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December 9th, 2013

Common Core Information and Symposium: What CCSS Means for Ohio

Save Our Schools! Education Controversy and Change

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**Introduction**

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), introduced on June 2, 2010 in Suwanee, Georgia are a set of college ready and career prepared benchmarks for students in grades K-12 (Rothman, 2011). The Standards focus on English and mathematics, but there are also Standards available for science and social studies. In an effort to save America’s failing schools, the Standards are meant to increase content rigor in core classes in the hopes of creating higher test scores. The Standards are “fewer, clearer, and higher” than previous state standards according to the authors of the Standards (Rothman, 2011), who are the nation’s leading state superintendents (Lehner, 2013). The 2014-2015 Ohio school year will be the debut for these standards, and educators as well as parents and politicians have their fair share of negative and positive opinions about the future of students and the Standards. Following CCSS, new computerized tests will accompany the Standards, bringing with them a new culture and era of standardized testing. While the Standards have been meticulously created using college readiness research, “once they are implemented [the Standards’] researchers must examine if they are indeed valid: if a student who meets the Standards is in fact prepared for post secondary success” (Rothman, 2011).

The CCSS would be the first official national education standards in the United States, and some people view them as an “…absolutely crucial wake-up call” as, currently, states make their own standards that may not be as rigorous as Common Core State Standards are (Calkins, 2012, p. 9). By placing equal importance on all core subjects, “the CCSS emphasize much higher-level comprehension skills than previous standards” and allow for a more uniform education system in the U.S. (Calkins, 2012, p.9). However, there are some politicians and voters that are against such federal control in education as they view it as an “unwarranted intrusion into the business of states and local districts” and cite No Child Left Behind as being worded to “[prohibit] the federal government from defining curriculum and instruction” (Mathis, 2010, p. 10). In addition, “as education is not mentioned in the Constitution, some contend that such prescriptions must remain a state responsibility” and, therefore, the CCSS may be unconstitutional (Mathis, 2010, p. 11); however, as the CCSS are supported by President Barack Obama and are being implemented in most states, this argument does not seem to hold much footing in the political center of education. While politicians debate the legality of CCSS, those who are impacted by the Standards are sharing their views on CCSS and their implementation and implications.

**Stakeholders**

Some states have already rejected adopting the Common Core for their classrooms; these states are Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia with Minnesota only adopting the English standards (Wolfgang, 2013). Reasons for rejecting the Common Core in those states range from parental skepticism about the effectiveness of the Standards to less local control to too much accreditation to the federal government (Wolfgang, 2013). While those states have more general reasoning for rejecting the Common Core, other stakeholders have more specific concerns regarding the Standards.

Students, teachers, administrators, parents, and policymakers are just a few stakeholders that will be affected by the CCSS in Ohio. One of the most important aspects of the Common Core is the need for collaboration amongst different stakeholders in order for the implementation of CCSS to be successful and many “conference participants were deeply committed to that concept of collaboration" (American Teacher Journal, 2012). If the different stakeholders draw partisan lines and collaboration between stakeholders is not possible, then the implementation of the Standards will be disastrous. The most troubling aspect of this scenario is the fact that those who would be affected most will be the students coming to school every day to learn more and better prepare themselves for careers through education, as the American Teacher Journal writes, "We all want what's best for our students, and Common Core is giving us a table to discuss what that is" (2012). CCSS are providing stakeholders with the opportunity to form new kinds of relationships that were not formed in the past. By being able to bring in a new kind of curriculum, new relationships between the stakeholders in education can be formed and further transform the dynamic learning environment available to students.

In 2012, Nancy Kober and Diane Stark Rentner did a study on how 35 states that implemented the Common Core are adjusting and what their general impressions are of the Standards in their first launch. Kober and Rentner found that “states that have adopted the CCSS are taking steps to familiarize key stakeholders with the Standards” (2012). Kober and Rentner also surveyed the 35 states and asked them whom they plan to provide information to about the new standards and their schools. The states answered that they will be alerting state education agency staff, school district leaders and staff, state legislators, higher education faculty and staff, and parent and community leaders (2012).

Teachers are one of the major stakeholders in the CCSS iniatives. While policymakers and parents are very important to the success or failure of the Common Core, teachers and students are the direct benefactors of the system. 21 states that have already adopted the Standards are “finding inadequate resources to support all of the activities necessary to implement the CCSS,” which was a major challenge in the 2011-2012 school year (Kober & Rentner, 2012). These teachers also stated:

These challenges include providing professional development in sufficient quality and quantity (considered a major challenge by 20 states), aligning the content of teacher preparation programs with the CCSS (18 states), and developing educator evaluation systems to hold teachers and principals accountable for student mastery of the CCSS (18 states). Just three states considered the alignment of teacher certification requirements with the CCSS to be a major challenge, although 14 states viewed this as a minor challenge and 7 said it was too soon to tell. Sixteen states expect to face major challenges in 2011-12 in developing or adopting assessments aligned with the CCSS. Eleven foresee major challenges in identifying or developing curriculum materials aligned to the common standards” (Kober & Rentner, 2012).

This laundry list of concerns displays how teachers truly feel about the CCSS and how it is affecting their teaching practices and life. In addition, “The CCSS will cost money that could have supported smaller classes, professional development, even access to books, Kindles, and iPads,” as creating new tests and curriculum can come with a hefty monetary cost (Calkins, 2012, p. 6). All these alternative ways to use the money would have greatly benefited teachers, as there would have more manageable classroom sizes and more training. However, teachers are not the only ones feeling some unexpected negative results from the new State Standards, as the new legislation includes bringing more technology into the classroom

School districts will also have to work with the forthcoming issue of testing technology. Not only do their concerns reach the students being able to manipulate online testing successfully, but also the bare essentials they will need to carry out the tests.

In 20 states, providing an adequate number of computers in schools constitutes a major challenge, while in 15 states, having adequate Internet access and bandwidth in schools is a major challenge. Several states foresee major challenges with a lack of available expertise at the state level (14 states) and district and school level (14 states) to address technological problems that may arise during test administration. Only 5 states foresee major challenges in providing adequate security to protect online assessments from cheating and fraud, although 16 states see this as a minor challenge (Kober & Rentner, 2012).

However, the study also shows that a significant number of states think it is too early to tell if technology will pose a problem for the CCSS.

**Legislation**

Most importantly, however, the CCSS will affect the learning and success of students. While the goals of the CCSS are to make students more prepared for their futures and to make the education system as valuable as possible, parents and policymakers across the U.S. are displaying concerns. An Ohio House Bill has been introduced by “Rep. Andy Thompson, a Republican from southeastern Ohio, and co-sponsored by 13 other legislators, all Republicans” (*HB 237*). House Bill 237 proposes, “the state board of education shall not adopt, and the department of education shall not implement, the academic content standards for English language arts and mathematics developed by the common core standards initiative. Nor shall the state board use the partnership for assessment of readiness for college and careers (PARCC), or any other assessments related to or based on the common core standards” (Legislature, 2013). In fact, the bill wants to halt all funds currently being spent on the expansion of the CCSS and to do more research on the effectiveness of the standards before moving forward in Ohio. Currently, House Bill 237 has not been enacted in Ohio.

**Research into the Common Core**

For some tentative research that has been done on the Common Core, *Reaching the Goal* is a report about the findings of a survey given to 1,815 postsecondary instructors who were nominated by 1,758 postsecondary liaisons (Conley, 2011, Acknowledgements). The survey asks the instructors about the influence on Common Core at the college level, as, ideally, Common Core will help prepare students for that level of education. “In general, respondents said that they thought the Common Core standards were a coherent representation” with 84% of respondents of agreeing that the Standards for English, language arts, and literacy are coherent and 62% of respondents agreeing that the mathematics standards were also coherent (Conley, 2011, p. 94). As for the rarely discussed cognitive demand of the CCSS, “large number of respondents (96% of respondents to the question) gave feedback that the Common Core standards are sufficient” in their level of cognitive demand (Conley, 2011, p. 94). The study suggests that “students who are generally proficient in the Common Core standards will likely be ready for a wide range of postsecondary courses,” meaning that CCSS may actually achieve their goals despite concerns that they will not be beneficial for students (Conley, 2011, Executive Summary p. 7).

However, that research comes from a survey, which involved respondents evaluating the possible effectiveness of the Common Core without having seen it enacted in a classroom. For some, still “…the image of the curriculum implicit in CCSS is not visibly researched based,” as some people view its implementation and eventual results as a rush to replace to the soon-to-be-expired No Child Left Behind education reform policy (Calkins, 2012, p. 6-7). The possible impact of CCSS is unknown even as states implement them and President Obama has them in his education reform policy Race to the Top. As William Mathis states, “There exists no research on the actual impact of common national standards in the United States. The reason is simple: there have never been such standards,” meaning that theses next few years will provide the data and eventual research during the actual process of using the Standards (2010, p. 3). For the official Common Core statement on CCSS, its website states, “the Standards provide clarity and consistency in what is expected of student learning across the country…they will ensure more consistent exposure to materials and learning experiences through curriculum, instruction, and teacher preparation among other supports for student learning” with no mention of any research to support its statement (Common Core, 2013). Educational change affects key stakeholders in Ohio’s school system, but for CCSS, those effects are highly disputed and frankly unknown. Until students graduate and are assessed under the new standards, Ohio will not know their true effectiveness.

**College Readiness**

When discussing a new curriculum like the Common Core, it is of the upmost importance that this curriculum addresses college readiness as well as produces the future leaders in the global market. Learning needs to be dynamic and ensure that it continues to be of interest to the changing student body. A static curriculum can cause students to be unprepared for the more rigorous high levels of education and demanding careers. One important aspect that the Common Core will address is the core subject of language arts. A student’s ability to write and dissect information is relevant in any future career and in any educational field. The Common Core will promote “An integrated model of literacy. The language arts- listening, speaking, reading, and writing-should be integrated with each other and across the curriculum. Students are asked to read and/or listen to texts read aloud and respond critically through discussion and in writing” (Strickland, 2012).

Incorporating “speaking” into the language arts is an example of an important change that the Common Core will bring. Students lack of ability to public speak or converse can cause serious issues when student is trying to obtain a scholarship or job and, by addressing this issue in schools, the Common Core shows the dynamic form of curriculum it provides. As competitiveness in the market place increases, so to do the expectations set for students. The Common Core will envelop “a cumulative model of expectations. Instruction should address grade specific standards in tandem with the broader goals of college and career readiness” (Strickland, 2012). With college and career readiness being the goal of grade level instruction, the Common Core is addressing a fundamental problem facing the United States, which is the staggering low number of college graduates in addition to the amount of people not qualified for high level jobs that will likely become the future backbone of the American economy.

A final important topic that is addressed in the new Common Core is “critical thinking with texts in all forms of media and technology” (Strickland, 2012). Challenging students to think through problems using technology is incredibly important considering the dynamic world they live in, which has become technology based and is constantly becoming technology dependent. Teaching students to become proficient in technology while challenging them to think through problems critically helps address the issue of creating effective, prepared, and knowledgeable leaders in the U.S.

**Structure, Curriculum, and Resources**

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) directly addresses how the CCSS will affect the structure and focus of schooling in Ohio. When the Standards are in full affect in the next school year, the structure of curriculum in Ohio schools will completely change. “Across the nation there is an ‘expectations gap,’ a disconnect between what students need to know to earn a high school diploma and what they need to know to be successful in college and careers,” but Achieve Inc. has developed a guide for states, such as Ohio, to successfully implement the CCSS so students transition easily to college preparedness (2010). The organization states that “in many ways, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) aim to help close this gap, as they are anchored in college- and career-ready expectations and were designed to ensure all students progress to the college-and career-ready level by the end of high school” (Achieve, 2010). This goal of closing the expectation gap is one that directly attacks current school structure not only within Ohio’s schools but schools across America.

Currently though, the CCSS and their supporters are following the path to what Dean Fink calls “successful school change.” The four steps an educational agent of change goes through include initiation, implementation, institutionalization, and outcome. Currently, the CCSS are between initiation and implementation because the Standards have already been adopted by Ohio and are getting ready to be implemented, as displayed by organizations such as Achieve Inc. (Fink, 2000). Implementation of the CCSS will be ongoing for Ohio, but until the change reaches institutionalization, it is not technically successful. Fink defines this desired stage as “when a change has become a normal organizational role and requires unquestioned resources and time” (2000). This step will be what Achieve, other CCSS supporters, and President Obama call “college and career readiness.” When students are able to enter college or their career sufficiently prepared, that is when Common Core can say it has achieved success.

Achieve Inc. discusses that not only will the structure of curriculum be changing with the CCSS, but also with standardized assessment formatting. It suggests that states remodel their tests (an example in Ohio is the Ohio Achievement Test) to mirror the CCSS, make distinct mileposts to make sure students are on the track for readiness, and design more challenging and frequent tests (2010). There is no question that the changes CCSS propose is radically different than what Ohio currently utilizes, and such a large change could take up to 10 years to produce results (Fink, 2000). With this in mind, however, Ohio should recognize that there are resources available to them, such as Achieve Inc., EduCore, and Common Core 360, which provide sustainable help that follows successful means of school change. Achieve clearly outlines how schools can adjust and align to CCSS in ways that Fink suggests are effective. Some examples Achieve mentions are: creating a strategic implementation team, creating a supportive environment, and creating a plan, budget, and timeline (2013). These suggestions fully resemble some of Fink’s frameworks of change such as leadership, meaning, and teacher’s work and lives (2000). What Ohio can expect of the duration of the CCSS life is drastic change within the curriculum and testing of Ohio’s schools. These two major changes will affect the structure of the school testing year as the CCSS call for two to four new tests during the school year (Bloom, 2012), teachers to change teaching practices to model the core, and for the culture of the school to be college and career focused.

**Conclusion**

As the quality and disparity in education continue to become concerning issues, providing a more rigorous curriculum to all American children can potentially help close the achievement gap. That being said, the most important part in determining whether a school has been successful in implementing the new Common Core is being able to understand that the levels of success will not be as uniform as the curriculum itself, as McPartland and Schneider state, “If schools or districts are to be compared for their effectiveness as academic learning environments, account must be taken of the initial differences of students who are to be served, in order to isolate the "value added" by the school program itself in students' performance outcomes” (1996). Positive results will not happen overnight and schools with highly disadvantaged populations will not be as successful as others, but that does not mean that they cannot vastly improve. Developing a more uniform curriculum may hamper the culture of diversity that our country embraces, but it has the potential of sending the message that all American students can be successful at the highest levels, something that our current curriculum does not necessarily hold to be true.

Another great aspect of the United States is the diversity of the population. Our nation’s ability to accept people from all different racial and ethnic backgrounds creates for a culturally diverse atmosphere. This kind of atmosphere is also reflected in the way students in the U.S. are taught. Schools that have large minority populations tend to focus some of their curriculum towards topics that the student population can better relate to. This can be viewed as a positive and a negative. The implementation of the Common Core would depart from this style of teaching and create a more uniform curriculum across the board.

A common core curriculum of demanding content and high performance standards would be a major departure from the current policy and practice of American education. At present, different curricula are provided to different students as a way of dealing with the diversity of students' abilities and interests in American schools, especially in middle schools and high schools (McPartland and Schneider, 1996).

The implementation of a curriculum like the Common Core that is uniform across the United States would potentially bring added academic challenge and rigor to certain school districts. However, educators should embrace adding more of a challenging curriculum as competition in the global marketplace continues to become more competitive, as evidenced by “studies of Catholic and public high schools [that] have argued that a common strong academic curriculum is a major explanation for the more positive educational outcomes, especially for poor and minority students, in Catholic high schools” (McPartland and Schneider, 1996). The positive results that have come from a more rigorous and uniform curriculum cannot be ignored.

**Our Plan**

Our plan for presenting the Common Core to the legislators is to encourage them to provide support to the implementation and execution of the Common Core in Ohio public schools. We will ask them to support educators with the new curriculum plan by providing the resources necessary for the new standards plan, the proper development and training for teaching with the Common Core, and giving them time to adapt to new teaching and learning standards. Some excellent resources include Achieve Inc., EduCore, and Common Core 360, which assist teachers and administrators in successfully transitioning to Common Core practices. From a training aspect, networks such as Common Core 360 provide training modules through video training that is practical and constantly available for teacher usage. “Teachers and administrators can watch the videos that guide effective instruction over and over again, either to address a new standard or to revisit one they’ve seen before” to help them prepare for the implementation of the Standards (Common Core 360, 2013). Most resources and training can be found online for free, but legislators should advise schools to provide in-person professional development and training in the Common Core before and during implementation.

We suggest using the first few years after the implementation of the Common Core as data and research to see if continuing with CCSS is appropriate for Ohio public schools. To evaluate if it is appropriate, we propose using teacher feedback about the value of Common Core in the classroom and its impact on teaching and learning styles; using parents and student surveys on overall satisfaction with CCSS; and the increase, decrease, or lack of significant change in student test scores for the first three years of implementation. In addition to using the first few years as data, we suggest having low-stakes testing throughout the school year, as a way to better transition to the new standards and as a way to decrease anxiety about and negative results from the new standardized tests. As suggested by Molly Bloom, the tests will be available online, with four tests throughout each school year (2012). These tests include “an initial test to see where students are at the start of the year, a midpoint test, and two tests given later in the year to see how much students have learned” (Bloom, 2012). Supporting this plan for testing through the Common Core will promote a healthier test culture within schools, where students get multiple opportunities to show what they know. As Common Core becomes part of public school education in Ohio, we suggest working with the CCSS by advocating efficient training and resources, measuring student success under low stake circumstances, and keeping an open mind when examining the new Standards rather than fighting against them as they are in the implementation stage of educational change in Ohio. We look forward to seeing how this new educational change impacts Ohio and its students.

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