

INTRODUCTION

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) represent one of the most ambitious American education reforms of the past century. Developed in 2009 and released in June 2010, the standards were designed to define what students should learn in mathematics and English language arts (ELA) from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. States already had their own individual standards and assessments, but many analysts considered them weak and ineffectual. By the end of 2010, more than forty states and the District of Columbia had adopted the CCSS as official K–12 standards. Even nonadopting states wrote new standards that mirrored key elements of CCSS. Swept away were fifty diverse sets of state-crafted standards, along with their attendant assessments and accountability systems.

The standards enjoyed early political support. US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan declared that CCSS “may prove to be the single greatest thing to happen to public education in America since Brown versus Board of Education.”¹ A bipartisan coalition of elites, including nearly all of the movers and shakers in education policy, promoted CCSS. But a political backlash emerged—and it, too, was bipartisan. Opponents on the right objected to the federal government’s support of the standards, warned of the dangerous precedent of allowing Washington to meddle in curriculum matters, and derided CCSS as “Obamacore.” Opponents on the left blasted the new assessments associated with the standards, objected to teacher evaluations tied to test scores, and organized opt-out

movements that informed parents of how to exclude their kids from state testing programs.

A decade later, scant evidence exists that Common Core produced any significant benefit. One federally funded evaluation actually estimates that the standards had a negative effect on student achievement in both reading and math. Fortunately, the overall impact is quite small.

A strange aspect of Common Core is that politicians have sent mixed signals on whether it even exists. When the Every Student Succeeds Act was signed into law in 2015, US Senator Lamar Alexander declared, “The federal Common Core mandate is history.”² And yet in 2016, Donald J. Trump ran for president promising to get rid of Common Core, characterizing it as a federal mandate.³ In 2017, US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos told a radio audience, “There isn’t really any Common Core anymore,” and she emphatically declared to a 2018 audience at the American Enterprise Institute, “Common Core is dead.”⁴ A year later, the governors of two states, Florida and Georgia, announced plans to end Common Core in their states, despite DeVos’s pronouncements and the standards of both states having been previously rewritten to get rid of Common Core.⁵

If we conclude that CCSS had a minimal impact on student learning, perhaps the standards changed other aspects of education in a productive manner. Even if such a possibility is conceded, the policy’s extraordinary costs and the ferocious debate that it engendered outstripped such meager benefits. Billions of taxpayer dollars, from both federal and state coffers, were poured into making CCSS a success. Prominent philanthropies, led by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, funded a public relations campaign to fight back against political opposition. The nation’s three-million-plus public school teachers were asked to retool their instruction and use new curriculum materials aligned with Common Core; large numbers of students began failing new Common Core-aligned assessments; and many parents struggled to understand the strange new homework assignments that students were bringing to the kitchen table.

Future historians will look back on this era and ask: What was Common Core? Where did it come from? What was the big Common Core debate all about? Why did the standards fail to produce the outcomes promised by advocates? Those questions lead to a final and important one: What are the lessons from the Common Core experience that can

inform future education policy and research? In tackling these questions, four themes cut across chapters and emerge from the book's narrative.

IMPLEMENTATION ISN'T EASY

A phrase heard repeatedly after the Common Core State Standards were released was, "Of course, standards are only the beginning; it all depends on their implementation." Implementation of large-scale, top-down education policy transpires in a complicated system that is multilayered and loosely coupled in terms of authority and expertise. Common Core is not a federal policy, although it received crucial support from the federal government during the Obama administration, but it is national in scope, originally involving more than forty states and Washington, DC. States have their own political offices and educational bureaucracies, of course, but consider some ballpark numbers for the nodes of political and organizational authority situated below the state level: approximately 13,600 school districts (also democratically governed and administered by professional bureaucracies), 98,000 schools, and more than three million teachers, most working in their own classrooms. Navigating the vertical complexity of the K–12 educational system is daunting.⁶

Saying that standards depend on implementation is a bit like saying skydivers' enjoyment of the day depends on their parachutes opening. Fortunately for skydivers, the probability of a chute failing is infinitesimal. Not so for the odds of top-down policies encountering obstacles on the way to local sites of implementation. This was illustrated in a classic 1973 study, *Implementation*, by Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky. The study analyzed the Economic Development Administration, a jobs development program targeting urban areas. Pressman and Wildavsky studied the program's impact in Oakland, California. The program received ample funding and enjoyed bipartisan political support at federal, state, and local levels of government, along with the support of major stakeholders in the private sector. And yet it failed miserably, with a barely a hint of the program's existence three years after federal funds first reached Oakland.⁷

What happened? Pressman and Wildavsky introduce the concept of *decision points* to explain the difficulty of policies navigating multilayered systems of governance. A decision point could involve any person or

agency—political or bureaucratic or even outside of government—with the power to disrupt a policy’s implementation. Each layer (state, district, school, etc.) may have several decision points to clear before implementation can proceed. Consider an implementation path in which the probability of negotiating any single decision point is quite high. An early estimate of the probability of successful implementation may lead one to predict that implementation will be easy. That’s probably what Common Core developers were thinking as they worked with the representatives of governors and state school chiefs in 2009: “Everyone is in agreement here; we should be able to get this done.” Such reasoning overlooks that the probability of success shrinks as the number of decision points increases. For a policy with a 95 percent probability of clearing a single decision point, it takes fourteen decision points for the odds to drop below 50 percent, making failure more likely than success. Michael Q. McShane calculated seventeen decision points for Common Core, most at the state level alone, and reported that a state official took him to task for undercounting the true number.⁸

Common Core was not a jobs program with a dedicated stream of revenue fed into local budgets. In that respect, the odds of successful implementation are probably longer than one would estimate using Pressman and Wildavsky’s conceptual scheme. Standards-based reform succeeds by changing what schools teach and how they teach it—by changing behaviors, not by writing checks. The policy lineage for CCSS can be traced to state efforts to regulate curriculum and instruction, which date back to the nineteenth century.

Common Core is similar to the policies promoting tracking reform that I studied in the 1990s, research that I published in a 1999 book, *The Tracking Wars*.⁹ *Tracking* is the practice of grouping students into separate classes by prior achievement or differentiating subject matter by difficulty. Some eighth graders, for example, may take a general math class, while more advanced students take Algebra I. At the high school level, Advanced Placement (AP) classes are offered in most academic subjects. Middle schools in California and Massachusetts were urged by state policy to reduce the amount of tracking in favor of classes with students who were heterogeneous in ability. Tracking is highly controversial. Critics charge that separating students by ability or prior achievement inevitably creates classes segregated by race

and socioeconomic background and that offering different curricula to tracked classes exacerbates existing achievement differences. Opponents of detracking often include parents of high-achieving children, who want accelerated curriculum options for their children beyond the conventional grade-level program.

I found that schools' implementation of tracking reform differed by school subject and several local conditions. Math teachers were resistant and continued offering differentiated classes—in particular, Algebra I courses to advanced eighth graders—while teachers of ELA and other subjects were more likely to embrace reform and create heterogeneously grouped classes. Organizational characteristics of schools influenced how schools responded. Middle schools are structured by varying grade levels. Schools with sixth to eighth grades were receptive to detracking, but those with seventh to eighth grades or seventh to ninth grades were resistant. The former are often staffed with elementary-trained teachers who have experience with heterogeneously grouped classrooms; the latter typically are not. Schools serving large numbers of students were more likely to continue some form of differentiation, but schools with smaller enrollments were more likely to adopt heterogeneously grouped classes. Increased school size is correlated with a wider span in student achievement.

The main lesson of the study was that schools shape state policies to fit local circumstances. Schools' demographic characteristics also predicted their response to tracking reform. Consistent with the argument that detracking serves the cause of equity, schools most likely to embrace detracking were located in urban areas and served students predominantly from low-income households. Schools located in suburban areas and serving more socioeconomically advantaged families, on the other hand, resisted the reform and were more likely to continue with tracking.

UNPREDICTABILITY

Common Core's developers were well aware that without changes in key aspects of schooling, the standards they were writing would be rendered inert. No one knows, when standards are written, released, and adopted, how that will all play out. Curriculum and instruction are particularly important because they constitute the technical core of the educational enterprise, producing the learning that takes place in classrooms. They

sit at the bottom layer of the system. Writing and adopting standards takes place at the top of the system, in the domain of politicians and educational officials, often informed by experts. Authority shifts downward as standards are implemented. Curriculum and instruction are under the control of teachers, principals, and local educators. Successful implementation of standards not only depends on the willingness of implementers but also on the quality of the curriculum and instruction that local educators use to enact the standards.

The quality of curriculum and instruction varies in several ways. The publisher of a terrific K–8 math series may also publish a terrible reading series; a math program with strong second and sixth grade texts may be weak in first and fourth grades; a fifth-grade ELA text may be effective in building vocabulary and offer engaging writing prompts, but spotty on grammar, spelling, and the fundamentals of writing. In addition, teachers do not teach in a vacuum. They respond to their students by modifying curriculum or altering teaching when necessary. They seek out supplementary materials when those provided to them are not appropriate. Sometimes teachers make adjustments on the fly. Lucky is the veteran teacher who has not experienced the dreaded day when an instructional unit that has always worked well falls flat with a particular cohort of students.

The odds of successfully implementing standards would be vastly improved if perfection in everything that matters downstream were guaranteed. Of course, it's not. There are good teachers and bad teachers and those in between. There is good curriculum and bad curriculum and a lot in between—and the same is true for assessments and accountability systems. Excellence in any of these domains is not easy to accomplish. It may even be difficult to define. Each has its own set of experts, research methodologies, and scholarly literatures. Experts in accountability systems are often economists and political scientists who know very little about pedagogy. Moreover, experts in the curriculum and instruction of particular school subjects rarely venture across disciplinary borders. Scholars of early literacy instruction are not expected to know the research on teaching secondary mathematics or science. An expert on teaching Shakespeare or Faulkner to AP English students probably

won't be appointed to a blue-ribbon commission evaluating elementary math textbooks.

POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY

The two subjects that Common Core tackles, mathematics and English language arts, have long histories of ideological debates between educational progressives and traditionalists. In the 1980s and 1990s, the disputes came to be known as the *reading wars* and the *math wars*. The terms for the debates and the protagonists are clumsy, but they refer to a real phenomenon. Some version of this ideological struggle has been going on since the dawn of the twentieth century, and, as we will first encounter in chapter 1 and revisit in later chapters, the politics of progressive-traditionalist conflict play a role in Common Core's story. Let's save more on that point for the book's narrative. The idea here is to alert readers that navigating multiple decision points also places implementation in constant political jeopardy. Defeated parties are never vanquished; they can always resurface and fight again in another forum. Common Core supporters won a number of victories in state adoptions that were later modified or overturned. In addition, social media serves as a platform for organizing opposition. The careful crafting and precise wording of math standards dimmed in importance to the ridicule that a few notorious homework problems generated, fairly or unfairly, after going viral. Ideology infuses topics beyond curriculum and pedagogy, too, as illustrated by the opt-out protests, a grassroots movement philosophically opposed to standardized testing that stood against Common Core assessments.

REFORM POLICIES ARE INCREMENTAL

American education reform is frequently characterized as a series of waves that rise and fall or as a pendulum swinging back and forth between contending social values.¹⁰ Policies emphasizing excellence and equity are good examples. The 1950s policies coming after Russia's launch of the Sputnik satellite focused on enhancing America's standing in the world. The role of advanced mathematics and science in national security received special attention. Those policies were followed by the

1960s reforms of the Great Society and civil rights era, with heightened efforts to improve the education of impoverished, Black, and Hispanic children, long neglected by US schools.

The reform efforts inspired by *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 have a slightly different dynamic. Each successive decade produced policies designed to raise student achievement, but they also tried to fix a perceived weakness of previous policy efforts. Immediately after *A Nation at Risk*, states instituted minimum competency tests and raised course content and graduation requirements. But many analysts felt these policies focused too much on basic skills. The 1990s featured professional organizations writing national standards and states adopting curriculum standards that included higher-level skills and content, backed by periodic assessments and school accountability systems. Critics considered the assessments too infrequent and the accountability systems more bark than bite. No Child Left Behind was passed and prevailed over most of the 2000s. It mandated annual testing in reading and math for the third through eighth grades and an accountability regime that ratcheted up sanctions on schools falling short. States were allowed to write their own content standards and to decide the level of student performance demonstrating proficiency on student assessments, provided that all students met that level by 2014. By 2009, the goal of 100 percent student proficiency was criticized as a cruel pipedream; a majority of schools in the country were rated as failing and in danger of incurring penalties. Moreover, the states' standards and assessments were seen as uneven in quality. The time was ripe for a set of shared, grade-by-grade standards in math and ELA. Common Core was born.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book is organized in eight chapters. The first three chapters are histories. The fourth and fifth chapters are on the content of the standards, early implementation, and politics. The sixth and seventh chapters review the existing empirical evidence on Common Core's effects. Finally, the eighth chapter concludes the book.

Chapter 1, *The Roots of State-Led Reform*, describes the development of state powers over schools, the ongoing ideological struggle between educational progressives and traditionalists, and the emergence

of scholars who brought scientific expertise to the study of curriculum and instruction. Classroom activities that had once been the sole domain of local educators were now influenced by forces beyond the schoolhouse walls.

Chapter 2, *Rising Expectations, Competing Ideas*, begins with the reforms prompted by *A Nation at Risk*, details the rise of systemic, standards-based reform in the 1980s and 1990s, and ends with the passage of *No Child Left Behind*.

Chapter 3, *Developing the Common Core State Standards*, traces the decline of *No Child Left Behind* and the rise of Common Core.

Chapter 4, *Content of the Core*, reviews the content of the Common Core standards in English language arts and mathematics, pointing out strengths and weaknesses, including identifying standards that promised to be easy and difficult to implement. Foreshadowing the next chapter, it also highlights aspects of the standards destined to provoke political controversy.

Chapter 5, *Resistance and Rebellion*, describes how Common Core's early popularity waned as critics raised objections, especially on social media, and a well-organized political opposition arose. Opponents forged a left-right coalition, with those on the left objecting to Common Core's testing regime and those on the right concerned about the federal government's involvement.

Chapter 6, *Effects on Student Achievement*, reviews research on Common Core's impact on student achievement, including National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test score gaps associated with racial and ethnic groups and between high and low achievers.

Chapter 7, *Effects on Curriculum and Instruction*, reviews research on how curriculum and instruction changed in response to Common Core.

Chapter 8, *Whatever Happened to Common Core?*, summarizes the book and offers lessons for future policy and research.

A PERSONAL NOTE

When the first draft of the Common Core State Standards was released, I was a senior fellow studying education policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. A group of us in the policy field would

regularly meet for a beer or two on Friday nights. The standards were the big policy topic in Washington at the time. I was repeatedly asked what I thought of them. I would shrug my shoulders and answer something like, “I don’t know; we’ll see how they turn out.” Standards never look the same in schools as they appear on paper. When pressed on whether I had read the standards, I said that I had; when asked to evaluate them strictly in comparison to previous standards on compositional qualities, I replied, “They’re better than most, but not perfect. I’d give them a B or B- as a grade.”

I also would sometimes reply that I thought standards were overrated as an instrument of school reform. Many of my friends were true believers in Common Core, and they would be irked by this observation. They were ready to debate the finer points of the Common Core, perhaps even to concede that a few of the standards were a bit faulty, but they were not going to consider, not for a single second, that the whole project may be a waste of time. To them, the choice was between Common Core and an alternative set of standards, with each state’s current standards as the default. I was a skeptic, not an opponent.

My earliest encounters with standards undoubtedly influenced my skepticism. When I completed my year-and-a-half teacher training program at the end of 1978, I had taken, as an elementary grade teacher candidate, instructional methods courses in math, reading, language arts, science, and history/social studies. California adopted state frameworks in each of these subjects, and they were presented as the backbone of the curriculum that we trainees would be teaching once we entered the classroom. The practice lessons we developed and textbooks we poured over were organized around the frameworks. At the time, California had textbook adoption at the state level. Publishers were given the frameworks so they could produce textbooks reflecting the state’s wishes, and the books were field-tested in hundreds of classrooms for a full year (we called the process *pilot testing* and the prospective books *pilots*). The state would gather information from the field tests and adopt a list of approved texts in grades K–8 (high school texts were adopted by districts). Districts would pick books from the approved list.

The state also had an annual test, the California Assessment Program (CAP), given in selected grades with matrix sampling, a new technique used also by NAEP. Unlike NAEP, scores from CAP were produced for

each school, and it was a momentous day each year when the scores were published in local newspapers. The scores were also scrutinized every three years by a team of educators from outside the district, part of the Program Quality Review. This was California's version of the United Kingdom's inspectorate system, with schools visited periodically, classrooms observed, and a report issued that described strengths and weaknesses at the school and suggestions for ways to improve.

I taught until June 1988, when I left the classroom to enter a PhD program at the University of Chicago. Oddly enough, it was not my own personal experiences as a teacher that shaped my thinking on standards. The jobs I took isolated me from their reach. My first year of teaching was in a self-contained special education class—twelve kids and two aides. All of the students were at least two years below grade level, and their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) governed the curriculum presented to each student. I then taught sixth grade for eight years in a Rapid Learner Program, in which all of the kids were on the other end of the achievement spectrum, about two years above grade level. As rapid learner teachers, my colleagues and I had unusual autonomy to select curriculum materials. Most of the books I used were pitched at approximately the eighth-grade level, many of them old and out of print so that my students wouldn't encounter them again in later grades.

What left a lasting impact on my view of standards was observing the politics of standards, especially as it evolved at the state level, from my perch in the classroom. Bill Honig had come into office as state superintendent of public instruction in 1983, full of ideas and enthusiasm. And, although we didn't know it then because the term wasn't in use, Honig was indeed a standards-based reformer. He assiduously watched over the rewriting of the state's frameworks in all academic subjects, tightened up linkages between curricular standards and existing assessment and accountability systems, and drove school reform toward the vision of a complete liberal arts education for all students.

But there were immediate troubles. First of all, the standards themselves were dominated by progressive pedagogy.¹¹ The 1985 Math Standards urged the de-emphasis of arithmetic and computation skills in the elementary grades. The 1992 version of the math standards went further

in embracing constructivist pedagogy. The content of the mathematics curriculum, the central topic of previous frameworks, did not appear until page 75. The 1987 language arts framework never used the term *whole language*, but its student-centered focus was interpreted as endorsing alternatives to code-based approaches to reading instruction. Decades later, Honig looked back on what happened to the state's reading policy and declared, "The framework was hijacked by the whole language movement."¹²

As a teacher, I enjoyed reading education history and was especially interested in the philosophical clashes between education progressives and traditionalists. In most of the debates regarding content, I leaned toward the traditionalist side, although I considered my pedagogy to be a hybrid of progressive and traditional practice. I arranged student desks in clusters of seven or eight, for example, and assigned a lot of group projects. One favorite was a stock market unit in which, after several lessons on equities and how markets function, the clusters acted as mini mutual funds in a class competition. One of the parents bought a large coffee dispenser for the room, the kids brought mugs and instant hot chocolate from home, a class set of each morning's edition of the *Sacramento Bee* was unpacked and distributed, and the first half hour or so of each day began with students' wrangling over whether to buy IBM or Ford, plotting their portfolios' progress on large sheets of graph paper hung on the walls. When I talk to former students today—they are in their forties and fifties—and tell them that I am considered an education traditionalist, they chuckle. They don't remember much that was traditional about our classroom.

At Chicago, my intellectual interests drew me to education policy. Over the course of my career as an analyst, the policies on which I have focused most intently are those featuring heated political battles, including standards. Controversial policies always involve fundamental questions about education. Common Core fits the bill. The content of curriculum, how teachers teach, who should decide expectations for kids and how high should expectations be—these are key questions that Common Core touches upon. Like my study of tracking reform in the 1990s, the question of implementation also comes into play. Once governments have decided on a policy decision, how does it become enacted in schools? Exploring that question compels an examination

of the schools system's organizational structure and the flow of policy downward from policymakers to practitioners.

Common Core has many ardent supporters and many dedicated opponents. I hope both find this book to be a fair account. I also hope readers get as much joy out of reading the book as I did researching and writing it.