

# Preface

## Embracing New Paradigms in Education

For each generation of Americans, one of the most important issues is the perennial struggle to improve the American education system and to develop new educational theories, paradigms, and strategies that will enable American students to survive and thrive in a rapidly changing global culture.

The twenty-first-century debate over the future of education involves a number of complex issues, including the degree to which federal intervention is needed or desired in primary and secondary education. Initiatives like No Child Left Behind and the Common Core programs have been among the most controversial facets of this ongoing debate. Other major issues include the rising cost of education, the growing economic disparities in both primary and secondary education, and the ongoing debate over the best ways for both teachers and students to embrace and utilize technology. Beyond specific debates, the goal of educators and legislators remains the same today as it was a century ago: to bring education to the greatest number of people and to foster knowledge in the American public that will enable Americans to compete in the global sphere.

### Quality in Teaching and Learning

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and the Common Core State Standards Initiative of 2009–2014 are the two most important American education initiatives of the twenty-first century thus far. Both programs represent an unprecedented move toward direct federal intervention and involvement in state educational systems, by linking the dispensation of federal funding to the performance of students and schools as measured by standardized testing and adherence to national standards of knowledge.

NCLB was a bipartisan piece of legislation passed during President George W. Bush's first term in office. Since the 2002 implementation of NCLB, national estimates indicate overall improvements in English and mathematics scores on standardized tests given across the nation. Supporters of the program have used these statistics as evidence of the law's success. Supporters have also pointed out that testing reveals a narrowing gap between white and minority students since the beginning of the program.

A state-level initiative sponsored by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Common Core State Standards are a set of guidelines establishing basic knowledge and skills that American K–12 students should have at the completion of each grade. As of 2014, forty-four states and the District of Columbia had adopted the standards, which were initially presented as an improvement on the standards-based assessment of the NCLB program. The Common Core standards were implicitly endorsed by the federal government when the administration of President Barack Obama used adherence to the standards as

one of the criteria for awarding federal money to states under the Race to the Top education funding program. Announced in 2009, Race to the Top offered schools the opportunity to compete for more than \$4 billion in funding for educational innovation and reform, based in part on the success of their students in standardized tests. By the end of 2013, all program funds had been disbursed to eighteen states and the District of Columbia.

Although recognized as landmarks of education reform, NCLB and the Common Core standards have also been highly controversial. For one, the focus on standardized testing has been blamed for creating an environment in which teachers focus only on facts that will appear on the tests, rather than presenting a more comprehensive and balanced education. Further, independent psychological studies indicate that standardized tests are often biased toward individuals from certain cultural, economic, and racial backgrounds, thus fostering a widening achievement gap among American students.

While the goal of these programs is to create fair national standards of knowledge that will help to make student assessment more accurate, many educators argue that standardized tests are not the best method available. Some schools utilize an alternative, performance-based evaluation method in which student knowledge is assessed based on the student's ability to apply their knowledge to problem solving in real-world situations. In some cases, public high schools utilizing the performance-based system reported lower dropout rates and higher graduation rates.

The debate over standards for measuring student success can be extended to the ongoing debate over how best to measure the effectiveness of teachers. Controversial state and federal proposals for standardized teacher assessment have raised the question of whether it is possible to evaluate all or most teachers based on a core set of standards. Teacher evaluations, in which students rate their experiences with teachers, have long been conducted for the use of teachers and administrators, but some schools are currently debating whether these results should be made available to the public and to parents guiding their children's education.

### **Class and Cost in Education**

Another major issue affecting families and students is the rising cost of education and the growing class gap between public and private options both for K–12 students and in higher education. The cost of private education has risen steadily in the twenty-first century; a 2012 article in the *New York Times* reported that the cost of private schooling for first-grade students in New York rose 48 percent between 2002 and 2012. In some cases, the cost of a single year in a private preparatory high school may exceed the cost of a year in one of America's top colleges.

The tuition paid to private schools results in a number of key benefits, including more advanced technology available to both teachers and students, smaller classrooms where teachers can dedicate more time to each student, and peripheral staff that can provide individualized tutoring and assistance. Collectively, private school students may enjoy an advantage in terms of preparation for both higher education

and employment, and yet the rising cost of private education places a financial strain on families struggling to afford the best education for their children.

The debate over the advantages and disadvantages of private versus public education extend also to the hundreds of for-profit educational institutions in the United States, attempting to fill an educational niche through a business-oriented model of operation. These controversial organizations have been accused of sacrificing educational quality to enhance profit.

Another issue in the economics of education concerns the rising cost of public and private college tuition. A 2014 article in the *Economist* noted that American students carried more than \$1.1 trillion in debt, which is more than the debt owed to American credit card companies. The issue of college debt and costs is considered by many to be a national crisis, and President Obama mentioned the issue in his State of the Union address every year from 2009 to 2014.

Studies have further shown that tuitions continue to rise and that the return on this investment varies greatly between students. While broad analyses indicate that individuals with a college education enjoy vastly superior earning potential, this estimate is skewed by the fact that different degrees pay different returns. Since the beginning of the 2008 economic recession, for instance, students obtaining degrees that once translated into high employability have been faced with a lack of jobs and difficulty in repaying their student loans. Nationwide in 2010, nearly 15 percent of students defaulted on their loans within three years of leaving college due to inability to obtain work sufficient to meet their financial needs.

The depth of the cost and debt problem has, in some cases, stimulated proposals to combat the issue with innovative solutions. A pilot program in Oregon called the Pay It Forward, Pay It Back program, for instance, involves providing undergraduate education at no upfront tuition cost to students, and then having them pay a percentage of their income back to the state over the next twenty years after graduation. While solutions like this may not be feasible on a nationwide scale, the complexity of the debt issue may mean that trying such innovative strategies is the only way to address this issue effectively.

While the financial implications of college debt are in many cases immediately apparent, educational analysts also warn about the unintended consequences of this phenomenon for the future of American society as a whole. If students increasingly focus on career paths with immediate rewards, this might reduce involvement in disciplines that provide fewer opportunities for immediate lucrative employment. On the whole, this pattern discourages students from engaging in the arts, philosophy, history, and the basic sciences, as careers in these fields are marked by lower income at entry levels. The threat of debt and the increasing severity of this problem may therefore threaten the diversity, creativity, and innovation of American culture, leading to a generation pursuing conservative educational goals out of a desire to minimize debt, rather than pursuing their passions and interests, which is often the path to creative innovation.

## Technology and Education

The evolution of technology is one of the characteristic features of the modern era in human culture. Social media, wireless connectivity, and an increasingly global network of communication and interaction are defining features of the twenty-first century. The benefits of global connectivity are widely acknowledged but are not equally shared, and the issue of how to integrate technology into education and thus extend the benefits of technology to a greater portion of society has become one of the most pressing issues facing American schools.

While students in America's top schools often enjoy access to the latest in modern technology and the resources to learn how to communicate and conduct research online, these resources are often reduced or lacking in America's most impoverished school systems. For instance, a 2012 article from the *Huffington Post* reported on a school in urban Chicago where nearly one thousand students share access to just twenty-four computers through the school's homework lab. By contrast, students at some of the nation's most affluent schools may be provided with individual laptops and even tablet devices.

Educators argue that familiarity with technology and online communication is rapidly becoming an educational necessity rather than simply a benefit or advantage. As online and computing technology have gradually been integrated into fields ranging from art history to automotive repair, legislators and school administrators must struggle with how to provide technology and teach technological competence as part of a basic education.

In addition to access to technology, educators are also increasingly experimenting with providing education online, through video lectures or video conferencing, allowing students to learn from home rather than having to meet in a classroom. Flipped classrooms (where students watch lectures at home and do what used to be homework in the classroom) and online degree programs are just two ways teachers have experimented with enhancing educational opportunities for students. While the benefits and detriments of online education are a matter of debate, the increasing familiarity of young students with online communication means that online learning may become an increasingly effective way for students and teachers to communicate. Cloud sharing and connectivity now enable online students to work together on the creation of documents or other projects and to collaborate in ways previously only possible in a shared physical space.

In many ways, the evolution of technology and communication has outpaced the capability of the educational system to adjust, and many educators have fallen behind their students in terms of technological competence. This represents a third facet of the debate over technology and education: the need to educate teachers as well as students on the newest technological trends and to help educators learn how to better utilize information technology in their classrooms.

Many of the issues in American education, including the ongoing effort to measure student and teacher success and the complex issues surrounding class and income gaps in educational achievement, have been perennial issues in the education debate for more than a century. Issues surrounding the integration of advanced

technology into education are more recent but no less important in a society rapidly evolving through the information age. While the problems facing the education system may at times appear insurmountable, difficult problems can also bring out the best and most innovative solutions. Around the nation and around the world, there are many passionate educators, administrators, and politicians searching for ways to enhance and extend the benefits of education in the twenty-first century.

—Micah Issitt

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Jenny, and Rachel Ohm. "Bracing for \$40,000 at New York City Private Schools." *New York Times*. New York Times, 27 Jan. 2012. Web. 4 June 2014.
- Bauman, Kurt J., and Nikki L. Graf. "Educational Attainment: 2000." *US Census Bureau*. US Census, Aug. 2003. Web. 4 June 2014.
- "Fast Facts: Educational Attainment." *National Center for Education Statistics*. US Dept. of Educ., 2013. Web. 4 June 2014.
- Flamm, Michael. "Facing the New Millennium." *Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*. Gilder Lehrman Inst. of Amer. History, n.d. Web. 4 June 2014.
- Kim, Susanna. "Oregon Lawmakers Pioneer Tuition-Free 'Pay It Forward, Pay It Back' College Plan." *ABC News*. ABC News Internet Ventures, 5 July 2013. Web. 4 June 2014.
- Spring, Joel H. H. *Political Agendas for Education: From Race to the Top to Saving the Planet*. 5th ed. New York: Routledge, 2014. Print.
- "Student Loan Debt Statistics." *American Student Assistance*. Amer. Student Assistance, 2014. Web. 4 June 2014.
- Weis, Lois, Kristin Cipollone, and Heather Jenkins. *Class Warfare: Class, Race, and College Admission in Top-Tier Secondary Schools*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2013. Print.

# 1

## Report Card: Common Core Standards



© Stan Carroll/The Commercial Appeal/Landov

Dr. Lynn House, interim superintendent of the Mississippi Department of Education, brought her message for the new Common Core standards being put in place in school districts across Mississippi and most of the nation. The new standards in math and language arts are to be in place in kindergarten through 12th grade by fall 2014.

# The Common Core Controversy

---

## About the Common Core

Despite its vociferous supporters and detractors, the Common Core academic standards seem misunderstood by both sides. Prior to 2010, every state in the United States adopted its own set of standards, which identified the skills students were expected to master upon completion of each grade level. But while state-specific standards allowed greater autonomy over curriculum development, students graduated from high schools across the country with inconsistent skill sets, and many were underprepared for the academic rigors of college.

Additionally, according to the 2000 US Census, nearly 18 percent of children and their families had moved during the prior year. Students relocating to new towns or states while still in school, especially during the academic year, may find the transition complicated by the different expectations of their new schools. Some students might be significantly ahead of their new peers and lose educational ground, while others might be significantly behind and struggle to catch up.

To address the problems caused by this patchwork of academic standards, the Common Core State Standards Organization (CCSSO) and the National Governor's Association for Best Practices (also known as the NGA Center) coordinated a state-led effort to develop the Common Core standards in 2009. The purpose of the Common Core is to standardize the skills taught in public schools across the United States so that all students, regardless of state or school district, are taught the same language and math skills at the same grade levels. As of 2014, forty-four states and the District of Columbia have adopted the standards and are implementing them in the classroom.

## What Is the Common Core?

Conflicting commentary demonstrates much confusion among politicians, educators, parents of school-age children, and the general public as to what the Common Core entails. It is not a predefined national curriculum, but instead defines a list of skills that students are expected to master by the end of each grade level. Each state then determines how to implement the standards within its curriculum.

For example, the standards for English Language Arts include “determine an author's point of view or purpose,” “determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words,” and “trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text.” The Common Core emphasizes informational texts because, while school reading traditionally focuses on fiction, most college-level and daily-life reading is nonfictional material such as historical, scientific, and technical texts. To address this discrepancy, the Common Core prescribes a more even split of fiction and

nonfiction materials, and teachers instruct students to dig deep into each text—not just give a cursory glance and apply it anecdotally to their own lives—and to use context to interpret unfamiliar vocabulary.

One common misconception is that the Common Core contains a large amount of required nonfiction reading and abolishes the study of literary works. In reality, the Common Core documentation provides suggested texts for teaching each required skill, but few specific materials are actually required under the standards. When required texts do appear (in late high school), they include documents of historical and literary significance, such as the US Constitution.

### **Mixed Reviews from Educators**

Several national teacher associations, including the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers, support the Common Core standards. These organizations appreciate the consistency provided by nationally adopted standards, and recognize the importance of ensuring that students across the country possess the same literacy and critical thinking skills upon high school graduation, regardless of where those students live.

However, as a practical matter, many individual teachers are unhappy with the nationwide rollout of the new standards. Some support the idea of basic skill standardization by grade level, but they are displeased about not being consulted during the development process, and believe that the decision-makers—often politicians or higher-level administrators such as school district superintendents—lack a realistic understanding of students' capabilities. As of March 2014, surveys suggested that about 70 percent of teachers felt that the transition to the Common Core curriculum was not working, and about 66 percent said that they were not given any input into how the new curriculum should be implemented at their schools. Both parents and educators voice concerns that the required analytical and critical thinking skills are not developmentally appropriate for the age level to which they are assigned, thus setting children up for frustration and disappointment rather than a higher level of achievement.

Educational historian and New York University professor Diane Ravitch notes that, while the Common Core standards sound reasonable in theory, they were not field tested prior to nationwide rollout. As a result, nearly every state is struggling to understand and implement the new standards. Many issues remain, including how to address widespread skill deficiencies, especially in higher grades where students' progress may lag significantly behind the new standards. In the meantime, school districts are instituting new standardized testing procedures to monitor students' progress on the standards, and sometimes tying teacher compensation and job security to student performance.

### **Student Assessment and Standardized Testing**

Assessment of student performance under the new Common Core standards is at the heart of many teachers' concerns. Educators and policy-makers often debate



the effectiveness and consequences of standardized testing: some believe it ensures that schools meet minimum standards, while others believe it reduces teacher autonomy. Critics assert that, rather than motivating teachers to improve their curricula, it instead pressures teachers to narrowly focus on test preparation rather than teaching broader skills and concepts to their students.

This debate looms large as school districts try to improve performance by tying teacher compensation and tenure to students' test results, and the debate moved to the forefront when trial administrations of the new Common Core tests in New York showed significant drops in student scores compared to prior assessments. It also revealed discrepancies based on socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity. Overall, 34 percent of students obtained a score that was up to the new standards, but only 20 percent of students with a lower socioeconomic status, 16 percent of Hispanic or Latino students, and 12 percent of black students passed. As a result, teachers and their representative unions fear accountability for poorly understood test results, while other Common Core states approach the new assessments with greater caution. Teachers worry about lacking the time within a single school year to bring students up to the newly raised standards while also covering the new required material. They argue that full implementation of the new standards across all grade levels must be a multiyear process, and that they are receiving insufficient support from their administrators—many of whom barely understand the new standards themselves—to attain these lofty goals.

As a practical matter, administering and scoring statewide standardized tests is expensive. According to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), it would cost about \$29.50 per student for the company to administer and score a Common Core–aligned math and reading test—nearly twice as much as some school districts currently spend on student testing. Educational testing companies stand to make significant amounts of money from the changing assessments, leading some critics to suspect that the purpose of the Common Core is more about corporate profit than improved education.

Additionally, many parents who exercise their right to opt their children out of standardized testing meet severe resistance from the school district. School districts' performance metrics, as well as their eligibility under 2009's Race to the Top education funding initiative, are tied not only to student performance, but also to the percentage of students who actually take the tests. When students opt out of testing, the reduction in district testing numbers can reduce the amount of state and federal funding the district receives.

### **Political Pressure and Negative Publicity**

As of 2014, some of the first states to adopt the Common Core during its 2010 rollout were reconsidering. In April 2014, Indiana voted to drop the Common Core and replace it with state-developed standards. Legislators touted this as a step forward, claiming the change allowed them to enact their own “uncommonly high” standards instead. However, education expert Sandra Stotsky reviewed a draft of Illinois's new standards and concluded that much of this draft was simply copied

from the Common Core standards; the English language arts standards for grades 6–12 were particularly similar, with Stotsky estimating that over 90 percent were unchanged from Common Core. In June 2014, South Carolina became the second state to drop the Common Core standards, planning to adopt a new set of standards in time for the 2015–2016 school year.

Ultimately, the debate over the Common Core is also political. The Republican Party is split, with Tea Party and libertarian-leaning Republicans worried about government control over school curricula and big-business Republicans embracing the standards because of financial opportunities. The Democratic Party is also split between those who believe a national standard helps ensure that all students receive an adequate education and those who worry it will leave students in already-underperforming school districts even further behind.

Indeed, education policy analysts suggest that the “one size fits all” approach to national standardization undermines teachers’ autonomy in their classrooms and prevents teachers from adapting their curricula to meet the specific needs of their students. Stan Karp of New Jersey’s Education Law Center and the liberal reform group Rethinking Schools notes that the Common Core “does not reflect the experience of many groups of students served by public education” and “does not reflect the concerns that many parents have for what they want to see in their education.” This may be true especially in underperforming school districts, where life skills might trump college preparation. Karp also notes that the approach “doubles down” on what he describes as a “testing-and-punish” approach to public education that has proven ineffective for many years.

### **No Clear Consensus or Solution**

In general, the fight against the Common Core has been a bipartisan effort. However, this may be a response to public outcry for repeal of the standards rather than careful consideration about the validity and helpfulness of the standards themselves. Ultimately, parents, teachers, administrators, and politicians agree that the United States must find a way to prepare its students better for higher education and competition in the global job market. However, disagreement abounds on whether the Common Core is the best solution to this dilemma and whether it will deliver on its promises of raising all US school districts to a uniformly high standard of education or simply generate more standardized testing and label more school districts as underperforming.

—Tracey M. DiLascio

### **Bibliography**

- Associated Press. “Indiana: Common Core Replaced with State Standards.” *New York Times*. New York Times, 28 Apr. 2014. Web. 5 June 2014.
- Common Core State Standards Organization. “About the Standards.” *Common Core State Standards Initiative*. Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014. Web. 5 June 2014.