The Current Debate about Common Core State Standards and the Standardization of K-12 Education in the United States

Robert Przybylski, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor & Foreign Expert
Department of Educational Administration and Policy
College of Education Science
Nanjing Normal University
122 Ninghai Road, Gulou District, Nanjing City, Jiangsu
China

Abstract

This study examines the accountability movement that is currently being carried out in the United States and how the Common Core State Standards initiative contributes to the standardization of k-12 education in the country. This conceptual paper uses both empirical and periodical literature from the past 15 years. Findings show, for the most part, programs designed to improve equity and student learning have fallen short of accountability benchmarks. This has led to an environment that includes educators given more and more responsibilities and increased pressure to meet everchanging criterions, much of it through rigid policies and curriculum. Ultimately, Common Core State Standards and its mandates on accountability have initiated a profound shift in the ways that district leadership strategically plan, how principals lead schools, and teachers teach.

Keywords: Common Core State Standards, Accountability, Standardization, Assessment, School Reform, Educational Politics

Stemming back to the release of A Nation at Risk by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, in 1983, demands for higher academic standards became a national prerogative in the United States (U.S.) Federal and state politicians took it upon themselves to come up with answers to what was perceived as a national dilemma that threatened the country's prominence in the world, both economically and politically.

Educational leaders, researchers, school administrative organizations, teacher unions, parents, students, and many other special interest groups identifying themselves as proponents of public education, joined in the national discussion. In the end, after almost two decades of dialogue, two primary results came about: federal lawmakers passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001; and, the federal government would provide states with additional funding to support the new initiatives stemming from the new Act.

NCLB would require schools to test every child in grades 3-8 every year, with the ultimate goal of having every child scoring "proficient" by 2014. This ambitious objective required schools to make adequate yearly progress (AYP). To help with this, NCLB specified systems of benchmarks with definitive timelines. Many states responded with policies outlining learning outcomes and by conjoining students' test scores to rewards and sanctions for school districts, schools, and students. Furthermore, many states enacted policies requiring students to pass state assessments to graduate from high school. Such policies expected teachers to not only use data in ways that aligned instructional practices with state standards but also encouraged them to provide additional support to students at risk of not meeting standards. It was believed that teachers would comply in doing so, since a strong accountability culture would exert a strong influence on teachers to have a sense of responsibility and the feeling of internal consequences for not meeting expectation. Principals likewise had a role to play in the new era of accountability. In many instances, school principals were ultimately held responsible for ensuring that benchmarks were met at their respective schools.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) debut in 2010 with the endorsement of 45 states and the District of Columbia. This added federal government initiative aligned curriculum in the hopes of promoting collaboration across the nation's state education departments resulting in the development of instructional materials and assessments consistent across the country. The outcome has been far from harmonious; rather, common core has set off a debate that promises to rage on for some time. This leads to the purpose of this paper, which is twofold: to conduct an examination and disclose the outcomes of CCSS; and to investigate the effects of standardization on k-12 education in the U.S.

Accountability

The Movement

When "A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education)" was released in 1983, it started the movement for higher academic standards in U.S. schools (Brunner, Fasca, Heinze, Honey, Light, Mardinach, & Wexler, 2005). Accountability became a priority for federal and state politicians which ultimately led to the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. All schools had to demonstrate AYP efficiency for the student body as a whole and specific student subgroups determined from achievement tests taken by students (Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2010). To help with this, NCLB specified systems of benchmarks with definitive timelines (Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2009). Most states responded with policies designed in the hopes of raising students' learning outcomes and reducing race and class achievement gaps by conjoining students' test scores to rewards and sanctions for school districts, schools, and students (Diamond & Cooper, 2007). Furthermore, many states had students' complete assessments to determine graduation from high school. Such policies had expectations for teachers to not only use data in ways that aligned instructional practices with state standards, but also, assumed that they would provide additional supports for at-risk students. Teachers, for the most part, complied since a strong accountability culture exerted a strong influence on teachers to have a sense of responsibility (Monpas-Huber, 2010). Principals, as well, took part in the new era of accountability. They were held responsible for student progress and achievement at their respective schools and those with failing schools implemented changes in hopes of reversing the schools' fortunes. In many instances initiatives failed to produce positive results and these principals often took the brunt of the schools' shortcomings, usually, through dismissal. In all, some schools have been able to consistently meet the required standards; others, though, have struggled and suffered penalties, including financial drawbacks and school reorganization (Duke & Landahl, 2011; Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2010).

Other studies have claimed that curriculums, in particular Math and English Language Arts, have narrowed under NCLB. Since students are required to write AYP related exams, teachers have limited instruction in preparation for these tests. Yet, in a survey administered by Ingram, Seashore Louis, Schroeder (2004), results showed that roughly half of the teachers and administrators judged teacher effectiveness and school effectiveness by some indicator other than student achievement. In another study using North Carolina principals, highlighted that only about 50% of the state's End-of-Grade tests were viewed as a good measure of student mastery (Ladd & Zelli, 2002).

By providing schools with specific objectives on student learning outcomes, the expectation was to have educators and students working cohesively towards the common goal of educational equality and success (Diamond & Cooper, 2007). However, there is a constituency of research implying otherwise, depicting an educational system that is subjugated to testing and student learning remaining stagnant.

The Implications of Standardization on United States K-12 education

While the goals of accountability programs were intended to improve equity and student learning, the aftermath of an increasingly complex system of assessment and accountability has yet, largely, not reversed student drop-out and graduation rates, closed the achievement gap between student subgroups, and the disparities between high and low achieving schools (Louis & Robinson, 2012; see also Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2009; Ladd & Zelli, 2002; Stiggins and Chappius, 2005). According to Louis et al. (2010b), NCLB, has been similar to most federal education mandates, providing a framework in which states can adapt to suit their existing political and accountability contexts. Then again, other findings have brought to light that school districts only played a moderating role when it came to applying state policies and in situations where the district was unable to build on state policies to supplement local programs, the overall effect was minimal.

On the other hand, NCLB had dire consequences for school leaders due to the nature of the policies foci on student outcomes, not leadership. The result has been principals losing their jobs when students at their respective schools performed poorly on standardized tests (Ylimaki, 2007). In addition, if accreditation requirements were not met, principals encountered potential loss of funding for their schools, increasing state and federal scrutiny, the possibility of school take-over by the state, and teacher turnover (Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2009). These pressures have proven to be an overwhelming load for principals, especially for those at schools with a history of poor student achievement and situated in communities with high levels of poverty, cultural diversity, and neighborhood crime (Ylimaki, 2007). These particular principals found it difficult to recruit and retain good quality teachers, and over time, these schools serving disadvantaged and low performing students had the tendency to end up with an even higher number of lower quality teachers (Ladd & Zelli, 2002). In an effort to confront these unforeseen issues, various forms of leadership designs and tactics, such as, collaborative leadership and professional development designs ensued. Collaborative leadership was undertaken by some principals in the hopes of developing teacher acceptance to the steady flow of initiatives that came from the state and district offices. In exchange of relinquishing some of his/her authority the principal yearned to achieve teacher buy-in through ownership. Teachers would come to realize that by believing student success would ensue would have them work harder; thus, in the end, establish an effective school. To some degree, teachers developed experiences and exchanged knowledge and ideas to help one another with regard to lesson planning, class management and technology (Blasé & Blasé, 1999). However, while faculty collaboration was essential to achieving success in some schools, principals would be held fully responsible in regard to student achievement (Monpas-Huber, 2010; see also Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2009; Ylimaki, 2007).

In brief, accountability continued to be the driving force when it came to establishing leadership within schools and to the affairs of student achievement. Educators were left with meeting standards through specified guidelines and policies enacted through strictly constructed curriculum guides and frequent testing (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012 see also Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2006; Stiggins and Chappius, 2005).

Common Core State Standards

What is it?

CCSS consists of quality standards for mathematics and English language arts. At the end of each grade, students are expected to meet or exceed the specific benchmarks. The measures are to help inform teachers, principals, and district leadership of the level of student learning; and as well, to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2016).

The Rationale behind Common Core

With international rankings showing the U.S. consistently underperforming against other nations, CCSS would not only provide a direction to improve student learning; but also, act as a means to having standards that were internationally benchmarked. Comparisons to other nations could be made on a level field and the reporting accuracy of student results would also assist state education departments and the federal department of education to better evaluate and compare states, districts, and schools within the U.S. (Mathis, 2010).

Higher education for many years had voiced concerns on the readiness of high school graduates entering universities and community colleges. Universities especially, complained that students' needing English remediation was becoming the norm (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). State legislatures on the other hand, considered students choosing to go into the workforce right after high school were ill prepared to do so. This ultimately led to the belief that CCSS through increased rigor in the classroom, particularly in high school, would better prepare students for college and the work force. This specific motive is considered the very reason why CCSS was created (Mathis, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

The CCSS program provides districts and schools with tests and other forms of assessments which allow for the monitoring of an individual students' progress throughout the year. So instead of comparing student achievement to other students, such as the traditional class average; a classroom teacher could monitor the individual student's progress at the subject, unit, and even at the lesson level, at any given time. Proponents of CCSS view this as being a stabilizing influence allowing students to better understand what is expected of them. If students understand why they are learning a certain concept, they will be further motivated to learn.

Another argument used by those advocating CCSS is the idea that the standards have paved the way for increased teacher collaboration and professional development (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2016; McLaughlin, Glaab, & Hilliger Carrasco, 2014). Since teachers across the nation are teaching the same curriculum, this enables teachers to share their best practices and apply what they have learned in their classrooms (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2016).

Concerns about Common Core

The CCSS currently only have frameworks in place for ELA and Mathematics. Subjects, such as, science and social studies do not, therefore leaving it up to the individual states to set their own set of standards. This goes against the actual principle of CCSS of ensuring that all students, no matter where they live and educate in the U.S., will receive the same level of education. Also, with only ELA and Mathematics falling under the standards of CCSS has narrowed the overall curriculum program for students. Schools are now devoting additional time to these two subjects by trading away time of other subjects and going as far as to eliminating entire subjects, for instance: art, music, physical education, health, social studies, elective courses, and even going to the extremes of eliminating recess/breaks for students (Ravitch, 2016).

CCSS is also argued as being partly responsible for the ever-increasing value put on standardized test performance. The issue of over testing students in the U.S. is a contentious issue and critics of CCSS view the program of escalating this perceived problem further. Proponents of CCSS contend that the program enables states, districts, and schools to compare the performances of their students against each other more accurately, and for that reason, testing ultimately encourages better teaching and learning. The critics on the other hand maintain the opposite; rather than better teaching and learning, teachers teach to the test and students simply memorize and repeat simple learning level techniques (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Monpas-Huber, 2010; Ravitch, 2016).

Younger students are expected to learn at a faster pace with increased rigor. Increased learning has been encouraged and accepted to a certain degree; but this has also created a more rigid and narrower curriculum primarily focused on mathematics and ELA at the expense of other subjects. Plus, as reflected in grade 3 AYP scores, younger students have shown that this accelerated learning agenda has generally failed to increase learning (Ravitch, 2016).

The transition to CCSS has put an additional burden to cash strapped states, districts, and schools. Many textbooks became obsolete and had to be replaced. To align with the new standards ushered in through CCSS, new curricula materials and technology were purchased along with many textbooks that became obsolete and had to be replaced (Diamond & Cooper, 2007; Duke & Landahl, 2011; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2010).

In all, the CCSS has been problematic for students, teachers, principals, and district leaders. Testing associated with CCSS is the primary component to measure student performance which has diminished other work, such as, classroom work, general assignments, and projects. Critics of CCSS argue that this development of 'teaching to the test' hinders a student's overall learning potential by limiting creativeness, inquiry, and problem-solving skills (Ravitch, 2016). Teachers, in turn, find the atmosphere stale and boring, diminishing their motivation to teach and hone their instructional skills (Lauen & Gaddis, 2012). Principals often implement changes in hopes of improving student scores. In many instances where initiatives fail to produce positive results, the principals often take the brunt of the schools' shortcomings, typically, through dismissal (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Sharratt & Fullan, 2012). Lastly, testing can be wrongfully used as provocation for political agendas. District leadership translate test scores as means to rank and judge schools as 'passing or failing', then exercise courses of actions that usually do more harm than good.

Conclusion

Though accountability has made its way as the priority of US educational policies, the debate concerning the effects of CCSS on student learning still ensues. Reviewing the literature as discussed in this paper the following inferences can be grouped as per the following.

Those in favor of CCSS argue that:

(1) CCSS are internationally benchmarked, which means, rankings are synchronized to international standards allowing for more accurate comparisons to relevant quantities.
(2) Prior to CCSS, each state had their own set of standards and assessments, thus creating problems when comparing results from one state to another. This is no longer the case with CCSS.

(3) CCSS have increased teaching and learning rigor and better prepares students for college and career success. In many states, this very reason was the primary factor for the implementation of CCSS.
(4) CCSS facilitates higher level thinking skills in students. Common Core assessments include the use several skills within each question, which ultimately, leads to better problem-solving skills and increased reasoning.
(5) CCSS assessments have given teachers a tool to monitor students' progress throughout the school year. Also, this enables teachers to compare student progress, individually.
(6) CCSS have enhanced teacher collaboration and professional development. Now, teachers, at the school site, across the district, and state, are sharing ideas and problems. In addition, the standards have sparked a meaningful, nationwide conversation about the state of education.
(7) CCSS have given students stability therefore allowing for better understanding of what is expected of them. In other words, students have a better understanding of "why" and the "purpose" of learning a specific concept.

Those opposed to CCSS argue that:

(1) difficulties in terms of adjusting curriculum for students and teachers. The transition for many teachers went against much of the training they received when preparing for the profession. For students, the new method of learning was a drastic change to what they were accustomed to in the past.
(2) for the most part, standards are vague and broad. They lack specifics leaving teachers generally confused and frustrated.
(3) younger students are forced to learn much more quickly than previously; but, the rate of change has been such that the pace is far-reaching to many. The result is that rather than they ever have before. With the increased rigor and need for higher-level thinking skills, early childhood programs have become more rigid.
(4) CCSS assessments do not have an equivalency test for students with special needs. Many states do provide special needs students with modified versions of the test; yet, this still means that 100% of a school's population has their results reported for accountability purposes. Hence, results are disputed by many educators as being invalid and not providing a true picture of student learning.
(5) CCSS currently only measures English-Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics. -- no science, social studies, art/music, and electives. Some states have developed their own measures for other subject areas; but, these is against the fundamental thinking of common core of having common standards across the United States.
(6) CCSS does not take in account the issue of socio-economic status (SES). Research has indicated the significance that SES has on student learning and CCSS is not designed with diversity in mind.
(7) Differentiated programs for student learning are not supported by CCSS. Therefore, students requiring additional assistance are subjected to an environment which classifies them as 'not proficient'.

CCSS and its mandates on accountability initiated a profound shift in the ways that district leadership strategically plan, how principals lead schools, and teachers teach. With the new focus on benchmark achievement educators searched for new or, in some instances, remodeled preexisting ideas in the hopes of finding ways to meet the new challenges. Accountability unleashed numerous programs, plans, and ideas in the hopes of increasing student achievement. Some of the more notable themes that emerged from educational research and federal and state education departments concerning student outcomes were instructional leadership and collaboration and the utilization of student data.

At the federal level, the Department of Education publishes annual reports with state and national education trends on student enrollment and demographics, school staffing, education funding, and graduation and dropout rates. Individual states provide extensive data on student achievement from state exams, SATs, ACTs, graduation and dropout rates, student demographics, school funding, teacher salaries and staffing levels. And, lastly, local school districts keep data on student test scores, demographics, and budgets.

NCLB set the benchmark of having all children in U.S. public schools to achieving 100% proficiency by 2014-15 (Means et al., 2011). There is little doubt that standardized tests have changed the pace and content of instruction, leading to greater emphasis on the knowledge and skills outlined in the standards set out by NCLB and state tests. These summative assessments have been used to measure what students have learned and to ensure they have met required standards. Additionally, the school is assessed as passing or failing and in some circumstances rewards or penalties are administered.

The pressures of meeting these demands have caused visible stress. The educational environment in U.S. k-12 education sees itself disjointed with states that once were onboard with the federal government now are opting out of programs such as CCSS and NCLB. No other nation in the world has gone through so many changes or imposed so many mandates on its educators in the past 15 years. And it appears that once again, the U.S. is at the point of another reckoning. Will lawmakers and educational leaders choose to continue pressing ahead with mandates that are oversimplified and measured with standards that have been steadily questioned by a notable constituency of educational researchers, principals, teachers, parents, and students? Or, will there be a mindset that is both deliberate and logical with the intention of putting first-and-foremost the educational well-being of children?

References

Blase, J., & Blase, J. R. (1999). Principals' instructional leadership and teacher development: Teachers' perspectives. *Educational Administration Quarterly*,35(3), 349-378.

Brunner, C., Fasca, C., Heinze, J., Honey, M., Light, D., Mardinach, E., & Wexler, D. (2005). Linking data and learning: The grow network study. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 10*(3), 241-267.

Council of Chief State School Officers. (2016). About the standards. Retrieved from http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/

Crum, K. S., Sherman, W. H., & Myran, S. (2009). Best practices of successful elementary school leaders. *Journal of Educational Administration, 48*(1), 48-63. doi: http://dx.doi.org.libdata.lib.ua.edu/10.1108/09578231011015412

Diamond, J. B., & Cooper, K. (2007). The uses of testing data in urban elementary schools: Some lessons from Chicago. In P. A. Moss (Ed.), *Evidence and decision making* (241-263). Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

Dougherty, C. (February, 2013). College and career readiness: the importance of early learning. ACT Research & Policy. Policy Report. Retrieved from http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/ImportanceofEarlyLearning

Duke, D. L., & Landahl, M. (2011). 'Raising Tests Scores Was the Easy Part': A case study of the Third Year of School Turnaround. *International Studies in Educational Administration (Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration & Management (CCEAM))*, *39*(3), 91-114.

Duke, D., & Salmonowicz, M. (2010). Key decisions of a first-year 'Turnaround' principal. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership, 38*(1), 33-58. doi:10.1177/1741143209345450

Hargreaves, A. & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: transforming teaching in every school.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Haskins, R., Murnane, R., Sawhill, I., & Snow, C. (October, 2012). Can academic standards boost literacy and close the achievement gap? Brookings Institution.

Ingram, D., Louis, K. S., & Schroeder, R. G. (2004). Accountability policies and teacher decision making: Barriers to the use of data to improve practice. *Teachers College Record, 106*(6), 1258-1287.

Ladd, H. F., & Zelli, A. (2002). School-based accountability in North Carolina: The responses of school principals. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 38*(4), 494-529. doi: 10.1177/001316102237670

Lauen, D., & Gaddis, S. (2012). Shining a light or fumbling in the dark? The effects of NCLB's subgroup-specific accountability on student achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 34*(2), 185-208.

Louis, K., & Robinson, V. (2012). External mandates and instructional leadership: School leaders as mediating agents. *Journal of Educational Administration, 50*(5), 629-665. doi:10.1108/09578231211249853

Louis, K.S., Thomas, E. and Anderson, S.E. (2010b). How do states influence district leadership. *Educational Leadership and Policy*, 9(3), 328-66.

Mathis, W. (2010). The "Common Core" standards initiative: an effective reform tool? The Great Lakes Center for Education Research & Practice. East Lansing, MI. Retrieved from http://www.greatlakescenter.org/docs/Policy_Briefs/Mathis_NationalStandards.pdf

McLaughlin, M., Glaab, L., & Hilliger Carrasco, I. (2014). Implementing common core state standards in California: a report from the field. Retrieved from http://www.edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/PACE%20CCSS%20McLaughlin.pdf

Monpas-Huber, J. B. (2010). Explaining teachers' instructional use of state assessment data: A multilevel study of high school teachers in Washington state. *Journal of School Leadership, 20*(2), 208-237.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2003). *Remedial education at degree-granting postsecondary institutions in fall 2000*. Washington DC: Department of Education.

Nelson, L. (May, 2013). The common core on campus. Inside Higher Ed. Retrieved fromhttps://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/05/03/common-core-curriculum-k-12-could-have-far-reaching-effects-higher-education

Ravitch, D. (2016). *The death and life of the great American school system: how testing and choice are undermining education*. (Revised Expanded Edition) Basic Books. New York: NY.

Sanzo, K. L., Sherman, W. H., & Clayton, J. (2010). Leadership practices of successful middle school principals. *Journal of Educational Administration, 49*(1), 31-45. Retrieved from http://search.ebscohost.com.libdata.lib.ua.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ922371&site=eds-live&scope=site; http://dx.doi.org.libdata.lib.ua.edu/10.1108/09578231111102045

Sharratt, L, and Fullan, M, (2012) *Putting Faces on the data*. National Association of School Principals, Principal Leadership Magazine, 48 -52.

Stiggins, R. and Chappius, J. (2005), Using student-involved classroom assessment to close achievement gaps, *Theory into Practice, 44(1),* 11-18.

U.S. Department of Education. (2016). College- and career-ready standards. Retrieved from http://www.ed.gov/k-12reforms/standards

Ylimaki, R. M. (2007). Instructional Leadership in Challenging US Schools. *International Studies in Educational Administration (Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration & Management (CCEAM))*, *35*(3), 11-19.