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## **Common Core Common Sense: Why It's Illiberal and Unconstitutional**

Dr. Daniel B. Coupland, Associate Professor of Education, Hillsdale College

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On May 29th, 2009, Arne Duncan, the new Secretary of Education for the Obama Administration, gave a speech at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. In the speech, he said,

We want to raise the bar dramatically in terms of high standards. What we have had as a country, I'm convinced, is what we call a race to the bottom. We have 50 different standards, 50 different goal posts. And due to political pressure, those have been dumbed down. We want to fundamentally reverse that. We want common, career-ready internationally benchmarked standards.

In this short paragraph, the Secretary of Education identified the problems of the past and set a new vision for education in this country. He correctly assessed the damage created by the Bush Administration's Education policy from 2002 known as No Child Left Behind (or NCLB). While supporters of NCLB can point to limited success in a few areas, the Bush Administration's education policy left the nation's schools in a bureaucratic mess. In the National Press Club speech, the new Secretary of Education was arguing that the mess was created by—what he and others have called—a “patchwork of state standards” that left states to compete in a fundamentally flawed and unfair process for limited federal funds. Secretary Duncan's argument—presented at the National Press Club and elsewhere—was very persuasive to those in the education community who had suffered under the separate and very unequal policies of the era known as No Child Left Behind. Four years after Arne Duncan's 2009 speech, all but a handful of states have signed on to a common set of curricular standards known as Common Core.

Common Core will now provide the framework for what students learn in math and English language arts, but it will also establish two federally funded and approved tests that will replace what states currently use to measure students' academic success. Afraid to be left out of the new national education marketplace, private companies are quickly trying to align themselves with the Common Core standards. In order to survive in the Common Core era, textbook publishers and other education-related industries must show how their materials meet these national standards. SAT and ACT are now aligned to Common Core. Those who think they can avoid the Common Core by sending their children to private schools or by homeschooling

should think again. The Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Stanford 10—two popular tests of private schools and homeschool parents—will also be aligned to Common Core.

Within a few short years, Common Core has gone from virtual unknown to national educational powerhouse that may influence the formal education of some 50 million K-12 students in America. In the next few minutes, I'll try to give you some insight on what Common Core is, what the major arguments are both for and against Common Core, and I will also try to show how these arguments are missing the most important ideas about education altogether. But first, I will start with a brief history.

### **A Brief History of Educational Standards in America**

The idea of a rich educational experience finds its roots deep in American history. The Founders of this country believed an “informed citizenry” was necessary for good government. In the early 1800s, Horace Mann continued this legacy by arguing for widespread public education. Today, Horace Mann is known as the “Father of the *Common School Movement*.” In the late 1800s, politicians and social leaders looked to the schools to solve pressing social needs brought on by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Many leading education theorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—including John Dewey, William H. Kilpatrick, G. Stanley Hall, and others—developed or promoted progressive solutions to these pressing social needs. For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, progressive theories—such as child-centered pedagogy and practical/work-related curricula—dominated much of the education landscape.

In October of 1957, the United States was awakened from its educational malaise when the Soviet Union successfully launched *Sputnik*, the first space satellite, into orbit. This one event signaled America's educational decline and brought attention to the need for a return to rich content—at least in the fields of math, science, and foreign languages. But these reforms were quickly lost in the cultural turmoil of the 1960s and early 1970s, and schools once again offered a smorgasbord of academically weak classes. Students were earning academic credit in courses titled “personal relationships,” “what's happening,” and “girl talk,” and they were receiving academic credit for extra-curricular activities such as “student government,” “mass media,” and “cheerleading.”

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published a landmark study on American education titled *A Nation at Risk*, which warned that the country's economic, political, and cultural future was threatened by our weak education system. The report stated the now famous lines,

Our nation is at risk, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people...If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.

*A Nation at Risk* signaled a turning point in American Education and brought about a renewed focus on what Americans should know and be able to do. E.D. Hirsch's 1987 book, *Cultural Literacy*, argued that schools should focus on the basics and pass along "core knowledge" that every educated American should know. But many in the education establishment resisted these content-based reforms and continued to push a progressive agenda for America's schools.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and the end of the Cold War, international trade boomed, and many countries had greater opportunities to participate in the global marketplace. Globalization led to international comparisons across a variety of social indicators—including education. Many of the Asian countries—with whom we were now competing—seemed to move further and further ahead of the United States. One of the obvious features of the education in these countries was the existence of clear national education standards. Many reformers pushed the idea that if the United States was going to compete in the international marketplace, the quality of education in the entire country would have to improve. They also concluded that such improvement would only occur if students were held to high academic standards.

In 1989, President George Bush Sr. hosted an education summit for the nation's governors on academic standards and assessment. A charismatic governor from Arkansas named Bill Clinton took the lead in crafting a set of goals for increasing academic achievement in America. And when Clinton defeated Bush for the presidency three years later, the new president used these goals to craft his signature education policy known as Goals 2000. Goals 2000 provided money for each state to develop its own standards based on a national template. Critics of this initiative claimed that this effort violated the longstanding principle established by the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that education is the responsibility of the states. But the Clinton administration countered that the national standards were meant to be only a template for the states to follow and that each state was ultimately responsible for its own standards. Interestingly, Goals 2000 also authorized the creation of an approval board which would certify that states standards had indeed matched the national template. This approval board, however, never materialized because in the 1994 midterm election, Republicans gained the majority in Congress and quickly abolished it.

Even without the federal board, the effort to create state standards based on a national template continued, and in the mid-1990s professional subject-specific organizations released national standards for history, English, and math. The general public assumed that these standards would represent the basic knowledge and skills that students would need to know in a particular subject, but they soon discovered that these professional organizations had used this federally funded project to push unproven and, in a few cases, radical ideas within academic fields. Public opposition to these national standards spread quickly. Most states avoided the controversy of the national standards by creating their own unique standards. If there was one thing in *common* across state standards it was their emphasis on less controversial skills—such as "critical thinking," "cooperative learning," and "shared understanding"—rather than more concrete statements about specific ideas, people, and books that students should read.

In 2001, President George W. Bush pushed his education policy—known as No Child Left Behind (or NCLB)—which—like those before it—promised to increase student achievement by encouraging states to set high standards and to develop assessments based on those standards. But unlike the initiatives before it, NCLB required states to test all students in particular subjects and at particular grade levels in order to receive federal funding.

Looking back, most education experts—on both right and left—concluded that NCLB had failed to deliver real and lasting success. NCLB created an environment where “teaching to the test” became status quo. And what made matter worse is that from state-to-state, the tests were all different. Under NCLB, each state had its own academic standards that it was expected to meet. And because federal money was based on each state meeting its own standards, there was little incentive for states to keep the academic bar high. In an effort to show higher proficiency in student achievement, states began lowering proficiency levels in what Secretary Duncan referred to as a “race to the bottom.” By the end of the decade, many in the education community were looking for an alternative to the “separate-and-unequal” approach to standards of NCLB.

### **Common Core**

In 2007, two national trade organizations—the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers—started work on a *common* set of curriculum standards in English language arts and mathematics. In December of 2008, these two groups produced a document on national education standards that would guide the Obama Administration during its transition into office. Two months later, the Secretary of Education announced a federal education grant program known as “Race to the Top” (the name is an obvious nod to the failures of No Child Left Behind). This program included money from the 2009 “Stimulus Bill,” which was to be used by states to improve academic standards and assessments. In order to receive Race to the Top grants, state had to commit to “a set of content standards that define what students must know and be able to do and that are substantially identical across all states in a consortium.” In 2011, the Obama administration made the decision to adopt common standards even easier. Most states were still obligated to meet onerous NCLB requirements. The U.S. Department of Education promised NCLB waivers to states that adopted a common set of college- and career- ready standards and assessments. And while the U.S. Department of Education did not require states to adopt the Common Core specifically, these standards were—and still are—the only standards that met the Education Department’s criteria.

Forty-five states and the District of Columbia adopted the Common Core standards. Minnesota adopted the English language arts standards, but it rejected the math. Initially, only Alaska and Texas rejected Common Core, but in the end, Virginia and Nebraska did too.

## Arguments FOR Common Core

The idea of common academic standards across all states is quite appealing to many in the field of education because it seems to cure some obvious and longstanding problems. Allow me to highlight two of the most important.

First, our mobile society makes it easy for families to pick up and move. As E.D. Hirsch points out in his book *The Knowledge Deficit* (2006),

In a typical American school district, the average rate at which students transfer in and out of schools during the academic year is about one third. In a typical inner-city school, only about half of the students who start in September are still there in May—a mobility rate of 50 percent. (111)

When students move from school to school—especially when these moves are across state lines, they often experience a fractured education filled with huge gaps or boring repetitions. However, if all schools are meeting the same academic standards, the students have a greater chance of finding a relatively consistent education experience regardless of where they move within the country. In theory a student should be able to move from Maine to California with little disruption in his education.

Second, for years, the United States has lagged behind many industrialized nations in key academic areas such as math and science. Since *Sputnik*, policymakers have tried to craft a coherent plan to improve our country's standing in these subjects areas, but they have struggled to do so in light of the "patchwork of state standards." Pointing to the failures of NCLB, proponents of Common Core argue that having a common set of academically rigorous standards for the entire country would allow policymakers to craft a coherent plan for improving American education. Many corporate leaders and politicians argue that we are unable to compete as a nation in a global society if every state is doing its own thing.

## Arguments AGAINST Common Core

As you can probably guess, Common Core has its critics, who typically focus one or more of the following concerns.

### 1. Cost

Critics claim that Common Core will be very expensive to implement and maintain. The only study on the cost of implementing Common Core standards and assessment nationwide estimated a price tag of about \$16 billion over seven years. But the truth of the matter is that no one really knows what the final price tag for Common Core will be. For this reason—and others—critics have already labeled this initiative ObamaCore. Critics of Common Core charge that most states acted irresponsibly when they adopted the standards because they did not first have a firm understanding of its price tag. Many states saw the Race to the Top funds as a

way to pay for immediate education expenses and failed to see that they were signing on to something that would be far more expensive.

## 2. Quality

Critics argue that rather than pushing all states toward high standards, Common Core is encouraging a coalescence in the mediocre middle—so, for example, while Mississippi’s standards appear to get stronger by adopting Common Core, the standards in Massachusetts get weaker. Several curriculum experts—including Ze’ev Wurman, Sandra Stotsky, and James Milgram—have examined the math and English language arts standards very carefully, and they have discovered some alarming concerns. In fact, because of these concerns and others, both Stotsky and Milgram—who served on the Common Core’s validation committee—refused to sign the final validation report.

## 3. Privacy

The 2009 “Stimulus Bill” required states to begin tracking students in a database—starting in their preschool years to their entry into the workforce. This database will link students’ results on Common Core-related assessments to other private personal information. This database will be available to a wide variety of departments within the federal government. While supporters of Common Core claim that the system employs measures to protect the anonymity of students, critics have pointed to studies that demonstrate how these measure might not be as secure as supporters assume. But the larger issue remains about whether collecting such private information is consistent with the role of government expressed by the Founders.

## 4. Constitutionality

The biggest concern of Common Core critics to date has been the federal government’s ever-increasing role in education. The 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the U.S. Constitution established the principle that the “power” to oversee education belongs to the states. This longstanding principle of local control of education is reiterated throughout our laws and government codes. For generations, Americans have understood that the constitutional authority for education rests with the states, not the federal government. Critics of Common Core see these standards as federal overreach and a violation of both the letter and spirit of federal education law and the U.S. Constitution.

Supporters of Common Core like to portray these critics as far-right extremists who are paranoid about a government takeover. But this is not true. Diane Ravitch, a respected historian of American education, is hardly a darling of the far right—especially in recent years. On Feb. 26<sup>th</sup> of this year, Ravitch wrote the following in a piece titled “Why I Oppose Common Core Standards.” Her comments below summarize many of the central concerns that most critics have.

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...

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...

After much deliberation,...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.

Ravitch then goes on to explain her opposition to 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.

The response from Common Core supporters regarding federal overreach has been surprising weak. Michelle Rhee, the former chancellor of the D.C. public schools and a well-known education reformer, is a strong supporter of Common Core. In a speech last Thursday to political and business leaders in my home state, she said,

The vast majority of states have adopted the standards. I've heard some rumblings from folks who say we don't like it when the federal government is telling us what to do. We don't like that. You know what you should not like? The fact that China is kicking our butts right now. Get over feeling bad about the federal government and feel bad that our kids are not competing.

I certainly hope that this country's commitment to the Constitution does not simply hang on something as fragile as a "feeling" that we need to "get over." Rhee's cavalier critique of those who are concerned about federal overreach is troubling, but I—for one—appreciate her honesty. Most supporters of Common Core try to hide behind words like "state-led" and "voluntary." But anyone willing take an honest look at what transpired between 2009 and 2011 would conclude that many of these cash-strapped states already under the burden of budget shortfalls and expensive NCLB requirements were seduced by a high pressured, time sensitive sales pitch for adopting the standards that included relief in the form of money and waivers. Yes, the states are ultimately responsible for selling their constitutional birthright for a bowl of porridge, and given more time, perhaps many more states might have rejected such a poor bargain. But perhaps, it's not too late.

## The Retreat

Initially, Common Core experienced widespread bi-partisan support. Even some prominent Republican politicians—such as Jeb Bush of Florida, Chris Christie of New Jersey, and Mitch Daniels of Indiana—were strong supporters of Common Core. But support for Common Core seems to be weakening, and some states that originally adopted the standards are starting to take a second look.

This spring, the Michigan House of Representatives voted essentially to defund the implementation of Common Core standards and their related tests. In Indiana, the State Senate voted to delay implementation of Common Core so that the State Board of Education could get a better understanding of the quality, cost, and loss of local control associated with implementation of the standards and related assessments. In April, Indiana's new governor, Mike Pence, agreed to take "a long, hard look" at Common Core and quickly added that he was one of a only few politicians initially to oppose No Child Left Behind.

Other states are considering legislative action to delay or defund Common Core standards and assessments. Within the last nine months, the following states have held public forums or formal legislative hearings to discuss delaying or defunding Common Core: South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, South Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

In April, The Republican National Committee passed an anti-Common Core resolution stating that the RNC "rejects the [Common Core] plan which creates and fits the country with a nationwide straitjacket on academic freedom and achievement."

Never to be outdone, Texas boldly reiterated its opposition to the Common Core standards. In early May, the Texas House of Representatives formally rejected the standards by a margin of 140-2.

Last month, a poll of "education insiders," which included national and state education leaders, found that support for Common Core is beginning to fade. The poll showed that 63% of those polled believe that states will implement some sort of moratorium on Common Core.

And it would be wrong to assume that opposition to Common Core is coming only from the right. Recently, Randi Weingarten, president of the nation's second largest teachers union with about 1 million members, called for a moratorium on the use of standardized tests based on Common Core standards. Ms. Weingarten, initially a strong supporter of the Common Core standards, is concerned that aspects of Common Core have been poorly implemented and that without a "mid-course correction," the entire effort will fall apart. She said recently that "The Common Core is in trouble. There is a serious backlash in lots of different ways, on the right and on the left."



## Something Much More Fundamental

The idea of common, nationwide standards is appealing, and as I mentioned above, the benefits of such standards should not be ignored. But the concerns over Common Core—and especially its implementation—are real and troubling. Any of these concerns—cost, mediocrity, and federal overreach—are serious enough that states should consider pausing and, perhaps, ultimately repealing their adoption of these standards. But a much more fundamental concern exists about Common Core that goes to the heart of any educational experience.

Recall Secretary Duncan’s comments from the beginning of my talk. He said, “We want common, career ready...standards.” The phrase “career-ready” or “college- and career-ready” appear throughout the Common Core standards. The opening page of the Common Core document includes eight references to “college- and career-“ readiness. If any other goal is mentioned, such as literacy, it is subservient to this overarching goal. The catchphrase for the Common Core—printed below its logo—is “Preparing America’s Students for College & Career.” Common Core’s mission statement reflects this notion as well. Here is the entire mission statement:

The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that young people need **for success in college and careers**. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned **to compete successfully in a global economy**.

With such a mission, it is easy to see why so many politicians and business leaders support Common Core. Even critics of Common Core have adopted the “college- and career-ready” mantra and now spend much of their time arguing how Common Core will *not* prepare students for the working world. I understand that this line of attack is necessary if they have any hope of stopping Common Core. But what I would like for us to consider here today is whether or not career preparation for a “global economy” should be the ultimate educational goal in America.

In the 1920s and 30s, progressive educators tried to devalue an impractical liberal arts education and saw schools as mechanisms for preparing students for particular roles within the social structure. During this era, schooling became job preparation.

But in the ancient world, job preparation was known as “servile education” because it prepared the student to “serve” a master in a particular kind of work. Modern theorists would say that I am being ridiculous to associate the ancient notion of “servile education” to “skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century” which will allow students to adapt to an ever-changing society. But as long as students are told that the end of education is a job or career, they will forever be servants of some master.

Joy Pullmann, an education policy analyst for the Heartland Institute (and a Hillsdale graduate), recently won the Robert Novak award to study and write about Common Core. Pullman is quickly becoming one of the nation's experts on Common Core. At a recent hearing in Wisconsin on Common Core Standards, Ms. Pullman addressed Common Core's misguided focus.

[I]n a self-governing nation we need citizens who can govern themselves. The ability to support oneself with meaningful work is an important part, but only a part, of self-government. When a nation expands **workforce training** so that it crowds out the other things that rightly belong in education, we end up turning out neither good workers nor good citizens.

The ancients knew that in order for men to be truly free, they must have a liberal education that includes study of literature and history, mathematics and science, music and art. Yes, man is made for work, but he is also made for so much more. Education should be about the highest things. We should study these things—stars, plant cells, square roots, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Mozart's *Requiem*, Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*—not simply because they will get us into the right college or a particular line of work; rather, we study these noble things because they can tell us who we are, why we are here, and what our relationship is to each other as human beings and to the physical world that surrounds us.

Commenting on the Common Core standards, Anthony Esolen, English professor at Providence College, said,

[W]hat appalls me most about the standards...is the cavalier contempt for great works of human art and thought, in literary form. It is sheer ignorance of the life of the imagination. We are not programming machines. We are teaching children...We are to be forming the minds, and hearts of men and women...[and we should] raise them to be human beings, honoring what is good and right, cherishing what is beautiful.

If education in America has become—as Common Core openly declares—preparation for work in a global economy, then the situation is far worse than Common Core critics anticipated, and the concerns about the cost, the quality, and, yes, even the constitutionality of Common Core pale in comparison to the concern for the hearts, minds, and souls of America's children.