

The Common Core Initiative:

The chances are slim at best—and here's why.

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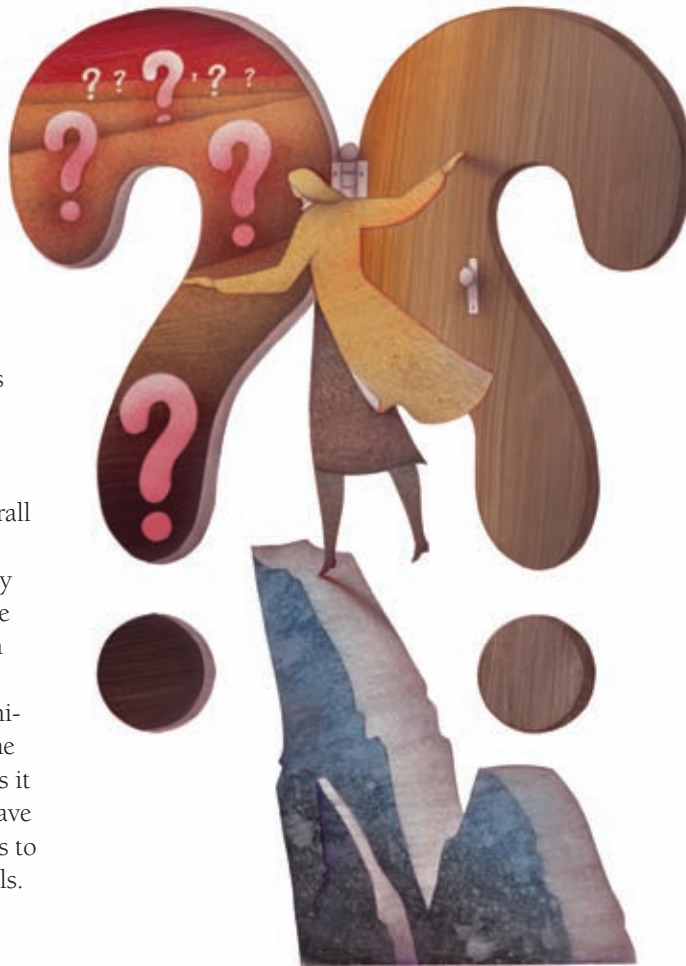
Advocates of the Common Core State Standards are hopeful. They believe the standards offer a historic opportunity to boost the overall quality of U.S. education.

Hope is important in policy debates, but there's also a role for skepticism. The Common Core State Standards are not the first national education initiative to be launched with the anticipation of success. Nor is it the first time policymakers have called on education standards to guide us toward better schools.

Looking into the Claims

In a recent study (Loveless, 2012), I tried to estimate the probability that the Common Core standards will produce more learning. The study started with the assumption that a good way to predict the future effects of any policy is to examine how well similar policies have worked in the past—in this case, by examining the past effects of state education standards. The study conducted three statistical investigations using state data from the reading and math portions of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) at both 4th and 8th grades.

The first investigation looked at whether the quality of state standards is related to past gains in student achievement. It turns out it isn't. States with poor standards have made NAEP



gains comparable to states with excellent standards.

A second investigation looked at whether the levels at which states set past proficiency standards made a difference in achievement. They don't. States with low bars for student proficiency posted similar NAEP scores as those with high bars.

Finally, the third analysis looked at variation in achievement. A key objective of the new standards is to reduce glaring inequalities. This doesn't mean to perfectly equalize all learning, of course. However, striving to ensure that all students possess the knowledge and skills necessary for college or careers means, statistically speaking, that a reduction in achievement variation should occur.

So how much reduction can we expect? The Common Core standards will surely not affect variation inside each individual state. Schools and

districts in every state have been operating under common standards for years. The real opportunity that the initiative presents is harmonizing differences in standards among states.

How much variation on NAEP achievement is there among states? Not much. In fact, within-state variation on NAEP is four to five times greater than variation among states. Put another way, the NAEP score gap between Massachusetts and Mississippi, one of the widest between any two states, exists among different schools and districts in every state. Unless the Common Core standards possess some unknown power that previous standards didn't possess, that variation will go untouched.

WHAT ARE THE CHANCES OF SUCCESS?

On the basis of these findings, the most reasonable prediction is that the Common Core initiative will have little to no effect on student achievement.

How might it defy this prediction and prove successful? Advocates of the initiative are counting on two mechanisms—high-quality professional development and improvements in curriculum—to overcome the many obstacles that lie ahead.

Educators will be bombarded with tales of wonderful professional development tied to the Common Core standards. Be on guard.

The Problem with Professional Development

So what does high-quality professional development look like? The research on the topic is limited, producing suggestive characteristics rather than definitive prescriptions.

Limited Potential for Strong Effects

A white paper on teacher quality from the National Academy of Education (Wilson, 2009) notes that several studies have identified promising features of effective professional development. These features include a focus on subject-matter knowledge; ample time (more than 40 hours per program) with a year or more of follow-up; clear linkages to teachers' existing knowledge and skills; training that actively engages teachers; and training teams of teachers from the same school.

A meta-analysis by the Council of Chief State School Officers (Blank & de las Alas, 2009) endorses a similar set of characteristics, although the best programs in this study were longer, delivering 100 hours or more of training.

Both reports note the limitations of professional development research. None of the studies that meet commonly recognized criteria for good evaluations involve middle or high school

teachers, only elementary teachers. Also, the list of promising features comes from studies of disparate programs. Their effectiveness when combined into a large-scale, comprehensive program is unknown.

The only randomized field trial—the gold standard of program evaluation—of a professional development program embodying many of the recommended features produced disappointing results (Garet et al., 2008). Participants received training on early reading instruction in content-focused summer institutes, with extensive follow-up during the school year. Teachers' knowledge increased and their pedagogy changed, but there was no improvement in student achievement.

The National Academy of Education report (Wilson, 2009) observes that professional development programs

with strong effects have been associated with small projects, concluding that “the average teacher has a minimal chance of experiencing high-quality professional development targeted to the subjects, grades, and students he or she teaches” (p. 6).

A Word About External Assessments

To evaluate whether professional development programs had an effect on student achievement, the Council of Chief State School Officers' meta-analysis includes some studies that look at assessments specifically designed by the programs themselves as well as studies that use national, state, and local assessments to judge program effectiveness. The latter group is more relevant to the Common Core standards because the success or failure of the programs depended on how much students learned on external assessments, the type of assessments the Common Core initiative will use.

These evaluations detected educationally insignificant, even trivial, effect sizes: .17 for national norm-referenced tests, .01 for statewide assessments, and .05 for studies that used local achievement tests (Blank & de las Alas, 2009). If professional development typically yields such small effects, then expectations that it will have a significant impact in the context of the new standards are probably unwarranted.

There's an important lesson here for educators who, in coming years, will be bombarded with tales of wonderful professional development tied to the Common Core standards. Be on guard. In an extensive Institute for Education

Sciences review of 1,300 studies of professional development (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007), the reviewers cautioned,

The limited number of studies and the variability in their professional development approaches preclude any conclusions about the effectiveness of specific professional development programs or about the effectiveness of professional development by form, content, and intensity (p. 14).

A “Better” Curriculum—But Which One?

The Common Core website (www.corestandards.org) makes a point of differentiating between standards and curriculum. The page “Myths vs. Facts” declares,

The Standards are not a curriculum. They are a clear set of shared goals and expectations for what knowledge and skills will help our students succeed. Local teachers, principals, superintendents, and others will decide how the standards are to be met. Teachers will continue to devise lesson plans and tailor instruction to the individual needs of the students in their classrooms. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012)

The curriculum that fleshes out the new standards will, in the end, determine how teachers, parents, and students actually experience the standards. What will that curriculum contain? Given that curricular content is subject to local discretion, how broad are the boundaries for those choices?

Core Knowledge vs. Partnership for 21st Century Skills

Consider two dramatically different views of curriculum, one supported by the Core Knowledge Foundation and the other by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. Their philosophies are diametrically opposed, yet both organizations are convinced that the Common Core State Standards embrace their point of view.

Core Knowledge, the brainchild

of E. D. Hirsch, holds that content knowledge is king. The author of the Core Knowledge blog, Robert Pondiscio (2012), lauds the Common Core initiative for reminding us “to engage children not just with rote literacy skills work and process writing, but also, and especially, with real content—rich, deep, broad knowledge about the world in which they live.” For example, on the Core Knowledge website, model lessons for 8th grade language arts include the study of Greek and Latin root



words; William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*; Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth* (supplemented by a research paper on Chinese culture); and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The key to becoming a good reader is content knowledge, Pondiscio argues, and he asks, “Yet how many times have we heard it said that we need to deemphasize teaching ‘mere facts’ and focus on skills like critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving?”

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills promotes exactly what Pondiscio deplors. The partnership has developed a framework of skills it believes are essential to good schooling, including life and career skills; information, media, and technology skills; and what it calls the 4Cs (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity). The partnership has also published a P21 Common Core

Toolkit (Magner, Soulé, & Wesolowski, 2011), which shows how the Common Core initiative and the partnership’s framework are aligned. The toolkit also offers vignettes (“lesson starters”) to illustrate how the Common Core standards integrate with the partnership’s framework.

For example, in contrast with Core Knowledge’s 8th grade lesson, an 8th grade English language arts lesson aligned to the partnership’s framework proceeds as follows:

After completing a literature circle unit of teen problem novels, students brainstorm a list of significant social, emotional, or health issues that teens face today. Working in groups, students research one issue and create a public service announcement on a closed YouTube channel (viewable only by students in the class) to persuade their peers about one action they should take regarding the issue. Students will select and use references from literary readings (e.g., citing how a particular novel presents the issue) as well as research from non-fiction sources to illustrate major points. (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008, p. 8)

This lesson would never occur in a Core Knowledge classroom. The point here is not to settle the argument between Core Knowledge and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. Rather, it’s to illustrate the elasticity of the educational philosophy underpinning the Common Core State Standards. Philosophical ambiguity may be smart politically because it allows for a wide range of supporters—a “big tent” strategy. But if two organizations with such starkly contrasting points of view both see the standards as compatible with their definition of an ideal curriculum, then any guidance about what to teach in local schools is broad indeed.

The Curriculum Conundrum

How will educators make curricular decisions? Hopefully, the effectiveness of curricular materials and programs will factor prominently.

Unfortunately, the research on effective curriculum is as thin as the research on effective professional development. As my Brookings colleagues document in a recent report, educators are “choosing blindly” when making curriculum decisions. Instructional programs can differ dramatically in their effectiveness (Chingos & Whitehurst, 2012).

Mathematica Policy Research conducted a randomized field trial of four primary-grade math textbooks and found huge differences between the most and least effective (Agodini, Harris, Thomas, Murphy, & Gallagher, 2010). Such high-quality studies are rare, and more important, even the most robust studies cannot do the impossible—provide advice on how to choose effective materials from a sea of candidates that have never been rigorously evaluated in the first place.

So what kind of information will inform the selection of local curriculum? Note that the publishers of the four math textbooks just mentioned—both effective and ineffective alike—all advertise that their texts are now aligned with the Common Core standards. As Chingos and Whitehurst (2012) observe,

Publishers of instructional materials are lining up to declare the alignment of their materials with the Common Core standards using the most superficial of definitions. The Common Core standards will only have a chance of raising student achievement if they are implemented with high-quality materials, but there is currently no basis to measure the quality of materials. (p. 1)

Back to Where We Started?

The Common Core State Standards have been adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia. They enjoy a huge following of well-wishers and supporters who are optimistic that the standards will boost achievement in U.S. schools. Setting aside the cheer-leading and fond hopes, what are the

real chances of success?

The most reasonable prediction is that the Common Core initiative will have little to no effect on student achievement. Moreover, on the basis of current research, high-quality professional development and “excellent” curricular materials are also unlikely to boost the Common Core standards’ slim chances of success. ⁴

⁴States that raised the bar from 2005 to 2009 did show an increase in 4th grade NAEP scores, but the correlation is weak, it does not appear in 8th grade, and the direction of causality is unclear. Rather than loftier expectations driving achievement gains, states may have raised the bar for proficiency because of rising achievement.

Expectations that professional development will have a significant impact in the context of the new standards are probably unwarranted.

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