

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS EDEN AREA

Pros and Cons Regarding California Common Core Standards For Forum on October 4, 2013

Following are excerpts from three current articles that present some of the Pros and Cons concerning the CCCS being implemented in our schools beginning this year. Our Forum Speakers will be presenting on how their school districts will be applying these standards in the classroom. The three articles may answer some of your questions or stimulate questions you may want to ask the speakers.

An Idiot's Guide to the Common Core California Schools Adopt New Standards

by Brandon Fastman & Paul Wellman, Santa Barbara Independent

This school year, teachers will begin to implement the most significant changes to classroom instruction since California first adopted standards in 1998. Along with 45 other states, three territories, and Washington, D.C., the Golden State is betting its kids' futures on new guidelines called the Common Core State Standards. This new touchstone is largely the result of pressure from the federal government, which told states they would be ineligible for Race to the Top funds if they did not adopt internationally vetted standards. (Ironically, California will not be eligible in the near future anyway because both the governor and the California Teachers Association refuse to adopt statewide teacher evaluations based on standardized test scores.)

Common Core does not dictate curricula, but it sets goals for K-12 classrooms that emphasize depth over breadth. The new standards are supposed to be fully implemented by 2015, but that means teachers have to start adapting now, by running pilot programs and experimenting with new lesson plans throughout this school year.

How It Works - Common Core is the culmination of work done by two nationwide groups, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, which were tasked with evaluating why American school-kids were falling behind on global education benchmarks as well as college- and career-readiness. They found that teachers were racing through textbooks and checking off boxes without pausing to gauge the intellectual growth of their students, so Common Core aims to correct that by requiring fewer topics but allowing students to think more deeply. It also makes the teacher less of an authority figure in the classroom, forcing students to spend more time figuring things out themselves.

At first, Common Core will affect math and English, but new science standards are in the pipeline, as well. In English, students can expect to see a greater ratio of nonfiction to literary texts, said former San Marcos High School teacher and current UCSB professor Tim Dewar, but that doesn't mean literature will go by the wayside. Literary texts may be read in conjunction with historical documents, for instance, and there will be more emphasis on

students reading and writing in other subjects. “If the only place students are reading and writing is in English,” said Dewar, “then we are screwed.”

In high school math, traditional subjects like algebra, geometry, and trigonometry will be more integrated to emphasize their connections, and more statistics will be required as it is deemed more useful in the working world.

Altogether, Common Core proponents hope to foster real-world problem-solving skills. In the classroom, students will be asked to struggle more to find solutions, a process that requires a healthy dose of metacognition.

Why It Works - A fancy way of saying “thinking about thinking,” metacognition is what happens when students are asked not just for the right answers but how they got to those answers. When instructors teach texts, they focus on comprehension. Previously, while teaching a book called *Frindle*, a teacher might have asked her kids, “What did Nick do to transform the classroom into a tropical setting?” Under the new standards, she might instead ask, “What do you think Nick’s motives are? To cause trouble? Is there an educational reason? What is your evidence?” The goal is to always drive students back to the text and encourage them to formulate evidence-based reasoning — in short, a bit more “why” instead of just “what.”

Students who excel under the current system may be most frustrated with the Common Core, said several teachers, explaining that those who are good at following directions, finishing work quickly, and finding right answers will be forced to consider other answers and to articulate their thought process. But Common Core will encourage critical thinking.

Promise of Perseverance - A key trait of good problem solving is perseverance. As it is, teachers, especially in math, focus on process. They often show students the steps to solving a particular type of problem. Common Core lesson plans will ask students to formulate the steps themselves.

Minding the Gap - Decried as a federal takeover of education by detractors who complain the standards weren’t fully vetted and worry that the transition is happening too quickly, Common Core is not heavily criticized on its merits. But there are some real concerns, one having to do specifically with the rigor of the new standards and who will struggle most with them.

Right now, poor minority children fare far worse in school than kids from white middle- and upper-class backgrounds. Class-based achievement gaps exist in most countries, but the U.S. is the most stratified. In fact, a recent Stanford study that analyzed the oft-cited international ranking of industrialized nations in which the U.S. came in 14th in reading and 25th in math found that the U.S. reported a higher percentage of poor and ill-educated children than its peer nations. Adjusted accordingly, the study showed, the U.S. would actually rank fifth in reading and 10th in math.

Some worry that Common Core may actually increase this gap, reinforcing the advantages of the haves while exacerbating the challenges to the have-nots. Many think Common Core may actually help shrink the gap.

Testing to Come - While teachers relish standards that let them dive deep into their subjects, Common Core also demands concrete results via enhanced standardized testing. With testing comes stakes — for school reputations, for funding, maybe even one day for teacher evaluations — and if the early-adopter examples of New York and Kentucky are to be heeded, we can expect a precipitous drop in proficiency rates early on.

Parents have been asked to be patient during the transition, and California won't institute new "Smarter Balanced Assessment" tests — which will be given to grades 3 to 8 and 11 — until the 2014-2015 school year. (This school year, students are expected to take the same old STAR exams, but the state applied for a waiver from the federal government, arguing that they are now pointless.) The new tests will be given on computers, which will use "adaptive technology" to increase or decrease the complexity of questions based on a student's previous answer. The theory, also employed in the modern GRE taken by hopeful grad students, is that this method better tests what students know rather than what they don't. (Try them for yourself at www.smarterbalanced.org/pilot-test — they're quite demanding!) But the new testing protocols also mean that schools will need to figure out how to get an electronic device in the hands of every single student.

Common Core may be just as steep for teachers as it will be for students.

Schools Can't Afford to Wait for Federal Action

By - Bruce Fuller, a professor of education and public policy at UC Berkeley - 8-18-13

Pangs of trepidation beset our children as they return to school, not to mention their jittery parents. Some kids will be bullied. One in 12 teachers will exert zero impact on learning. Our public schools are secular dens of iniquity, critics still shout.

But it turns out that schools are getting better, steadily lifting students over the past two generations and shaving disparities among racial groups. The learning curves of elementary and middle school pupils climbed by almost two grade levels in reading and mathematics between 1971 and 2008, as detailed this summer by the National Center for Educational Statistics.

Still, plenty of work remains. The fresh federal data also reveal that test scores have hit a flat, dusty plateau in recent years despite a flurry of initiatives from the Obama administration. In California, student performance slipped last spring for the first time in more than a decade, as detailed by the state education department earlier this month. Overall, just one-quarter of California's fourth-graders are proficient readers by the measure of national standards.

We shouldn't wait on government to rekindle progress. Washington is hog-tied over how to recast federal leadership. The once promising No Child Left Behind law is collapsing of its own micro-managed weight. Legislation was passed last month that would disassemble any federal role in lifting our schools and then sliced \$1 billion in education aid.

Our kids' eye-opening historical progress has stemmed largely from the local action of parents and neighborhood activists and state spending. Mandates from afar won't spark inspiring teaching or engaged students. And now Gov. Brown's revolutionary decentralizing of school finance, approved this summer, affords greater power to parents and others who press for effective, grassroots reforms. So, what can be learned from students' historical gains? And what's to be done locally to regain momentum?

Parenting and preschool: Steady work inside families has contributed plenty. Young women have made remarkable progress in their school attainment since the civil rights era. In 1971, barely one-third of black females 25 and older held a high school diploma, but this share rose to 81 percent by 2012. Latina women still lag behind, yet three-fifths of them now finish high school.

Better-educated mothers engage their toddlers in richer oral language and more consistently read together and search-out quality preschools. They tend to marry partners who share these nurturing inclinations. Just one-fifth of the nation's 4-year-olds attended preschool in the 1960s, rising to more than two-thirds by 2010. President Obama now hopes to budge Republican leaders to expand and improve preschool programs.

Equity and excellence: The long-term rise in test scores also stems from students taking more demanding courses and a rise in black and Latino children moving into higher course tracks, reports UC Berkeley sociologist. The share of high school students completing two years of algebra has climbed steadily, from 40 to 76 percent since 1982, and pupils taking rigorous courses perform better in English and math regardless of family background.

One nettlesome question is how English learners will adapt to the rigorous Common Core curricula. After years of didactic drill-and-kill pedagogy, these new policies require more writing and analysis inside classrooms. Rigorous dual-language immersion - splitting classroom time between English and Spanish - offers one hopeful experiment in the city and South Bay. Thanks to work by the Human-scale schools, we know that small high schools successfully graduate more students than factory-like campuses.

But charter schools still display spotty success, relying on 20-something teachers who show plenty of verve yet leave the profession after a few years. Instead, Los Angeles is cultivating so-called pilot schools, human-scale campuses of about 350 students who focus on health sciences, digital technologies or performing arts. Principals at L.A.'s 49 pilot schools control their own budgets, can fire mediocre teachers and recruit inspiring teachers who retain regular job benefits and union ties.

Promising innovations sprout from local activism, not from long-distance rule making. State financing of schools is rebounding and now is under greater local control. But these historical lessons accent the efficacy of steady work in homes and preschools along with inventive forms of schooling. Now local activists and policy leaders might take careful stock of their colorful inventions, build on the original force of parents and rally around what works. Otherwise, student achievement could keep falling.

New Common Core Standards Are Right for California

By - Michael Kirst, professor emeritus at Stanford University, is president of the State Board of Education.

It is perhaps the worst-kept secret in public education: Too many students leave school with a diploma in their hands, but without the knowledge in their heads they need to start college or pursue a meaningful career.

We pay a steep price for the skills gap. More than 72 percent of our graduating students go to postsecondary institutions, but many are funneled into remedial, non-credit classes. Employers spend time and money training new workers. But it's students who suffer most, finding themselves unprepared for the challenging world outside the classroom. The Common Core State Standards represent a big part of what California — and 44 other states — are doing to address the problem.

But adopting the standards, as the State Board of Education did in 2010, was the easy part. The challenge is bringing these standards to life in our schools, work that will require significant effort from every part of our education system - and key decisions from everyone from the statehouse to the schoolhouse. Academic content standards are simply a list of the things we want students to know and be able to do, like drawing the yard lines on a football field. We put the goal line in the right place, at career and college readiness. And we've set out, step by step, the progress each student needs to make in each grade and subject to get there.

That's no small achievement. Before 1997, California had no grade-by-grade standards. A student moving from one school to another might find little in common between the old class and the new. The 1997 standards represented real progress at the time, but we've learned a lot since then.

The former standards were a mile wide and an inch deep. The list of things we asked students to learn was so long, important topics got superficial treatment at best. What was covered one year didn't necessarily build toward what came next.

The Common Core standards change all that, focusing on key knowledge students need in a logical sequence. Fourth-grade math, for example, becomes a master class in fractions. Why fractions? They're the key to unlocking the language of algebra. Algebra, in turn, is the gateway to probability, statistics and higher mathematics.

The new standards for reading and writing take a similar, staircase approach through the grades, with students asked to gradually understand more and more challenging texts, and compose arguments based on evidence and research. Students will write less about their feelings, and more about what they can prove - better preparation for both college term papers and reports to the boss.

No one is more crucial to this work than teachers, who will need time and training to replace the old emphasis on rote memorization with new lessons that include student ability to analyze, evaluate, derive and model concepts.

Schools will need new instructional materials. Common Core wisely leaves curriculum development to the states and districts, including the design of curriculum frameworks that

provide research-based approaches for instruction. School districts will determine their own priorities and adopt materials suiting their needs.

The right tests are vital as well. Multiple-choice assessments were never designed to measure the deeper learning called for by the Common Core, so we must transition to ones that measure learning in new ways. The new, computer-adaptive tests will include performance tasks and questions that require extended responses. No doubt it will take our students time to learn these new skills, so it's important to remember that test results are meant to provide information about student progress, not a measure of their potential.

Accountability systems will also need to change. California's was designed for an old model based solely on test scores. We must bring this system up to date, combining student achievement with other measures of success, including graduation rates, chronic absence, suspensions and college and career readiness.

Of course money is an issue. This year's state budget sets aside \$1.25 billion for school districts to put these new standards in place. The overhaul of our school finance system through the new local control funding formula will give districts unprecedented flexibility about how to allocate resources, with additional funds set aside to help students most in need.

The task list is long and the challenges are real. Meeting them will take persistence, patience and support from parents and the public. But moving forward is California's best hope for making sure all children - no matter where they come from or where they live - receive the world-class education they deserve.