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A Decade On, Has Common Core Failed?

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL STANDARDS

The Common Core State Standards, released in 2010, were rapidly adopted by more than 40 states. Champions maintained that these rigorous standards would transform American education, but the initiative went on to encounter a bumpy path. A decade on, what are we to make of this ambitious effort? What kind of impact, if any, has it had on the quality of instruction and student learning—or is it too early to say? In this forum, three experts present their views on these questions: Morgan Polikoff, associate professor at the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California; Michael J. Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and an executive editor at *Education Next*; and Tom Loveless, past director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution and former policy professor at Harvard.

COMMON STANDARDS AREN'T ENOUGH

by MORGAN S. POLIKOFF

THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY of Common Core's launch offers the opportunity to take stock of the impact these nearly national standards have had on student learning, as well as their future prospects. In my view, the standards movement in general, and Common Core in particular, have achieved all they're going to at this point. The impacts from the policy are not nothing, but they're definitely not enough to solve the problems of America's K–12 public schools. *(continued on next page)*

STAY THE COURSE ON NATIONAL STANDARDS

by MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

AS AN EARLY Common Core booster, I had hoped that by now—10 years after most states adopted the standards—our schools would have logged tangible improvements in teaching and learning that resulted in higher student achievement. As Tom Loveless and Morgan Polikoff argue so effectively, there's little evidence such progress has happened at scale.

Yet.

That one small word lies at the crux of the matter. *(continued on page 77)*

COMMON CORE HAS NOT WORKED

by TOM LOVELESS

EDUCATION STANDARDS do not flop spectacularly. Their failure gives rise to nothing like the black-and-white films of early aeronautical experiments: no missiles exploding on launch pads or planes tumbling from the sky. But 10 years after 46 of the 50 states adopted the Common Core standards, the lack of evidence that they have improved student achievement is nonetheless remarkable. Despite the fact that Common Core enjoyed the bipartisan support of *(continued on page 79)*

What's more, I'm not optimistic that standards reforms are going to accomplish much more without some serious rethinking of the education-reform agenda. In short, unless policymakers go after the elephant in the room—the outrageously decentralized federalist structures that encourage mediocrity (especially for the most disadvantaged students) and thwart large-scale improvement efforts—they aren't going to get much more out of Common Core or any other reform policy.

Impact on Achievement

The million-dollar question is: what impact has Common Core had on student achievement? This is not an easy question to answer, although recent evidence has shed some light on it. Two analyses—neither yet published, but both presented at academic conferences—used data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, to examine the impact of Common Core (or in one case, “college- and career-ready” standards more generally) on student achievement.

The first and most comprehensive study was conducted by researchers at the American Institutes for Research, which is affiliated with the Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning, or C-SAIL, a project that I co-lead. This investigation finds no effects of college- and career-ready standards on 4th-grade math or 8th-grade reading achievement but small negative effects on 4th-grade reading and

it's difficult to define precisely when Common Core began. Was it the day a state adopted the standards? Or when it implemented a standards-aligned test? Or when teachers started using Common Core curriculum materials? Second, the states that adopted the standards may have differed in important ways from states that didn't adopt them, making it difficult to tease out the discrete impacts of the standards. And third, while NAEP is the best outcome measure currently available, it's severely flawed for this kind of study, because it's not clear how well NAEP is aligned to either the Common Core standards or to other state standards. A drop in NAEP scores, for instance, could just be the result of content being moved to different grade levels within Common Core relative to prior standards (for example, content that was typically taught before grade 4 now being taught later). Even allowing for these caveats, the evidence at this point certainly indicates that the standards didn't produce great positive effects. That's an important finding.

Implementation Woes

To improvise on a well-known phrase from the political strategist James Carville, when it comes to education policies, “It's the implementation, stupid.” Evidence from many different studies using multiple methods indicates that implementation of Common Core and other college- and career-ready standards has been weak.

One survey study from RAND found that teachers hold many misconceptions about what the standards are calling for.

One study examined the change in teachers' instruction over the course of the Common Core era and found no evidence that it was becoming more aligned with standards (and some evidence it was becoming less so).

8th-grade math, as well as some differences across sub-scales in both subjects. Importantly, this was a study of general college- and career-ready standards, not specifically Common Core.

The second study, conducted at Vanderbilt University, focused just on Common Core and also on a shorter time horizon, and found the opposite—modest positive effects on achievement just a few years after adoption of the standards.

What can one gather from these findings? One conclusion seems clear: neither Common Core nor college- and career-ready standards have had big positive impacts on student achievement. There's no way to read the existing studies, or even to eyeball NAEP trends, and conclude otherwise. Similarly, I feel confident in saying the standards have not substantially harmed achievement. It looks like the pattern is one of no effects to slightly negative effects.

The truth is we'll probably never know the true causal impact of the standards on achievement, for a number of reasons. First,

For instance, many teachers think the standards emphasize students reading at their own individual reading levels, when the standards actually call for students to read challenging grade-level texts. Another RAND study examined the change in teachers' instruction over the course of the Common Core era and found no evidence that it was becoming more aligned with standards (and some evidence it was becoming less so).

In C-SAIL's national study of Common Core implementation, we found a number of troubling trends. Teachers were teaching content that had been de-emphasized in the new standards at higher rates than content that had been emphasized. Rural teachers were less likely to cover standards-emphasized content than other teachers were. Teachers of students with disabilities lagged in implementation as well.

Are there implementation bright spots? Yes, there are some. By all accounts, Louisiana is a leader in standards implementation. State officials there have taken an aggressive stance on policy

matters such as curriculum materials (all but requiring districts to adopt from a few selected, highly aligned materials) and teacher training (offering curriculum-oriented training at massive scale to teachers and leaders throughout the state). Survey evidence from RAND indeed suggests that teachers there understand the standards better and are implementing them more faithfully.

But in general, standards implementation remains anemic. Why has implementation been so difficult? The U.S. system of public education makes implementation of any policy, but especially one that targets the instructional core, close to impossible. Rather than seriously challenging the structures in the system that get in the way of large-scale instructional improvement, the standards movement accepted the system as it was and tried to work around the problem. It didn't succeed, and there's scant reason to think it will succeed in the future.

Staying Power

While it appears that Common Core has had little effect on student achievement, there are two related trends that bear mentioning. The first is that the standards have had remarkable staying power. A lot of states have renamed the standards or even "repealed" them—but in almost every state, what is in place now looks an awful lot like the Common Core as originally written. Even the standards-aligned tests developed by two federally funded consortia, while far from dominant, are still being used in 16 states.

This is all the more impressive given the relentless and

hand in evaluating materials and providing districts with better options. EngageNY.org, a New York State initiative that provides educators with tools and resources for effective, standards-aligned instruction, arose from the federal government's Race to the Top competitive grant program and grew to become one of the most widely used set of instructional materials in the nation. Funders are also recognizing the importance of curriculum and allocating their resources toward improving the ways curriculum materials are made, adopted, and used. I don't believe that any of this would have happened without Common Core and the nearly national curriculum market it created.

What's Next?

The fundamental issues that led to the standards movement in the first place haven't changed. Schools are plagued by poor overall performance, enormous opportunity gaps and achievement gaps, weak instructional supervision, inadequate alignment among policy instruments, and multiple layers of bureaucracy sending teachers conflicting messages about classroom approaches. Standards-based reforms have been chipping away at this problem for 30 years now. It's true that outcomes have risen considerably in that time, but all signs point to the conclusion that this particular strategy has run its course. And while average levels of performance have improved, there's little to no evidence the standards movement has moved the needle on gaps.

It's time for a new approach. Policymakers should not throw

It's worth considering whether the country really needs 10,000 school districts, 10,000 school boards, arbitrary and segregation-promoting district boundaries, and all the other structures that contribute to a fragmented education system.

sometimes absurd smear campaign levied against the standards from both the Right and the Left. While these efforts succeeded in weakening support for the standards, the 2019 *Education Next* poll found that public approval of the Common Core (and more general support for common standards) has rebounded after a large dip. People like the idea of common standards, and they're not especially opposed to the Common Core brand.

The second is that the standards (and their meager track record) have led to renewed policy efforts around curriculum materials, which I view as much more promising. This new energy around curriculum has manifested itself in several ways. EdReports.org, an organization that compares and evaluates K–12 curricula, was an early mover, recognizing the serious need districts had for high-quality curriculum materials and the failures of the market to give them those resources. Louisiana has led on curriculum, but other states are moving to take a more assertive

out the goal of improving teaching at scale. Therefore, they would be wise to retain the standards and assessments that are now in place. But if these leaders are serious about that goal, they will probably have to be much more aggressive.

What kinds of policies do I have in mind? First, these leaders could take curriculum more seriously than they have in the past. States could require the public schools to choose from among just a small number of curricular options. Teacher-education programs could train teachers in using those specific curricula, and the state could follow up by giving them ongoing training on those curricula. Teachers could be strongly discouraged, or even prevented, from cobbling together curricula from random, unregulated websites like Pinterest (or at the very least, states and districts could curate these kinds of materials). In exchange for this loss of control, teachers could be given more support to effectively implement their adopted materials—time to collaborate with teachers in their school, *(continued on next page)*

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observe what's working and what's not, and make changes to improve implementation. But the Wild West days of every teacher and every school with

their own curricula must come to an end.

A second question worth considering is whether the country really needs 10,000 school districts, 10,000 school boards, arbitrary and segregation-promoting district boundaries, and all the other structures that contribute to a fragmented education system. I am not advocating for a federal takeover of education, but rather for states—which have the constitutional authority and a vested interest in ensuring educational opportunity for all students—to examine how the organization of their education systems exacerbates their core problems. Every state is different, so the reforms may differ as well. The goal, though, should be the same—focusing all structures and systems on clearing out the policy clutter (especially those policies that further disadvantage the already disadvantaged) and directing all elements of the system toward supporting effective, scalable instruction.

But wait, you might say, local control is important, and kids are too different from one another for this kind of centralization to work! Actually, that's not true. Kids are of course individuals, and individual children do differ from each other. But the

variation in students (certainly in terms of achievement, but also in terms of social-emotional skills and other outcomes) lies mostly *within* classrooms (and certainly within schools and districts)—not between them. And even if one were to assume that there are large differences between classrooms, there's no evidence that current structures do a good job of matching teaching and curriculum to student need. If that were so, schools would be producing better outcomes than they do.

But wait, you might say, the effectiveness of some schools of choice shows that decentralization is good and off-the-shelf curricula are bad. To the contrary: visit some KIPP or Success Academy charter schools and take a look at their approach to curriculum and to teacher control of it. They are not letting a thousand flowers bloom—they are adopting or creating high-quality materials and then supporting and expecting teachers to effectively implement them. These schools are indeed models in that regard.

As Common Core enters the next decade, education leaders have an opportunity to consider whether standards are going to save America from its educational woes. I don't think they will. The Common Core standards have done as much as they can with the system that exists. So the choice presents itself: change the policy, or change the system. The system is the problem, and *that* is what needs fixing. ■



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I now realize that supporters of Common Core were naive to think that the shifts associated with the new standards could happen in just

a few years. As even we standards hawks have long recognized, standards are just words on paper. To put them to work, to make them effective requires aligned assessments and high-quality instructional materials, and those resources took a half decade or more to build. It is only very recently—since 2018 or so—that most states have had the full combination of higher standards; aligned, tougher, and stable tests; and up-and-running account-

to three grade levels above their predecessors. It was historic, life-changing progress. (The booming 1990s economy and big spending increases into the 2000s were probably at least partly responsible for this good news.)

But big problems remained. Perhaps most significantly, the low-level standards and tests in place in most states were sending the wrong signal to parents, educators, and taxpayers: that vastly more students were on track for future success than really were. Students were easily passing the state tests and graduating from high school, but only 30 to 40 percent of these graduates were truly ready for what was next. These indicators of student

Standards are just words on paper. Making them work requires aligned assessments and high-quality instructional materials, and those resources took a half decade or more to build.

ability systems. And it is only very recently—also since 2018 or so—that local school districts have had the time and money to adopt new, Common Core–aligned curricula.

Now the real work begins. And that work is extremely challenging, for it involves encouraging more than three million teachers across a vast continent to improve their instructional practices.

What Is Common Core?

In its simplest terms, Common Core is a set of standards in English language arts and mathematics that 46 states adopted in 2010 to replace their own sets of expectations for what children should learn, grade by grade, from kindergarten through high school. The standards themselves are essentially lists of what students should know and be able to do as they progress through primary and secondary school in the major domains of each subject.

But that, of course, was not the whole ball game. We advocates wanted to dramatically raise the expectations of schools and teachers—to aim for the lofty goal of “college- and career-readiness” for many more students. The Common Core itself was explicit that young people who met its expectations would indeed be ready for what comes after high school.

That goal represented a huge change from the focus of K–12 education in the 1990s and early 2000s, which was on getting all students to basic levels of literacy and numeracy. Under what you might call Accountability 1.0, both the standards in place in most states and the end-of-year assessments set a low bar for proficiency. Nothing in the accountability model incentivized continued progress for kids who had already mastered low-level standards. But studies would eventually show that the approach largely advanced its mission: The performance of the lowest-performing students rose dramatically from the 1990s into and through the 2000s. Those students were achieving two

performance had merely created the illusion of proficiency.

With many fits and starts, these concerns eventually paved the way for Accountability 2.0. This recalibration included much more demanding academic standards that were aligned to readiness for college and career. The launch of the Common Core led to higher-quality and more rigorous assessments, such as those developed by the Smarter Balanced consortium, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, and their successors. Finally, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 brought about fairer and clearer accountability systems, with more states moving to A–F or five-star rating systems for schools. These systems are easier to comprehend than the “continuous improvement” kinds of labels often used before.

A renewed commitment to capacity building accompanied this second wave of standards-based reform. In earlier eras, the mantra was “autonomy in return for accountability.” But as my colleague Robert Pondiscio has argued, what we discovered was a stunning lack of know-how in many American schools. Educators wanted to help their students meet standards, but many didn’t know how, nor did they have the basic tools, such as standards-aligned materials, with which to do it. Under Accountability 2.0, at least some state officials would put serious effort into helping their local counterparts on key instructional issues, especially when it came to vetting curricula (see “Louisiana Threads the Needle on Ed Reform,” *features*, Fall 2017).

The mass adoption of the Common Core helped to supercharge these developments. It’s possible that states would have moved in this direction even without the standards, eventually, but there were few signs of that at the time. Multiple studies by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which I now lead, found lackluster progress in the quality or clarity of standards over the 2000s. As for the level of rigor in the state assessments, most states defined “proficiency” at rock-bottom levels, up and until the adoption of the Common Core, and especially (*continued on next page*)

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the creation of aligned assessments, as the analyses of Paul Peterson and colleagues have illustrated in these pages (see “After Common Core,

States Set Rigorous Standards,” *features*, Summer 2016).

Most encouraging, it appears that the emergence of Common Core has prompted the adoption of significantly better curricular materials. The standards’ originators had hoped that by creating a national marketplace for textbooks, digital resources, and other instructional materials, common standards could usher in a sea change in the quality and alignment of what teachers use in the classroom. (That shift doesn’t require a single, much less a national, curriculum, but it does imply many fewer choices than teachers have traditionally had to navigate.) And sure enough, reviews by the curriculum-evaluation website EdReports.org indicate that the quality of materials on the market has been getting better and better, especially over the last few years. This is an

This full package has only been in place for a couple of years. (The political tussles over Common Core, and the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008, surely slowed everything down.)

The undertaking ahead is huge. In raising standards for what it means for a student to be “on track” or “on grade level” in the quest for college- and career-readiness, most states have had to declare 50 to 60 percent of their students to be behind in their learning. In many classrooms—especially in high-poverty communities—it’s not unusual for most children to be *two or three grade levels* behind. Figuring out how to help these kids catch up, while encouraging their higher-achieving peers to continue making progress, is extraordinarily difficult. It will likely require new teaching strategies, the use of digital resources that allow for greater personalization, and other approaches that nobody has yet dreamed up.

Will this go well everywhere—and anytime soon? Surely not. Does that mean policymakers should revert to state standards that were mediocre, unclear, and targeted at basic lit-

Helping teachers use the new curricula effectively will take time—for planning, collaboration, and coaching, and for teachers to get better at refining their technique and making the “instructional shifts” the standards call for.

important change from the days of uninspiring textbooks, or the all-too-common practice of teachers looking for lesson plans on Pinterest.

Building better instructional materials, though, is just the beginning. These resources must be adopted, and then implemented, to have a positive impact. Yet by some estimates, just 10 to 15 percent of schools have adopted Common Core–aligned curricula. Surveys in the early 2010s found that many teachers misunderstood the standards or their intent. Until very recently, teachers didn’t have instructional materials that made the standards real. Even today, most teachers still don’t have access to these essential tools.

Helping teachers use the new curricula effectively will also take time—time for planning, collaboration, and coaching, and time for teachers to get better, year by year, at refining their technique and making the “instructional shifts” the standards call for.

The Work Ahead

To recap: Common Core was part of a larger strategy to shift schools’ expectations significantly higher. State assessments that were aligned to more challenging standards, and that set passing scores at loftier levels, help to make these expectations tangible. Curricular materials aligned to the standards provide a daily road map for teaching the standards in the classroom.

eracy and numeracy? Return to state assessments that tested low-level skills and encouraged low-level teaching? Blow up the national market for curricular and digital products that has been created, painstakingly, over the past 10 years?

No. The smartest path forward is to follow through on the Common Core initiative. That will require states to take on new roles, especially in vetting curricular products and encouraging schools to adopt them, if not demanding they do. Overhauling teacher prep should be high on the to-do list, too. The federal government can help by investing in research and development around thorny implementation issues, such as how to help low achievers, English language learners, and students with disabilities make rapid progress toward the higher standards. Driving state and local dollars into instructional materials, teacher planning time, and coaching will also be important. It’s fair to expect that states and districts that have been making these moves should start to see improved achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and other measures by 2021 or 2023 at the latest, compared to those who stick with business as usual.

Going backward will accomplish nothing. So would resigning to a futile sense that no progress is possible until we blow up our educational system, which has proven remarkably resilient for a hundred years. It will require patience and fortitude to stay the course, but that is what the nation’s children and the country itself need right now. ■

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policy elites and commanded vast financial resources from both public and private sources, it simply did not accomplish what its supporters had intended. The standards wasted both time and money and diverted those resources away from more promising pursuits.

Three studies have now sought to examine the effects of Common Core and, more generally, “college- and career-ready” standards on student learning. The picture that emerges does not inspire confidence. The most recent study, conducted in 2019 by the federally funded Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning, or C-SAIL, found that college- and career-ready standards had negative effects on student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress,

The C-SAIL team conducted a second analysis using what they dubbed a Prior Similarity Index. A 2009 study by researchers at Michigan State University had determined that some states’ 2009 math standards were similar to Common Core in terms of focus and coherence, while other states’ standards were inferior on those qualities. The states with the “less similar” standards comprised the treatment group, since researchers assumed that Common Core imposed a substantial change in those places. States with prior math standards that were similar to Common Core’s were assigned to the comparison group.

This second analysis uncovered no statistically significant effects.

All of the estimated effects from both analyses are negative, with losses ranging from about 1.5 to 4 NAEP scale score points.

**Despite the fact that Common Core enjoyed the bipartisan support of policy elites
and commanded vast financial resources from public and private sources,
it simply did not accomplish what its supporters had intended.**

or NAEP, in both 4th-grade reading and 8th-grade math. A series of analyses that I conducted over several years revealed mixed effects from Common Core in states defined as “strong implementers” of the standards. And a 2017 study showed that adoption of Common Core standards did prompt many states to raise their performance benchmarks—that is, the minimum score at which students are judged as attaining “proficiency” on state tests. These higher proficiency bars, however, have not translated into higher student achievement. It is time to accept that Common Core didn’t fulfill its promise.

C-SAIL Study

C-SAIL’s 2019 study examined states’ average NAEP scores in 2010, the year in which most states adopted the standards, and in 2017. Researchers theorized that, among the states adopting Common Core, those that had weak standards before 2010 stood to incur the greatest gains, while those that had more rigorous standards in place before Common Core would experience the least change because they already had high expectations for students. Based on the Fordham Institute’s 2010 evaluations of state English language arts and math standards, the C-SAIL research team created a Prior Rigor Index, assigning states with weak standards to the “treatment” group and states with strong standards to the comparison group. (States scoring in the middle of Fordham’s rating scale were excluded from the analysis, to provide a sharper contrast, as were states adopting standards in any year other than 2010.)

In this analysis, researchers detected statistically significant negative effects in both 4th-grade reading and 8th-grade math.

The effects are also small, especially considering that they represent a policy unfolding over seven years. Consider these results in the context of the history of NAEP scores for the nation as a whole. Losses on NAEP are rare, but relatively large gains are common. NAEP advances of four or more points have been registered during short periods: 4th-grade reading (6 points, 2000–02), 8th-grade reading (4 points, 1994–98), 4th-grade math (9 points, 2000–03), and 8th-grade math (5 points, 2000–03).

Common Core supporters were understandably disappointed by these findings, but a particularly disheartening discovery was that the losses did not abate, and in fact, were still accumulating in 2015–17. It became harder for these advocates to urge patience and argue that Common Core’s positive impact would eventually emerge: the negative effects of Common Core were larger in 2017 than in any previous year.

Impact on State Proficiency Standards

While the evidence indicates that Common Core failed to improve academic achievement, the standards did prompt states to raise their benchmarks for student learning. In 2017, Jaekyung Lee and Yin Wu of the University of Buffalo-SUNY investigated the effects of Common Core on state proficiency standards for reading and math (that is, the minimum scores set for students to be identified as “proficient” on state tests) and student achievement. They found that Common Core states raised the proficiency bar more than non-adopting states during this period. Raising this standard makes it more difficult for students to score as proficient and thereby raises expectations. Echoing previous research, though, the researchers found that raising or *(continued on next page)*

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“Although it is premature to make any verdict on the impact of the CCSS [Common Core] on student achievement, the findings of this study as well as previous studies raise concerns about implementation challenges and limitations of the current CCSS-based education policies.”

Brown Center Report Studies

In 2014–16, I conducted a series of correlational analyses of Common Core, published by the Brookings Institution’s *Brown Center Report on American Education*. In 2018, I released a follow-up study. The goal of these studies was to take a look at whether Common Core was more effective in states that took implementation of the standards seriously.

My method was to compare test results in the states that rejected Common Core (non-adopters), with those in states that were “strong implementers” of the standards. I conducted two sets of comparisons with different criteria for identifying states as strong implementers.

The first group of strong implementers comprised states that in 2011 reported spending federal stimulus funds on three activities to support standards implementation: professional development, new instructional materials, and joining a testing consortium.

For the second set of comparisons, I designated as “strong implementers” the states with ambitious timelines for fully implementing Common Core “in classrooms.” These 11 states planned on full implementation by the end of the 2012–13 academic year. These criteria were designed to be dynamic. The composition of the groups changed over time with changes in state policy toward Common Core. After 2013, states that formally rescinded the standards were re-categorized as non-adopters for the NAEP period in which the policy change occurred. Non-adopters grew to 10 states in 2017 from 5

lowering the proficiency bar was not associated with gains in student achievement on NAEP from 2009 to 2015. The authors caution:

states in 2013, and strong implementers declined to 8 states in 2017 from 11 states in 2013.

For this essay, I developed a third strategy for identifying strong implementers, based on whether in 2017 a state used either of the two assessments that were specifically developed to align with the Common Core standards: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers test or the Smarter Balanced test. (I counted the three states that used some items from these tests in a hybrid state assessment—Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Michigan—as among those using a “Common Core” test.)

The premise of this strategy is that states using a prominent Common Core-aligned test in 2017 were publicly indicating a strong commitment to the standards. This model has the advantage of producing larger comparison groups than the other two—with 23 states using a Common Core test and 27 not.

Results of the comparisons are mixed (see Table 1). Some of the changes in NAEP performance associated with Common

Core are positive and some are negative. These effects are also quite small—plus or minus about 2 NAEP scale score points. The results are more favorable toward Common Core than those of the C-SAIL study, especially in reading: the improvement in 4th-grade reading ranged from 0.2 scale score points to 2.4 points—but these findings agree with C-SAIL’s conclusion that only minimal changes in NAEP scores are associated with states embracing or rejecting Common Core.

Time to Cut Bait?

A decade after the release of the Common Core standards, the accumulated evidence reveals no meaningfully positive result. A limitation of this research is the difficulty of pinpointing precisely when Common Core should be considered fully implemented and of evaluating the fidelity of that implementation. Self-selection could also be a problem if unknown factors influenced states in adopting or rejecting Common Core and those factors subsequently influenced state NAEP scores. Yet the research to date on Common Core

Multiple Comparisons Reveal No Impact of Common Core (Table 1)

Analyses found no association between the strength of implementation of the standards and the amount of progress states made on the National Assessment of Educational Progress between 2009 and 2017.

	Change in NAEP Scores Associated with Common Core Implementation		
	Implementation defined based on . . .		
	Stimulus fund spending	Ambitious timeline	Use of consortium test
Math 4th Grade	-1.6	0.3	-1.9
Math 8th Grade	-0.6	0.2	-1.4
Reading 4th Grade	2.4	2.1	0.2
Reading 8th Grade	1.8	1.2	1.0

NOTE: Comparison states in the first two columns are those not adopting Common Core; comparison states in the third column are those not using a consortium test. State NAEP scores are adjusted for demographic changes using the Urban Institute’s “America’s Gradebook.”

SOURCE: Author’s calculations

reinforces a larger body of evidence suggesting that academic-content standards bear scant relevance to student learning. In a recent blog post, Robert Slavin of Johns Hopkins University observes that “plentiful evidence from rigorous studies” indicates that adopting one set of standards over another “makes little difference in student achievement.” Slavin notes that of the dozens of favorable reviews of curricula posted by EdReports.org, a curriculum-evaluation organization that was founded to support Common Core implementation, only two programs with high ratings have any empirical evidence of effectiveness. Alignment with Common Core, not evidence of boosting student learning, is the first screen in the EdReports review process.

A curriculum-review process that gives greater weight to adherence to standards than to impact on learning is not identifying high-quality curricula; it is identifying conforming curricula. An example rich with irony can be found in the textbook series *Math in Focus*, which is based on the math standards of Singapore. Students in that nation consistently score near the top of international math assessments, and the authors of Common Core touted it as one of the countries whose standards they consulted in developing Common Core. In the early days of implementation, Common Core supporters

pointed to Singapore math as ideal for implementing their vision of high-quality mathematics instruction. *Math in Focus* produced impressive learning gains in three rigorous studies of effectiveness that involved about 3,000 children.

But *Math in Focus* failed the EdReports review. How can that be? The textbook series moves students more quickly through elementary math than Common Core dictates. A common refrain in the EdReports reviews is that topics from later grades are introduced, taking the program out of alignment with the standards. A program with rigorous evidence of effectively teaching math is vetoed while programs with no evidence of boosting learning are endorsed because they are compatible with Common Core.

In short, the evidence suggests student achievement is, at best, about where it would have been if Common Core had never been adopted, if the billions of dollars spent on implementation had never been spent, if the countless hours of professional development inducing teachers to retool their lessons had never been imposed. When will time be up on the Common Core experiment? How many more years must pass, how much more should Americans spend, and how many more effective curricula must be pushed aside before leaders conclude that Common Core has failed? ■



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