

ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE COMMON CORE

A **CHICAGO TEACHERS UNION**
POSITION PAPER

JULY 2014



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

—from the **Common Core Mission Statement**¹

With the advent of democracy and modern industrial conditions, it is impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be twenty years from now. Hence it is impossible to prepare the child for any precise set of conditions. To prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities; that his eye and ear and hand may be tools ready to command, that his judgment may be capable of grasping the conditions under which it has to work, and the executive forces be trained to act economically and efficiently.

—**John Dewey**²

We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education. The complete education gives one not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate.

If we are not careful, our colleges will produce a group of close-minded, unscientific, illogical propagandists, consumed with immoral acts. Be careful, “brethren!” Be careful, teachers!

—**Dr. Martin Luther King**³

INTRODUCTION

The Chicago Teachers Union is committed to helping members do their best work, and since the Common Core Standards (CCS) are required to be taught in Chicago public schools, the CTU supports teachers in this work through professional development and curriculum development. However, as educators, we are also obligated to question the true purpose of CCS, and expose flaws in the standards themselves, their developmental appropriateness, the testing requirements, uses of test results, equity of opportunity, their roll-out time frame, and their implementation. As the preceding quotations indicate, the CCS reflect a far narrower vision of education than that of Dewey or King.

This paper's purpose is to stimulate thought and discussion about the context of CCS roll out across the country, specifically in Illinois and Chicago. The standards themselves may or may not turn out to be useful frameworks for teachers and appropriate for students; however, this paper is not mainly an appraisal of the standards themselves, but a critique of the idea that common standards across all states and district contexts are the solution for education's woes. On the contrary, research and careful study reveal that the CCS are likely to increase the opportunity gap experienced by students of color and low-income students; exacerbate the over-use of standardized tests; and increase the influence and market share of vendors, private consultants, and other education profiteers in the public schools.

Study after study (e.g., Rothstein, 2012⁴, Ladd, 2012⁵) has documented that the root cause of educational failings is poverty and racism. Common Core Standards, like other "reforms" promoted by the corporate elite, ignore these vital issues entirely.

U.S. education could benefit from a dose of Finland's approach. Students there regularly achieve high scores on the international PISA test, but not because they emphasize standards or standardized testing. Instead, the idea that every child should have the same opportunity to learn, regardless of family background or income, has been Finland's primary education policy driver for the last thirty years. Education there is seen first and foremost as an instrument to even out social inequality.⁶

The rhetoric of the education reform movement champions CCS as a tool to create civil rights opportunities for Black and Latino students, but the reality is that new CCS-aligned assessments are used to unfairly label students, punish teachers, and close schools. For example, when New York City students took the CCS-aligned state test in 2013, general pass rates were low—below 30 percent. However, Black and Latino students passed at lower rates than White and Asian students. In math, for example, 15 percent of Black students and 19 percent of Latino students passed, compared to 50 percent of White students and 61 percent of Asian students. On the English Language Arts exam, only 3 percent of non-native speakers and 6 percent of students with disabilities were deemed proficient.⁷ Rhetoric about "failing schools," justified largely by these test scores, enabled the New York state Department of Education to close or phase out 50 schools and cut education spending by 14%, leading to larger classes and fewer textbooks. While money, time, and other resources pour into (and go out of) school districts all over the country in support of anything labeled Common Core, little if anything is being done on a national scale to guarantee educational equity.

CLOSE READING

A look at the standards themselves reveals troubling features as well. The strategy of “close reading” is a central focus of the English Language Arts Standards. As explained by Timothy Shanahan (2013) in *American Educator*,⁸ “These standards will likely lead to the greatest changes in reading instruction seen for generations.” (p. 5) Students are expected to read the text three times. The first time, students read to understand key ideas and details; the second, to understand the craft and structure of the text; the third, to “critically evaluate the text and compare its ideas and approach with those of other texts.” (p. 10)

Close Reading is a useful strategy, one commonly used by book reviewers and others, but the emphasis given to this technique in the CCS is disproportionate to its usefulness and pushes out other important purposes for reading. For example, reading for pleasure leads students to develop imagination, worldliness, and vocabulary skills, as well as an appreciation for literature. Isn't it important to help children develop a love of reading and literature, and not just read for information or to critique, evaluate, and compare? The best way for children to develop their reading abilities is to read.

Proponents of CCS-style close reading argue that reading should be decontextualized. For example, David Coleman, a chief author of the standards, and now President of The College Board, created a video on the close reading of Martin Luther King's famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.⁹ Coleman (2012) emphasizes the need for students to pay attention only to “what lies within the four corners of the text”. King's letter was written in response to white clergy, who disapproved of the campaign he led against segregation by downtown businesses and for which he was jailed. It is particularly disturbing that Coleman would emphasize non-contextual reading of a text so rich in histor-

ical background and one still relevant to the lives of many CPS (and other) students. It is an example of how the Common Core idea of close reading, in dismissing the relevancy of students' thoughts and experiences, undermines students' potential to connect with the material and learn more from it.

As *Rethinking Schools* author Daniel E. Ferguson (2013) points out,¹⁰

There is a grand irony in the last few minutes of the video when Coleman praises King for not just responding to what was in the clergymen's letter, “but pointing out how critical is what's not in the letter.” Why then, is it problematic to let students do the same, to let their world inform their reading? ... What if King had done only a close reading of the letter from the Southern clergymen he was addressing? What if he did not allow his own reading of the world to inform his understanding of the white clergymen's words? What leadership and wisdom would have been lost?

Close reading replaces the “text to self” strategy, which has been taught for years and values learning from relatives or members of students' immediate communities. Close reading contrasts with *critical reading*, which incorporates close reading but emphasizes what is not in the text as well as what is in it. Critical reading allows students the opportunity to relate what they are reading to both personal experiences and other texts (the “text to text” strategy). Context allows the reader to make personal connections and build on previous reading or knowledge. Common Core gives undue emphasis to learning from isolated pockets of text.

Insisting that teachers focus on “text dependent” questions narrows the scope of classroom discussion. The primary (perhaps the only) place that students encounter text they must read out of context is on standardized tests. Coleman (2012) im-

plied this in his recommendations to curriculum publishers, stating that since “80 to 90 percent of the reading standards require text-dependent analysis, aligned curriculum materials should have a similar percentage of text-dependent questions” (p. 6).¹¹ The narrow view of close reading emphasized by Coleman and other Common Core authors may make students better test takers, but it is unlikely to make them better readers or more learned individuals.

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROPRIATENESS

The early childhood CCS were designed by working backward from College and Career Readiness at the senior high school level, without taking into account developmental appropriateness. More than 500 early childhood professionals, including prominent members of the field, made this clear in the Joint Statement of Early Childhood Health and Education Professionals on the Common Core Standards Initiative (2010). The statement points to the need for support, encouragement, active hands-on learning, and play at the early childhood level. They describe the long hours of didactic instruction, scripted teaching, narrowing of the curriculum, and overuse of standardized tests with young children that have already resulted from current state standards, and call for the withdrawal of CCS for children in grades K-3.¹²

The CCS require Kindergarten children to master more than 90 skills. Yet, research reveals¹³ that early skill development, such as “Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet” does not correlate to later reading proficiency. Instead, research supports a nurturing environment, project based interdisciplinary learning, and guided play to develop executive functioning (staying on task, problem solving, working collaboratively, planning, conflict resolution, organizing and delaying gratification). This nurturing environment needs to be devoid of the stress related

to discreet skill mastery. The social and emotional skills appropriately developed in the early years of school lay the basis for students’ learning behaviors in ELA, Mathematics, and other subjects.

The basis for love of literature should, in formal schooling, begin in the pre-primary through early elementary grades. It is therefore crucial that the study of literary text (fiction) be valued at least as much as the study of non-fiction texts in these grades. Common Core Standards, however, under-emphasize reading for pleasure. For example, CCS emphasize the reading of folk and fairy tales for skill mastery purposes such as identifying story element, patterning, rhyming, main idea, and character study. While mastery skills are important, at the early childhood level reading should primarily be for pleasure (Learning to Read) rather than a chore or process for gathering information (Reading to Learn).

TESTING AND CCS

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) failed to significantly increase academic performance or positively affect the education of underserved Black and Latino students¹⁴, and had a negative impact on curricula and instructional practices. This bodes ill for CCS. The experience of NCLB suggests that the students most likely to be behind—those who are poor, African-American, Latino, and/or go to segregated schools—are also the ones most likely to have their schools turned into test-prep factories so that children meet the demands of success metrics. Ironically, the very instructional processes and methods proven to enhance academic improvement have been scrapped in districts across the country in favor of *test prep*, which has the opposite effect. Instead of learning from NCLB that accountability, as measured by scores on a standardized test, is not the way to increase student learning or improve education, Common Core places even more emphasis on testing. Mastery of Common

Core Standards will be tested in English Language Arts and Mathematics (until more subjects are added) at least twice every school year for all students by computerized tests. The amount of time students sit in front of screens will drastically increase, as companies feed the national market for test-prep materials that are supposed to help students be more successful on these tests. The role of the teacher as instructor, coach, and facilitator will diminish, as will the educational values of life-long learning, reading for pleasure, puzzling over and solving difficult problems, collaborating on projects, integrating the arts, and learning from and about people from multiple cultures.

PART OF CORPORATE REFORM

The development of CCS is part of the corporate “education reform” agenda. These “reforms” are characterized by heavy emphasis on standardized testing, competition, ranking and sorting of teachers, and the position that language barriers, special needs, personal circumstances, poverty, and other hardships in students’ lives are irrelevant to education policy. They echo previous education “reforms”, going back at least 120 years to the 1893 “Committee of Ten” report, in that they focus on capitalist economic needs but not necessarily children’s learning needs. The United States has a long history of relatively small groups of people influencing the direction and tenor of education policy and curriculum nationally.¹⁵

In 1991, President George H.W. Bush announced his education program, “America 2000,” including a set of national tests to be given in five core academic areas. The program was given a boost in 2007 when a commission of the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) published *Tough Choices or Tough Times*.¹⁶ This document lays out a theoretical framework for common standards, and nearly half of the commission’s leadership group members are now vocal supporters or

directly involved in Common Core implementation. For example, one of the commissioners, Joel Klein, the former New York City schools chancellor who championed corporate education reform, is now the chief executive officer of Amplify,¹⁷ one of the companies that will profit from Common Core with educational software.

Advocates of the Common Core Standards, such as U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, promote the myth that they were the brainchild of state governors and the Council of Chief State School Officers who turned over standards’ development to classroom teachers. In fact, no teachers authored the original standards, and most of the development work was done by test and textbook publishers. Even the name, Common Core *State* Standards, supports the illusion that these standards were developed independently by the states. In this paper, therefore, “State” is dropped in favor of “Common Core Standards.” Further obscured is the fact that only a few teachers had cursory review power (at best) during the standards’ development. According to testimony of teacher Sandra Stotsky,¹⁸ CCS validation committee member, this committee was little more than a “rubber stamp” whose “requests were ignored” for the “supposed body of research evidence” on which CCS was based. Stotsky opposed, for example, the misplaced stress on informational texts and the omission of major topics in trigonometry and precalculus.¹⁹

Of 29 CCS Development Work Group members, eight were from Achieve (the “non-profit” organization formed to manage CCS development and implementation), seven from College Board (test publishers), seven from ACT (test publishers), two from America’s Choice (now owned by Pearson, one of the largest textbook and test publishers in the world), two from Student Achievement Partners (another “non-profit” creating CCS materials), one from Vockley Lang LLC (a communications group that specializes in effective message manage-

ment), one retired educational consultant and one professor emeritus (see full list on last page). Teachers were not part of CCS development, but Pearson, the company that stands to make millions on Common Core, is using their position on the development group to sell its products by boasting that its “close association with key authors and architects of the Common Core State Standards ensures that the spirit and pedagogical approach of the initiative is embodied in our professional development.”²⁰

It is not just test and curriculum publishers, who have been intimately involved with the Common Core push. Some of the largest corporations in the world are fierce CCS advocates.

Morna McDermott, professor of education at Towson University in Maryland, created a flow chart²¹ that demonstrates research, funding, and advocacy links supportive of the CCS. She identifies the people, organizations, and corporations that are key drivers for Common Core standards. McDermott points out, for example, that Bill Gates, (co-chair, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) has paid \$173.5 million to businesses and non-profits for the implementation of CCS. Gates is well known for his support of charter schools and initiatives that seek to use student test scores for teacher evaluation and merit pay. The people and organizations named by McDermott are shown in the table below.

Corporations, Foundations, Organizations, and People Linked to CCS (McDermott)

<p>CORPORATIONS</p> <p>State Farm* Wal-Mart* Lumina* Boeing* Lockheed Martin* Ford Motor Co. Pearson McKinsey Consulting News Corp. Achieve inBloom (Gates/Wireless Generation)</p> <p>*ALEC members</p>	<p>ORGANIZATIONS/INSTITUTES</p> <p>U.S. Department of Education U.S. Department of Defense American Enterprise Institute College Board Council on Foreign Relations ACT Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Alliance for Excellent Education Fordham Institute Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium Student Achievement Partners Teach for America</p>
<p>FOUNDATIONS</p> <p>Broad Foundation Gates Foundation Walton Foundation</p>	<p>PEOPLE</p> <p>Joel Klein, CEO, Amplify Rupert Murdoch, former Director, News International Margaret Spellings, Secretary of Education under GW Bush Gene Wilhoit, former director of Council of Chief State School Officers Jeb Bush, former governor of Florida Chester Finn, President of Fordham Foundation David Coleman, College Board President Lou Gerstner, former IBM CEO Joanne Weiss, former Chief of Staff to Arne Duncan Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State under George W. Bush</p>

This table reveals the deep connection between the main business and political backers of corporate education reform and the CCS. To these elites, the standards are much more than just a means to improve reading and math scores—they are a critical component of American economic and military competitiveness. For example, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Joel Klein promote CCS in a report for the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) about military preparedness.²² They write that too many students are unable to pass the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery and “many U.S. generals caution that too many new enlistees cannot read training manuals for technologically sophisticated equipment.” (p. 10)

The authors of *Tough Choices or Tough Times* (2007), whose connection to CCS was previously described, lay out a vision based on the concerns of corporate America. The report posits that globalization requires routine jobs, outsourced to the lowest bidder on a global scale. “Although it is possible to construct a scenario for improving our standard of living, the clear and present danger is that it will fall for most Americans.” (p. 8) The claim that CCS will lead to “College and Career Readiness” rings hollow, given that 44% of 2012 college graduates are unemployed or under-employed.²³ More likely, the corporations behind Common Core are concerned with their own profits, not students’ educational futures.

IMPLEMENTATION AND ROLL-OUT ISSUES

School administrators and state superintendents are rolling out CCS for all grade levels at the same time, even though the standards are sequentially based. This means, for example, that a sixth grader will be taught based on standards that assume mastery of Kindergarten through fifth grade standards (which have yet to be taught), in the first year CCS are rolled out. A reasonable process

might be one year at a time, starting with Kindergarten, and starting with necessary professional development for teachers in the new standards. First grade educators would then teach from first grade standards to students who were taught from, and mastered, Kindergarten standards, and so on.

However, even this more logical scenario has problems. Common Core provides no guidance or leeway for students who enter first grade (or any grade level) without sufficient background. Since early grade standards are developmentally inappropriate, at least in part because learning at that level is non-linear (even more subject to sudden changes or directional shifts than learning at other levels), it is reasonable to expect that many children will not master Kindergarten standards. This sets them up to be behind in school at the age of six and never be able to catch up! Students most likely to fall behind are economically disadvantaged students of color. Nothing in the prolific CCS promotion materials addresses these inequities in education, even though well-developed research exists on both the problem and solutions (e.g., smaller class size, well-rounded curriculum, and adequate wrap-around support services).

The CCS have no supports for students who are not “on grade level,” English Learners, students with Individual Education Plans or other students with special needs or circumstances. Therefore, in addition to rolling out the standards faster than they can be taught well, there are no provisions for support for teachers in general or support for teachers of EL or Special Education in particular.

CONCLUSION

Across the country, education policy-makers from the Department of Education to state and local school boards are pursuing so-called education “reform”. These “reforms” are heavily promoted

and financed by the business community, which sees them as setting the stage for future profits. “Reforms” include the appropriation of public funds by private charter school managers, the wholesale closing of public schools, disproportional emphasis on standardized testing, and attacks on teachers and their unions. While Common Core Standards may appear to be benign or even helpful, they are part and parcel of the corporate reform strategy. Standards, coupled with testing and evaluation tied to student test scores, set the stage for greater control of what is taught in each classroom—destroying teacher discretion, and pressuring teachers to ignore the needs of the students in front of them by focusing on the fulfillment of requirements set by the school district.

The members of the Mathematics Work Group were:

Sara Clough, Director, Elementary and Secondary School Programs, Development, Education Division, ACT, Inc.

Phil Daro, Senior Fellow, America’s Choice

Susan K. Eddins, Educational Consultant, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (Retired)

Kaye Forgione, Senior Associate and Team Leader for Mathematics, Achieve

John Kraman, Associate Director, Research, Achieve

Marci Ladd, Mathematics Consultant, The College Board & Senior Manager and Mathematics Content Lead, Academic Benchmarks

William McCallum, University Distinguished Professor and Head, Department of Mathematics, The University of Arizona & Mathematics Consultant, Achieve

Sherri Miller, Assistant Vice President, Educational Planning and Assessment System (EPAS) Development, Education Division, ACT, Inc.

Ken Mullen, Senior Program Development Associate—Mathematics, Elementary and Secondary School Programs, Development, Education Division, ACT, Inc.

Robin O’Callaghan, Senior Director, Mathematics, Research and Development, The College Board

Andrew Schwartz, Assessment Manager, Research and Development, The College Board

Laura McGiffert Slover, Vice President, Content and Policy Research, Achieve

Douglas Sovde, Senior Associate, Mathematics, Achieve

Natasha Vasavada, Senior Director, Standards and Curriculum Alignment Services, Research and Development, The College Board

Jason Zimba, Faculty Member, Physics, Mathematics, and the Center for the Advancement of Public Action, Bennington College and Cofounder, Student Achievement Partners

The members of the English-language Arts Work Group were:

Sara Clough, Director, Elementary and Secondary School Programs, Development, Education Division, ACT, Inc.

David Coleman, Founder, Student Achievement Partners

Sally Hampton, Senior Fellow for Literacy, America’s Choice

Joel Harris, Director, English Language Arts Curriculum and Standards, Research and Development, The College Board

Beth Hart, Senior Assessment Specialist, Research and Development, The College Board

John Kraman, Associate Director, Research, Achieve

Laura McGiffert Slover, Vice President, Content and Policy Research, Achieve

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Sherri Miller, Assistant Vice President, Educational Planning and Assessment System (EPAS) Development, Education Division, ACT, Inc.

Sandy Murphy, Professor Emeritus, University of California – Davis

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Sue Pimentel, Co-Founder, StandardsWork; English Language Arts Consultant, Achieve

Natasha Vasavada, Senior Director, Standards and Curriculum Alignment Services, Research and Development, The College Board

Martha Vockley, Principal and Founder, VockleyLang, LLC

ENDNOTES

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OPPOSE THE COMMON CORE

Resolution submitted to 2014 AFT Convention
by the **Chicago Teachers Union**

1 WHEREAS, the purpose of education is to educate a populace of
2 critical thinkers who are capable of shaping a just and equitable
3 society in order to lead good and purpose-filled lives, not solely
4 preparation for college and career; and

5 WHEREAS, instructional and curricular decisions should be in the
6 hands of classroom professionals who understand the context and
7 interests of their students; and

8 WHEREAS, the education of children should be grounded in
9 developmentally appropriate practice; and

10 WHEREAS, high quality education requires adequate resources to
11 provide a rich and varied course of instruction, individual and small
12 group attention, and wrap-around services for students; and

13 WHEREAS, the Common Core State Standards were developed
14 by non-practitioners, such as test and curriculum publishers, as well
15 as education reform foundations, such as the Gates and Broad
16 Foundations, and as a result the CCSS better reflect the interests and
17 priorities of corporate education reformers than the best interests and
18 priorities of teachers and students; and

19 WHEREAS, the Common Core State Standards were piloted
20 incorrectly, have been implemented too quickly, and as a result have
21 produced numerous developmentally inappropriate expectations that
22 do not reflect the learning needs of many students; and

23 WHEREAS, imposition of the Common Core State Standards
24 adversely impacts students of highest need, including students of
25 color, impoverished students, English language learners and students
26 with disabilities; and

27 WHEREAS, the Common Core State Standards emphasize
28 pedagogical techniques, such as close reading, out of proportion to
29 the actual value of these methods – and as a result distort instruction
30 and remove instructional materials from their social context; and

31 WHEREAS, despite the efforts of our union to provide support to
32 teachers, the significant time, effort, and expense associated with
33 modifying curricula to the Common Core State Standards interferes
34 and takes resources away from creating developmentally appropriate
35 and engaging courses of study; and

WHEREAS, the assessments that accompany the Common Core
State Standards (PARCC and Smarter Balance) are not transparent
in that teachers and parents are not allowed to view the tests and
item analysis will likely not be made available given the nature of
computer-adaptive tests; and

WHEREAS, Common Core assessments disrupt student learning,
consuming tremendous amounts of time and resources for test
preparation and administration; and

WHEREAS, the assessment practices that accompany Common Core
State Standards—including the political manipulation of test
scores—are used as justification to label and close schools, fail
students, and evaluate educators; therefore be it

**RESOLVED that the American Federation of Teachers opposes the
Common Core State Standards (and the aligned tests) as a
framework for teaching and learning; and be it further**

**RESOLVED, the AFT advocates for an engaged and socially relevant
curriculum that is student-based and supported by research, as well
as for supports such as those described in the Chicago Teachers
Union report, *The Schools Chicago's Students Deserve*; and be it
further**

**RESOLVED, the AFT will embark on internal discussions to educate
and seek feedback from members regarding the Common Core and
its impact on our students; and be it further**

**RESOLVED, the AFT will lobby the U.S. Department of Education to
eliminate the use of the Common Core State Standards for teaching
and assessment; and be it further**

**RESOLVED, the AFT will organize other members and affiliates to
increase opposition to the Common Core State Standards; and be it
further**

**RESOLVED, that a copy of this resolution be sent to the U.S.
Department of Education, the President of the United States, and
all members of the U.S. Congress.**