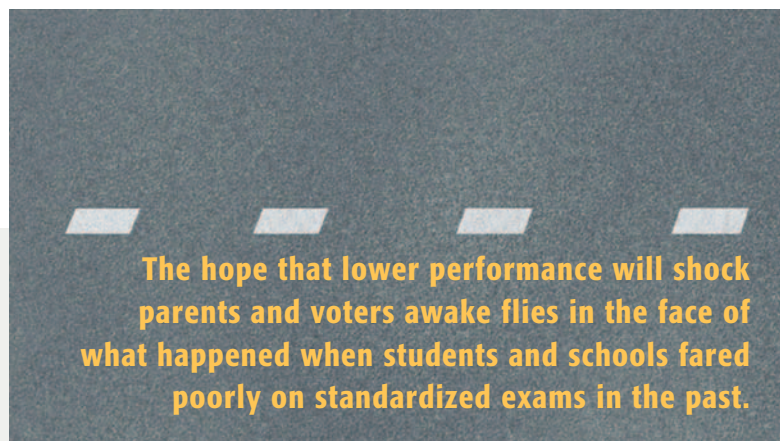
In order to align instruction to the new standards, a raft of new materials for students and teachers are being developed. How schools integrate these new materials will play an outsized role in determining the ultimate success or failure of the Common Core. If the experience of Louisiana's Superintendent of Education John White is any indication, there will be problems. His department initially rejected every math and reading textbook that it reviewed because they were not sufficiently aligned to the Common Core (Sawchuk, 2012). If teachers can't find good materials, they can't teach to the standards effectively.

As it turns out, pretty much anyone can slap a Common Core-aligned sticker onto a textbook, professional development module, or supplemental resource. States, districts, and schools will have the daunting task of wading through all of these. Without some meaningful vetting process, all of the benefits of the nationwide market for new tools will be washed away in the flood of misaligned materials.

Instructional alignment is important because if teachers aren't teaching what is going to be on the test, then when poor test results come back we can't tell if (a) students were taught what they needed to know but didn't learn it or (b) students weren't taught what they needed to know. Each scenario requires a vastly different response. As new materials are rolled out, we might need several years to know if an expected dip in proficiency scores is due to harder tests or textbooks and materials that don't cover Common Core material adequately, or something different altogether, like students simply adapting to new question structures.

There are real questions about whether states have the capacity to deliver the high-quality professional development necessary to align instruction to the Common Core. The Center on Education Policy's survey of state education officials in 2013 found 37 states reporting challenges in implement-

ing quality professional development and 31 states reporting challenges in providing all math and English languages arts teachers with state-sponsored professional development at all.



#3. New expectations

Results from the new, Common Core-aligned exams have shown drastic declines in student proficiency rates. This is almost axiomatic. Raising the standard from basic “proficiency” to the more rigorous “college and career readiness” means more students will struggle to clear it. Also, if the ACT is a reliable barometer of “college and career readiness,” there is ample evidence that the American education system is not preparing students adequately. ACT, Inc. reported last year that only 25% of students who took the test were found to be college ready in all four tested subjects. This problem was not simply confined to more disadvantaged populations — while only 5% of African-American and 13% of Hispanic students were college-ready in all four subjects, only 42% of Asian-American students and 32% of white students were as well.

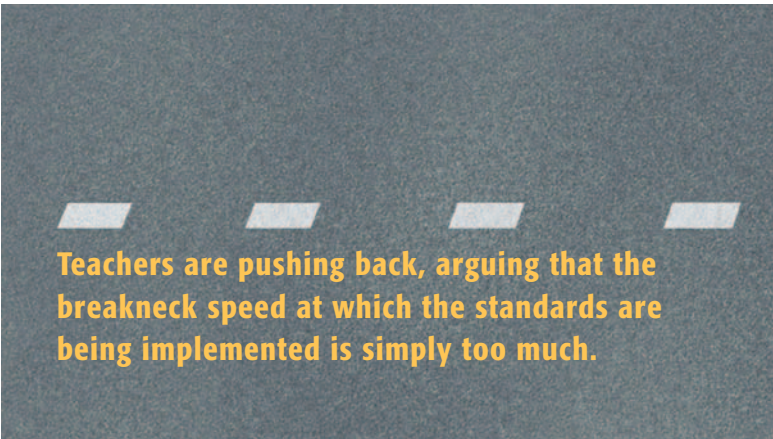
Part of the Common Core’s theory of action is that the resulting scores on new college and career-standard exams will serve as what the authors of *Pathways to the Common Core* call “a crucial wake-up call” (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012, p. 9). Advocates expect the results to mobilize suburban and middle-class parents to the cause of education reform. But folks may also view the results far more skeptically, saying “I’d rather trust my ‘lying eyes’ than what any standardized tests tell me.”

When the state of New York released results on the first round of Common Core-aligned assessments in summer 2013, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten told

the *New York Times* that she was “worried” about the Common Core because “you have a lot of people all throughout the state saying, ‘Why are you experimenting on my kids?’” Quoted in the same *New York Times* article, education commentator Diane Ravitch called the new standards “inappropriate” and “too high” (Rich, 2013).

The hope that lower performance will shock parents and voters awake flies in the face of what happened when students and schools fared poorly on standardized exams in the past. NCLB is a poster child for this. When more and more schools were deemed to be failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress, particularly schools that many believed were doing well, support for NCLB evaporated. Gallup polling showed modest popularity for NCLB in its early years, with 31% of Americans viewing it favorably in 2006 (Hess, 2006). As scores dropped, so did the support. By 2011, only 16% of Americans believed NCLB made the American education system better rather than worse (Saad, 2012). Gene Wilhoit, then executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, characterized NCLB at the time as “a system that was well intended” but that had led to “a result that is causing the law to lose its credibility” (McNeil, 2011).

NCLB had credibility when it said the schools that parents and voters thought were failing were deemed failing. It lost credibility when it started to identify as failing the schools that parents and voters thought were doing well. It’s hard to imagine why the Common Core would be any different. Is “proficiency” vs. “college and career readiness” a powerful enough distinction to help suburban parents deal with the sting of learning that their school (for which they may have paid a premium when buying their home) has pass rates in the 30s and 40s? If it’s not, the Common Core risks undermining confidence in accountability policy that took decades to build.



Teachers are pushing back, arguing that the breakneck speed at which the standards are being implemented is simply too much.

#4. New stakes

A central feature of the U.S. Department of Education waivers to NCLB was a promise to develop teacher evaluation systems that use Common Core-aligned assessments as the measure of student achievement by the 2014-15 school year. To meet that timeline, tests have to be field-tested this school year. Instruction, materials, and professional development ought to align by the time these new assessments “count” for the purpose of evaluation. This is an enormous undertaking. Most of these accountability systems took years to develop, and changing the fundamental metric upon which they are based will have serious consequences.

In states all across the country, teachers are pushing back, arguing that the breakneck speed at which the standards are being implemented is simply too much. Joshua Starr, superintendent in Montgomery County, Md., took to the pages of the *Washington Post* in early 2013 to call for a three-year moratorium on high-stakes testing so schools would have time to align their instruction appropriately (Starr, 2013). AFT president Randi Weingarten seconded his call in April 2013, calling for an open-ended moratorium. Weingarten went on to take a firm shot at Common Core advocates, saying, “These standards, which hold such potential to create deeper learning, are instead creating a serious backlash as officials seek to make them count before they make them work. They will either lead to a revolution in teaching and learning, or they will end up in the overflowing dustbin of abandoned reforms” (Weingarten, 2013).

In order for these tests to give meaningful and actionable information, instruction must be aligned to them. Alignment is a messy process that works through trial and error — schools teach what they think will be on the test to the best of their ability, get results back, figure out what they did not cover but should have, and adjust practice accordingly. This accelerated timeline compresses the ability to do that, and risks serious consequences being



attached to tools that aren’t ready for primetime. Even though Secretary Duncan offered a form of “waiver waivers” to states that needed more time implementing teacher evaluation programs in summer 2013, granting an extra year before tests would count, the alignment process could take longer, pausing accountability even more.

Conclusion

Political scientists have long recognized that it’s easiest to forge broad coalitions when the idea is alluring, practical implications are fuzzy, and you’ve got a little money to help ease things along. The practical stuff of implementation was always going to ruffle feathers and spur the emergence of opposition. New standards and tests would pose concerns for teachers and unions when tied to new evaluation and tenure systems. Legislators and governors, many of whom weren’t in office when the Common Core was adopted, would have to come up with hundreds of millions of dollars for implementation. Proficiency

rates would either remain high (angering advocates) or would be slashed (angering parents). In short, the very things that helped the Common Core rush to its surprising success in 2010 and 2011 carried a price tag. The decisions that will determine the success of the Common Core enterprise will bear their own trade-offs, many of them affecting other key pieces of the school improvement agenda.

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Such disputes speak not only to the fidelity of Common Core implementation or effect. They remind us that efforts to alter standards and assessments affect so many other improvement efforts that rest on that edifice. The plight of the Common Core will matter not just for that effort, but will play an outsized role in determining the fate of so many other developments that have defined 21st-century school reform. Whether educators, policy makers, advocates, and funders recognize that, and what they do about it, will in many ways be *the* educational story of the second decade of this young century. ■

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