

Powerful Alignment: Building Consensus around the Common Core State Standards

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This paper examines a sampling of arguments for and against the Common Core State Standards from the period surrounding their adoption. While supporters of the standards have articulated common goals such as economic security, equity, and alignment, opposing voices have failed to coalesce around a unified set of principles or a common language. An analysis of the various arguments and rhetorical techniques used by supporters and opponents reveals a model for achieving rapid, dramatic change in the modern educational landscape.

National educational standards have been periodically proposed and repeatedly rejected for well over a century (Bracey, 2009). Even in the decades after *A Nation at Risk* made high educational standards tantamount to common sense, calls for national standards such as the Goals 2000 initiative (EdSource, 2010) continued to incite a litany of warnings about prescriptiveness, disciplinary rigidity, the dangers of federal intrusion, and the impossibility of satisfying all stakeholders. Given this country's history with national standards, the recent change of heart demonstrated by the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards is nothing short of astounding. How did this dramatic shift occur?

A look at the discourse surrounding their adoption suggests that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) may owe their success to the alliance formed between formerly disparate groups to achieve a mutually desirable end. Although supporters are not completely unified in their beliefs about the role and purpose of the standards, they have embraced a common language and common goals. The similarly varied groups who oppose the standards struggle to be as relevant and influential as the proponents, mainly because they have failed to propose a unified alternative or to agree on their arguments.

This paper examines three goals of the CCSS, as commonly cited by supporters, and three arguments raised by opponents of the standards. The quality of the standards, especially in relation to existing state standards, has been fiercely debated (e.g. Stotsky & Wurman, 2010), but this paper does not include claims about the rigor of the standards or arguments about their quality. Rather, it centers on arguments about the very existence of the CCSS, the groups and individuals who make those arguments, and the ways in which their arguments overlap. Sources include newspaper articles, blogs, policy documents, and the occasional peer-reviewed journal article from the period between summer 2009, when the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers announced their plan to develop common standards, and spring 2011, when the standards had been adopted by 42 states. On the whole, statements of support were (and are) more common than statements of opposition, but one need not look far to locate either.

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Supporters

The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) was initially driven by the National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Three of their initial business partners were Achieve, Inc., the College Board, and ACT, all of whom have financial interests in standards, assessments, and international benchmarking (Hargraves, 2010). The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has been a major financial backer, investing \$20 million to bring the CCSS into classrooms. The money will be used in partnership with the Pearson Foundation, a nonprofit arm of the country's largest textbook publisher (Associated Press, 2011, April 27). A number of business and industry leaders have also professed their support for the standards, and their stated reasons will be discussed below.

Supporters are not limited to those with financial interests or market-based ideals, however; they also include parties who have an interest in teacher professionalism and teacher education. The American Federation of Teachers vocally supports the standards and the development of associated curriculum, maintaining that common curriculum will improve student learning as well as the education and experience of teachers. Linda Darling-Hammond, a longtime advocate of teacher professionalism, sees the standards as an important step towards greater educational equity.

Clearly, supporters of the CCSS do not fall neatly into political and ideological groups, and we must consider what it is that unites them. Money is one cynical possibility. Powerful financial interests have taken leading roles in the development and implementation of the standards, and an alliance can be very lucrative. However, money is not necessarily the key factor in the groups' newfound agreement. The CCSS have emerged as a powerful force in educational policy, and thus it has become worthwhile for groups representing all levels of the educational process to become involved. Recognizing the persistence and increasing influence of standardization, groups have found ways in which the CCSS can help them to achieve their greater organizational goals.

Three goals, in particular, seem to unite almost all supporters of the CCSS: security, equality, and alignment. Some combination of these goals is employed in nearly every statement of support. Seemingly different groups, from market-based reformers to advocates for teacher professionalism and rigorous teacher education, set aside more divisive goals of their own as they use these unified frames in various ways.

When supporters of the standards state their goals, they must also construct the problem that necessitates this particular goal. Below, the discussion of each policy goal explains the associated problem as constructed by supporters in addition to the logic behind each goal (as framed in the pro-standards literature), the assumptions behind the rhetoric, and any rebuttals commonly used by standards opponents.

Security

Economic security, for both individuals and the nation, is one of the primary goals cited by supporters of the CCSS. This particular goal finds a rhetorical home in the human capital argument that is prevalent in the educational discourse of the federal government and other major defenders of educational policy decisions. According to Joel Spring, human capital ideology and its associated reforms (charter schools, high-stakes testing, and standardized curricula) originate with very wealthy Americans, who have much to gain from a reinvigorated economy, but the media has exposed the public to such a “steady stream of uncritical messages” supporting the human capital ideology that the public has internalized it (2010, p. 43). Thus, it is not surprising that economic security is commonly cited as a goal for the CCSS; a good education, according to the human capital ideology, should prepare students for the workforce of the future.

Constructing the problem

To underscore the urgent need for national standards, supporters often define the problem through international comparisons. They raise concerns that other nations, like Finland, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, have “come from behind and eclipsed our achievements” (“Common Core Curriculum,” 2011, p. 1). Data used to substantiate this problem statement include the results of international assessments such as the PISA, and lists of successful nations that have implemented national standards. The overall narrative is one of decline and ceded greatness—not unlike the story told by *A Nation at Risk* nearly thirty years ago (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Standards are also linked to more local concerns about economic security—specifically, the country’s current unemployment crisis. Supporters of the standards tie their work to common fears about job security. A number of prominent corporations, including Dell, IBM, Microsoft, and Verizon, as well as several state Chambers of Commerce, lent their names to a “Business Sign-On Letter” in which they lamented, “We are a nation with 50 sets of inconsistent standards, even though the expectations of colleges and employers in math and English are nearly universal” (2010). According to this argument, a lack of consistent standards will leave many students woefully underprepared for college and career.

The security argument

The way in which supporters of the CCSS position themselves in relation to economic concerns is as follows: (1) *The health of our national economy is tied to the education of our citizens.* (2) *Because many of our international competitors have college- and career- ready standards, we will lag behind if we do not meet that challenge.* (3) *National standards will lead to greater security for individuals and the nation.* Examples of this logic can be seen in statements by supporters of all stripes, from the Shanker Institute to Linda Darling-Hammond to the Fordham Foundation. One characteristic example from the Fordham reviewers shows the ease with which supporters make the leap from local to global security: “Many more [citizens] will be ‘college- and career- ready’ and that means the country as a whole will be stronger, safer, more competitive” (Carmichael, et al., 2010, p. 1).

Assumptions

Several key assumptions characterize any manifestation of the human capital argument. Chief among them is the idea that economic success is tied to education, and that an educated citizenry will lead to a healthy economy. Furthermore, proponents assume that universally high standards (as opposed to strong local control, for example) will produce that educated citizenry. Another assumption implicit in the college- and career- ready standards is that college should be a goal for all Americans; the skills needed to be a productive worker in today's knowledge economy are the same skills required of college students.

Rebuttals

Those who oppose the CCSS, or at the very least wish to proceed with caution, have raised questions about evidence behind the security argument. Christopher Tienken is a particularly persistent voice in the demand for more evidence of national standards' effectiveness in promoting global competitiveness. He writes of dissatisfaction with national standards in England and elsewhere, and frequently suggests that the history of standardization in countries such as China has led to a lack of innovation, as suggested by its dearth of Nobel prize winners (Tienken, 2011a, 2011b). Critics of the standards have also questioned the quality of the evidence that is provided, pointing out that works cited to support the standards include many research projects in which the work team authors, their companies, or the Endorsing Partners of the standards were involved (Utah NAME, 2009). More evidence is needed, these groups maintain, before we can claim that national standards will increase this country's economic power.

A point less often made, but with the potential to affect public sentiment, is that economic security should not be the goal of education in the first place. William Wraga (2010) sees the human capital perspective as troublingly narrow, and cites Goodlad's delineation of historical educational goals, classified as academic, vocational, social, civic, and cultural. Wraga worries that our goals have shifted from a well-rounded education to a comparatively flat one (2010, p. 2).

Equality

Supporters of the standards also see them as a possible solution to, or alleviator of, persistent inequities in student achievement. The degree to which the standards are seen as a cure to social ills varies among supporters, but there is general agreement that equal inputs will lead to greater equality of outputs. The goal of equality is also tied by some supporters to the security frame: the more students who emerge from high school at college- and career- ready levels, the stronger the American economy will become.

Constructing the problem

As in the security frame, the equality argument addresses the inconsistency of the current state educational standards. Supporters of the Common Core often refer to the current model as a "patchwork" system, suggesting something uneven and unintentional, a covering-up rather than a reinvention. This system, according to those who wish to change it, institutionalizes uneven expectations and outcomes for students. The differing quality of states' standards is no secret, yet the government has sanctioned it.

When calling for greater equality in state standards, supporters of the Common Core frequently use the language of rights and beliefs. For example, the Council of the Great City Schools writes, “We believe it is only through common standards that we can deliver on the promise of equity implicit in the purpose of public education, and give all our young people a real shot at the American dream” (2010, p. 1). Advocating for common curriculum based on the Common Core Standards, the Shanker Institute declares, “We believe that whether children live in Mississippi or Minnesota, Berkeley or the Bronx, our expectations for their achievement should be equally high” (2011, p. 1). This language, in the style of a manifesto, begs support; once the Common Core Standards become a matter of belief, to oppose them seems nearly immoral.

The equality argument

Those who see the CCSS as a path to equality use some variation of the following argument: (1) *Equal expectations can, and should, be institutionalized.* (2) *Equality of expectations is a step toward equality of opportunity in college and careers.* (3) *Equality of opportunity will increase security, for individuals and for the nation.* The businesses and business organizations who support the standards highlight the relationship between these three ideas: for example, “In a competitive world economy where education and/or training after high school is increasingly the norm for access to good jobs, to prepare students for anything less is, by definition, to deny opportunity” (Business Sign-On Letter, 2010). The opportunity that is being equalized by the standards is an opportunity to join the workforce, and to provide a useful service in the competitive global economy. The benefits of equality are tied to the human capital argument outlined above: equal access to jobs means more people will be prepared to be productive members of the knowledge economy.

Assumptions

The supporters of the CCSS are not vocally divided over the nature of equality as a goal, but they quietly form two different camps. One group seems to operate under the assumption that common standards and equal expectations will have an impact on educational equity. Haycock, for example, speaks of “consistent, high standards that prepare all students, regardless of their zip code, for education beyond high school” (2009, p. 1). This type of language suggests that high standards themselves have the power to change a student’s experience.

Other supporters speak in more measured tones about the actual power of the standards to contribute to equal opportunity for students. For this subset, national standards are one piece of a larger educational solution, and that true equity cannot be achieved unless high standards are paired with significant social supports. Linda Darling-Hammond, in a piece that casts the standards as an equalizing force, writes, “This is just a start... We must equalize resources for students, support thoughtful assessments, help schools learn from success, and create an infrastructure to recruit, train, and retain the best teachers” (2009, p.1). In no way are the standards mistaken for a panacea; instead, according to this version of the argument, they represent a first step toward a similarly comprehensive education for all students. This subtle but important distinction has the potential to get lost in the larger rhetoric of support.

Rebuttals

Some opponents of the CCSS regard the entire enterprise as nothing more than a distraction, a way to avoid talking about the real problems that plague education. They allege that the supporters of the Common Core, with their focus on equalizing expectations, do not address more pressing barriers to achievement, such as poverty, isolation, and social inequity. Pointing out that many countries with national standards also have nationalized healthcare and housing policies, Tienken pointedly muses, “Perhaps it’s not universal curriculum standards that make the difference. Maybe it’s a comprehensive social system that provides a quality social safety net...” (2011a, p.10). Rebuttals to the equality argument often raise the point that what we call the achievement gap begins long before children will experience the positive influence of high standards. Responding to a *New York Times* article that portrayed the standards in a very positive light, one anonymous poster declared that, no matter the quality of the standards, “no curriculum change will fix the culture of poverty and ignorance that damages these children before they ever see a classroom” (anonymous post, *New York Times*, April 25, 2011).

Alignment

Perhaps the most pervasive, consistent, and universal argument for the CCSS has to do with alignment. The broad goal of alignment is cited by nearly every individual or group who speaks in support of the standards. This goal involves alignment between the standards and curriculum, assessments, college admission standards, and other tools for learning, teaching, and measurement, as well as alignment between the activities of different schools and classrooms. The goal of alignment involves scaling up the not-yet-implemented standards and finding ways to maximize their usefulness.

Constructing the problem

One of the “deep metaphors” (Lakoff, 1995) of the CCSS movement is the idea of American education as a “fractured system” (Council of the Great City Schools, 2010). This symbol suggests an educational system in dire need of repair. States are fragmented and disconnected, their standards representing an impossible range of material and expectations. States’ widely varying standards cause problems for textbook publishers, teachers, teacher educators, students who change classrooms or schools, and those who wish to conduct meaningful large-scale assessments of student learning. Alignment will presumably bring order and unity to a broken system.

The alignment argument

Those who identify alignment as a goal usually use the following narrative: (1) *Our educational system is broken.* (2) *The CCSS will bring coherence to all aspects of the educational system, from teacher preparation to assessment.* (3) *A coherent, unified educational system will lead to greater collaboration and the more efficient, effective use of resources.* (4) *The standards will increase in effectiveness as they are brought to scale through corresponding curricula, assessments, professional development opportunities, and so on.*

The many individuals and organizations that weigh in on this issue list a variety of ways in which alignment will lead to a more coherent system. For example, those who represent teachers see many potential benefits for educators in the Common Core standards. *American*

Educator, published by the AFT, devoted an entire issue to the need for a curriculum based on the Common Core standards, in which the stated benefits ranged from preparing students for standardized tests (“Common Core Curriculum,” 2011) to improving teacher preparation (Cohen, 2011). Alignment will also increase students’ preparation to do college-level work, according to Haycock (2009), who notes that the high numbers of students doing remedial college coursework “suggests a lack of alignment between what their high schools have been teaching them and what is expected of them once they get to college or career training programs” (p.1).

In this frame, collaboration between parties who have a financial interest in the standards is no secret, but instead an open reality and a benefit. “The standards would give curriculum and test developers, publishers, and education schools a way to align their work,” write representatives from the Council of the Great City Schools (2010). Close associations between the standards’ creators and those who can gain from their implementation are not viewed as corrupt, but as an intelligent use of resources.

Assumptions

The standards, are, for the most part, untested. Despite their widespread adoption, they have been implemented in only a handful of schools. Thus, proponents of alignment make the assumption that the untested standards are worth scaling up. The stated effects of the CCSS and any associated educational materials are also based, at this point, on assumptions: for example, if teachers work with the same standards or curricular materials, those teachers will be more likely to collaborate across classrooms, schools, or states.

Rebuttals

Critiques of the alignment goal take on many forms, both direct and indirect. Some critics paint the degree of collaboration as sinister, unethical, or un-American. There is a sense that the standards and any related support materials are in position to spiral out of control; as Tienken writes, “once we go down this road, there is no coming back” (2010b, p.3). Others argue that such extensive collaboration undermines the creation of diverse funds of knowledge, which should be viewed as a strength. These objections, which are central to opponents’ arguments, will be examined in greater detail in the section on opponents of the CCSS.

Supporters’ Use of Language

Supporters of the CCSS represent a wide range of ideologies and thus, as a group, hold broad appeal. In order to nurture this alliance, supporters have coalesced around the three goals described above—goals that are mutually agreeable to almost all involved parties. The language used by supporters is also calculated to appeal to a diverse audience. Supporters convene around words that describe the standards in a way that almost any listener would find positive: “fewer,” “clearer,” “higher,” “coherent,” “concise.” Articles in favor of the standards note their broad nature while also highlighting their clarity and understandability. Most people could conceivably gravitate toward at least one of those words as representative of the type of standards they seek. Suggestions about “readiness” and “skills” for “all children” are also, if vague, universally appealing. Such goals do not suggest that children have to become anything in particular, but that they will be ready and able to choose from a variety of options. In general, the language used by supporters is a mild version of the dominant policy discourse, characterized by appealing ambiguity.

Perhaps more revelatory than the language used by supporters are the frames and arguments they avoid. Supporters tend to stay away from arguments that might polarize. As a counter-example, one editorial in favor of the Common Core standards draws attention because its argument is so different from most others. Joan Richardson writes enthusiastically about a future in which students will be “customizing their learning by shopping for education in online malls,” and teachers “will develop deeper individual expertise and, in entrepreneurial fashion, begin to serve students who want the knowledge they have to offer” (2010, p. 4). Richardson’s vision, strongly and explicitly based in an ideology of markets and competition, is an outlier among pro-Common Core writings, drawing attention to the fact that most other supporters, even those who support market-based initiatives, are not making the same type of argument. Large numbers of people can get on board with high-quality assessments, but fewer will find a shopping-mall educational system palatable.

Resistance to the Common Core State Standards

Despite the overwhelming acceptance of the Common Core standards, and the inevitability of their realization in most states, many writers have spoken out against their implementation. Unlike the standards’ supporters, who speak in terms of the goals that the standards and any aligned resources will be able to achieve, opponents focus on problems with the idea of national standards in general and these standards in particular. At this point, the Common Core standards are a reality, and the best hope for those who express concern is to slow or halt the rapid scaling-up process.

Like the supporters of the CCSS, opponents represent a variety of political and ideological viewpoints. Among the most vocal opponents are conservative foundations and organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the Homeschool Legal Defense Association, and FreedomWorks. However, other opponents, like the National Association for Multicultural Education and the National Black Education Agenda, are left-leaning—even radically so. Only three states, Texas, Alaska, and Virginia, have firmly decided not to adopt the standards. However, from those states come forceful denunciations of the standards’ agenda.

Among other concerns, opponents have identified problems related to transparency, freedom, and diversity. Distinct groups are associated with each of these arguments, as opposed to the more unified structure of the alliance that has formed in support of the standards. Unlike the previous frames, which could be represented with unified logical arguments, these discourses usually take on several different strands—the result of an underdeveloped language of resistance that fails to transcend political and ideological boundaries.

Transparency

The transparency argument is largely a reaction to the alignment goal embraced by the standards’ supporters. Those making the argument identify a problem with either the standards-creation process or the perceived financial interests that drive the standards.

Christopher Tienken and William Mathis, of Seton Hall University and the University of Colorado at Boulder, respectively, have forcefully made this argument; Tienken, in particular, has published extensively on this and other arguments against the standards. The transparency

argument also surfaces frequently in blogs, editorials, and online comment boards; in general, it is made by individuals, not organizations.

Constructing the problem

There are two major strands of the discourse about transparency. The first has to do with the way in which the standards were created. Opponents who are concerned about transparency maintain that the standards-creation process was overly secretive. As Bracey (2009, p.76) writes, some have come to believe that “the whole exercise is a sham, that the standards were already written, probably by Achieve, Inc., one of the partners in the project.” Valerie Strauss of the *Washington Post* raises a catalogue of doubts about the standards’ validity, based on the short time in which they were written and the secrecy of the drafting process (2010). The drafts were, in fact, released for public comment, and reflect changes suggested by the comments. However, CCSSI declined to post all comments, instead summarizing the responses. This move created more fodder for those who already had concerns about transparency (Gewertz, 2010). A related problem with transparency involves those who were left out of the creation process. Several dissenters lament the lack of teacher involvement in the drafting. Tienken and Zhao (2010) resent the CCSSI’s suggestion that the standards represent the coming together of many different educational stakeholders: “We did not combine our talents to create the CCSS. The standards were written by corporations and private consulting firms” (p.8).

The second strand of the transparency discourse maintains that the creators of the standards were driven by financial motives. Tienken and Zhao take up this argument as well: “The entities involved in creating the CCSS stand to make money from national standards and testing. So from the start, profiteering is potentially at play and the threat exists that children were not the first interest in this process” (2010, p.8). According to Damon Hargraves, who analyzed the various partnerships that made the Common Core standards possible, “there is so much money being transferred that it is hard to follow who is doing what and how much money is going where. It can be easily said though that this is big business” (2010, p.1).

Analysis of the transparency argument

This frame is powerful and interesting, and could potentially appeal to a range of people. The financial entanglements of the various drafting parties can, indeed, give pause; despite the influence of market-based ideology on educational policy, many Americans are still uncomfortable with the idea of a public education driven by private interests.

One problem with the argument, however, is the fact that contributing organizations have been fairly transparent about their financial involvement. As shown in the alignment section, above, a certain amount of “synergy” among drafting organizations is widely considered desirable. This is a manifestation of the “creative capitalism” embraced by Bill Gates, in which the ideas of helping society and making a profit are not mutually exclusive (Gates, 2008). The opponents who question the backers’ interconnectedness are not technically revealing any secrets.

Another issue is the fringe nature of the individuals who raise concerns about transparency. They are not organized, their arguments are not always backed by research, and their piled-up accusations threaten to take on the qualities of a conspiracy theory rather than a

well-reasoned argument. To say that teachers were not involved in the drafting of the standards flatly contradicts the claims of the CCSSI, and those who make such an argument must have clearly articulated grounds for saying so. Tempered statements about this important issue might garner more support.

Freedom

Last February, in response to unrest among Republican senators, a Utah committee voted to rename the Common Core State Standards the “Utah Common Core State Standards” (Schencker, 2011). This move is hardly a substantive change, but it does highlight one of the major fears surrounding standards adoption: can states retain their autonomy in the face of a movement towards nationalization?

Unlike the scattered proponents of the transparency and evidence arguments, those who believe that the CCSS are a threat to certain freedoms have constructed a powerful and fairly consistent discourse. However, the argument seems tied to a particular group of supporters. The freedom argument is primarily made by very conservative groups such as the Heritage Foundation, FreedomWorks, and the Cato Institute, although more moderate voices, in an attempt to cast a wider net for opponents of the standards, have also taken it up (see Tienken & Canton, 2009).

Constructing the problem

The freedom discourse has two major strands. The first is that the CCSS undermine valued American principles—specifically, the principle of local control, often referred to as “federalism” in this discourse. In this argument, the very presence of national standards is a threat to federalism (Heritage Foundation, 2011) and choice. American Principles in Action, a group that advocates school choice and strong local control, denounces “those who argue that educational bureaucrats know better than parents regarding the education of their child” (2011). For opponents of the standards who take this particular view, the adoption of standards is no different from the outright nationalization of education.

The second strand of the argument has to do with the process of adoption. Many who feel that the standards undermine American freedoms also assert that states were coerced into adopting the standards (e.g. Korbe, 2011). Specifically, they object to the weight of the Common Core Standards in determining the winners of Race to the Top funding. Adoption of the standards was worth only 40 points of possible 500, with 30 more points awarded for “supporting the transition to enhanced standards” and “developing and implementing high-quality assessments” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p.3), but thus far, none of the non-adopting states have received RTTT funds. Governor Rick Perry of Texas, one of the non-adopting states, speaks of “this administration’s attempt to bait states” into adopting the standards (“Gov. Perry,” 2010); with similar language, a Washington journalist asserts that “the Obama administration has dangled a purse of several hundred million dollars” before states in order to bribe them into adopting the Common Core (Mass, 2011). As Stone points out, “the far Right is wont to see coercion in any government rule or regulation, because all laws are backed by the government’s monopoly on the legitimate use of force” (2002, p. 24). In this case, since the standards are not technically a government regulation, the perceived coercion comes from the government’s use of funding to encourage adoption of the standards.

Analysis of the freedom argument

The freedom-based argument against the standards has several rhetorical strengths. Its proponents have developed a common language, using terms such as “federalism” and “coercion” across their writings. This discourse also employs powerful symbolism of confinement and bondage; in a compelling and well-edited video from the Heritage Foundation, one interviewee after another uses the image of hands (“out of our hands,” “putting a hand behind your back,” “handcuff teachers,” etc.) to suggest a lack of autonomy (Heritage Foundation, 2011).

Another strength of this argument is its ability to connect a very current ideology of choice and markets to prominent figures and ideals in American history. American Principles in Action ties its local-control argument to the words of Thomas Jefferson: “...if it is believed that these elementary schools will be better managed by the governor and council, the commissioners of the literary fund, or any other general authority of the government, than by the parents within each ward, it is a belief against all experience” (2011). Terry Stoops of FreedomWorks uses particularly strong language: “The founders... understood that if you are able to capture the hearts and minds of children, that is the road to tyranny” (“FreedomWorks speaker,” 2011). Connections between the “founders” and current political or ideological struggles, so important in today’s Tea Party rhetoric, have the potential to capture conservatives’ attention.

Despite its potency, the freedom argument has several key weaknesses. First of all, the argument is almost exclusively embraced by conservatives, and does not seem to have spread beyond a certain sector of the population, influential as that sector might be. As the standards’ supporters prove, sweeping change is made much more viable through alliance-building, and the freedom discourse does not seem to have garnered great support beyond its conservative following.

A major weakness in the argument is revealed when we consider the alternative to standards suggested by this group of opponents. They do not speak in terms of goals because their goal is, more or less, to maintain the status quo—to keep the system of standards much the way it is. Because so much of America has bought into the idea that the educational system must be fixed, it is difficult to rally people around an argument that says “what we have now is best.” This conservative mentality may apply well to other areas of policy, but the public opinion of education is so low that keeping things the way they are might not be the desirable answer.

Diversity

Both conservative and liberal groups have expressed concerns about a seeming disregard for diversity in the adoption of the CCSS. The argument that it may not be right to teach all students according to the same standards has surfaced in many statements of opposition from entities that range from the conservative Heritage Foundation to the liberal National Association for Multicultural Education. However, supporters and detractors have not yet settled upon a common vocabulary or shared goals that might combat the diversity problem posed by the standards.

Constructing the Problem

Two major strands make up the diversity argument, with some variation within these strands. The first line of reasoning maintains that the CCSSI ignores the variability of the student population. “Variability” is defined in different ways depending on who is doing the arguing. For example, the Cato Institute focuses on differences in learning styles: “All kids are different. They grow, mature, and learn at different rates, and develop different talents and interests. In light of that obvious reality, to build an education system that treats all kids as if they are the same is insanity” (McCluskey, 2010, p.1). A video by the Heritage Foundation, in which a teacher worries that she will no longer be able to teach different groups in different ways, suggests that the standards would make it impossible for teachers to differentiate instruction (2011). For the National Black Education Agenda, a different kind of variability is at issue: “Common Standards assume an American student population embodies with a similar history of freedom and neutrality—they are not sufficient to educate students... who themselves, whether they recognize it or not, are still victimized by a white supremacist culture and school curriculum” (Smith & Anderson, n.d., p.4).

The second, less frequently articulated part of the diversity argument asserts that teaching the same standards to everyone will undermine the strength of our nation. Tienken writes, “The diversity of the United States is its greatest strength. The U.S. economy is able to adapt to change because of the diversity of the workforce” (2011b, p.60). The Utah chapter of the National Association for Multicultural Education suggests that the Language Arts standards of the Common Core be changed to better develop the cultural and linguistic resources of multilingual students—“a national treasure, often wasted” (2009). This argument is consistent with the general argument for multicultural education, which prizes diverse funds of knowledge (Sleeter, 2005). Surprisingly, though, prominent multiculturalists have been fairly reticent about the standards. The powerful argument that a diverse knowledge base is a strong one is underrepresented in the discourse about the CCSS.

Analyzing the diversity argument

As an argument against the Common Core standards, the diversity discourse is in some ways the most unifying. Concerns about teaching the same content to all students are raised by a greater variety of individuals and groups than any other concern. Furthermore, questions about the standards’ ability to address differences get at the very heart of the standards debate. Even if standards are fairly flexible, do we still sacrifice some amount of richness or sensitivity?

However, appeals to consider the diversity of learners, though they come from a variety of opponents, are less prevalent than one might imagine. Many parties who might be expected to contribute to this debate, such as advocates of multicultural education, are silent. Others, such as the Council for Exceptional Children, vocally support the standards—in fact, the CEC was involved in the revision process. When the CEC advocates for the standards, arguments about differentiation become less compelling.

Perhaps more importantly, the goals of the various groups making the diversity argument are not well-aligned. Each group sticks to a fairly narrow agenda, with little effort to make its argument relevant to other groups. Conservative organizations focus on parents’ right to choose

what their children are learning, and speak of diversity only in terms of learning styles and parental preferences; multicultural organizations do not mention the parental role.

Given a non-standardized curriculum that takes student differences into account, what should students learn? The fairly polarized answers that come from two groups who make the diversity argument highlight the failure of Common Core opponents to effectively resist the standards. Although the conservative organization FreedomWorks and the National Black Education Agenda both resist the idea that all children should receive the same education, the alternatives that they seem to suggest could hardly be more different. Defending parents' right to have a say in what their children learn, Terry Stoops of FreedomWorks attests:

...This curriculum...would incorporate many of the things our kids don't need to know, like the multiculturalism, like the cultural awareness and those sorts of things that really divert a child's attention from being able to read and write as they should.
("FreedomWorks Speaker," 2011, p.1)

Stoops worries that, if all teachers are made to follow the Common Core standards, everyone will be subjected to the "diversion" of multiculturalism. For him, choice is necessary in making sure that students learn what their parents think is important, and the Common Core standards are too prescriptive. This view is very different from that of the National Black Education Association, for whom the standards are not prescriptive enough to encourage respect for diversity:

...as the Common Core State Standards make clear, [illustrative texts] are only recommendations, not required readings. States are free to choose their own texts and materials. The State of Texas, for example, has already decided to remove such illustrious Americans as President Thomas Jefferson and Justice Thurgood Marshall from its textbooks and curriculum. (Smith & Anderson, n.d., p. 4)

This group has professed a desire that differences among students be respected and accounted for, yet it sees the Common Core standards as a weak curriculum that does not preserve the important interest of multiculturalism. Although both of these groups oppose the CCSS, it is difficult to imagine them coming together to propose an alternative.

The Likely Fate of Resistance Efforts

The preceding comparison of FreedomWorks and the NBEA simply highlights the futility of current efforts to resist the rapid descent of the CCSS upon American educational policy and practice. Opponents of the standards raise many meaningful concerns and questions. However, they have failed to develop a unified language or articulate common goals.

Despite their differing ideologies, supporters of the CCSS have united around shared goals. If opponents wish to halt the progress of the Common Core, they must also find some common ground in their language and vision. Otherwise, the questions that they pose will resonate with small sectors of the population, but will not stem the standards' encroachment into curriculum, assessment, and teacher education.

Proponents of the CCSS certainly have much to gain from heeding the arguments of opponents. They would do well to re-emphasize the voluntary nature of the standards, as well as any other tools that may be derived from those standards within the next few years. Input from teachers who have worked with the standards would also be useful, not only to aid future development but to humanize the standards and dispel fears that they are nothing but a cold, corporate invention. They should absolutely respond to those who question the standards' ability to preserve the country's diversity of language and knowledge, and to be relevant and flexible for students of all backgrounds and learning styles.

However, when it comes to swaying public opinion, supporters of the Common Core standards have employed a winning formula. Opponents should learn from the supporters' willingness to compromise and find common ground; by focusing narrowly on a particular set of interests, most opposing writers and groups neglect related ideas that could strengthen their argument. Unless opponents of the standards can propose a meaningful alternative path, they will continue to chip away at a mountain with their separate pickaxes. Despite their best efforts, the mountain will hardly feel the difference.

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