An Analysis of Common Core

By Sarah DiCioccio, 8 June 2014

Abstract

The following is a researched argument on Common Core and standardized testing in the United States. It is intended to aid those in the education community, including teachers, administrators, and policy-makers in shaping the way education is approached nationally. Although Common Core is intended to better prepare students for college and careers, it does not achieve this purpose. This is primarily due to unintentional inequalities, and the lack of critical thinking and creativity required by the mandated curriculum and standardized testing Common Core encompasses. Overall, fewer resources should be dedicated to creating and administrating standardized tests, and should be reallocated to creating hands-on learning and social-emotional skill development opportunities for students.

Keywords: Common Core, standardized testing, education policy, social-emotional learning, application-based learning

Introduction

Education policy and state standards have become heavily debated issues since the approach was first developed in 1990. Today, Common Core education standards and standardized testing are highly controversial in the education community. While many policy makers and government officials support Common Core’s implementation, teachers, and those carrying out the new curriculum, see many flaws in the policy when it is put into action, resulting in Common Core becoming a highly debated subject in the education sector. The higher standards Common Core imposes are a well-intentioned and aim to improve education in the United States; however, the standardized testing and required curriculum that accompanies the new education policy is counterproductive for both students and teachers. In addition to providing unequal opportunity for students in low-income households, Common Core and standardized testing pull focus and resources from necessary hands-on learning and social-emotional skill development opportunities for students.

The Benefits of Common Core Curriculum and Standardized Testing

The basic concept behind Common Core was inspired by the No Child Left Behind policy, established by the Bush administration in 2001. The education policy dictates that every child will meet certain education standards, which resulted in
schools needing to document and prove their success. Preexisting standardized tests were specific to each individual state. Therefore, the standardized tests in Mississippi could look drastically different, in terms of difficulty, than those in Ohio. As a result, state-issued standardized tests were no longer an equal measure of student success on a national-wide scale. Common Core provides a standardized test with the same expectations for each state. At this time, the initiative has been adopted in 43 states and the District of Columbia, truly creating a nation-wide assessment tool of student achievement (Kaiser, Marjorie A).

These higher standards Common Core embodies are not only intended to improve education, but aim to close achievement gaps. By providing every student across the country the same test, grading each test the same way, and holding each student to the same set of standards, then bias and circumstance could be, theoretically, eliminated in the school systems (Farah, Yara N). In addition to limiting bias, the Common Core curriculum and standardized testing would mean that a diploma meant acquisition of the same skills, regardless of which school a student attended. Therefore, not only would Common Core result in the elimination of bias against students, but it would also serve to close the achievement gap. By promoting and enforcing rigorous academic standards, particularly in math and reading, Common Core is supposed to assure that each high school graduate has obtained the same knowledge and skills necessary for college and career readiness in order succeed in post- secondary life (Kaiser, Marjorie A).

The Disadvantages to Uniform Curriculum and Testing

Despite this intended outcome of Common Core, the policy has proven to play out much differently than anticipated. Primarily, the goal to create an unbiased and equal environment for students of all backgrounds, incomes, and orientations has not yet been realized. In their essay, “Standardized Testing as an Assault on Humanism and Critical Thinking in Education,” Noam Chomsky and Arianne Robichaud argue that one of the largest issues with Common core preventing this is the standardized test. Previous standardized tests were taken with a pencil on paper, but through Common Core, all standardized tests are taken on computers. While the advancement in technology has been beneficial for some, this is only the case for students who have grown up with access to computers and similar technology. The assumption that all students will know how to navigate a computer equally well is misguided. Many low-income students do not have regular access to a computer at home. These students lack of familiarity with the technology could negatively impact their test scores, causing online standardized tests to be unintentionally biased towards high-income students.

Common Core’s standardized tests are biased against certain demographics of students in more subtle ways, as well. Chomsky and Robichaud call upon an example of a standardized test question that asks students to determine which food is not a fruit, but a vegetable, based on whether the food has seeds. The options are: celery,
apple, orange, and pumpkin. For those students who have had ample interaction with all four foods listed here, the answer is obviously celery because it does not have seeds. However, students from low-income backgrounds may not have ever encountered pumpkin or celery, due to the fact that these foods are much more uncommon and more expensive than apples and oranges. In this instance, the test questions are more difficult for students from low-income households, creating an unequal learning opportunity for students.

Beyond the inequality of the standardized test in Common Core, the concept of “teaching to a test,” as Chomsky and Robichaud refer to it, is squandering students’ creativity and critical-thinking skills. Teachers have become required to teach to the test, as their salaries now depend on it. Many schools have adopted a salary scale that causes teacher’s salaries to be directly influenced by their students’ standardized test scores. By having a required curriculum for students across the nation, Common Core is promoting uniformity in education. However, children are naturally curious, and this is a curiosity that should be encouraged in order to help students find their passions and promote a love for learning (Chomsky, Noam, and Arianne Robichaud).

Not only does Common Core and standardized testing result in a lack of creativity, it also neglects students’ social emotional skill development. In the article, “Modern Education: a tragedy of the commons,” Smith Grinell and Colette Rabin develop the argument that standardized testing is not in the best interest of the students, but rather the short term goals of a community. For example, because high standardized test scores are the modern measure of a high quality school system, they also have the ability to improve the real estate market of a town, as more families will want to move to that area for the school system. However, as Grinell and Rabin write, standardized testing neglects, “other dimensions [social emotional skills] of schooling that most people agree are as important, or in many cases more important, than academic performance” (Grinell, 749) (Grinell, Smith, and Colette Rabin).

**Future Directions of Education Policy Reform**

Common Core ultimately aims to better prepare students for college and career readiness in order to improve the United States’ return on investment in the education system. However, college and career readiness require students to be able to apply the knowledge and skills they learned in high-school. As John J. Moye, DTE, William E. Dugger, Jr., DTE, and Kendall N. Stark-Weather, DTE write in their essay, “Is ‘Learning by doing’ Important?,” “Knowing something and knowing how to do something are very different things,” (Moye, 22). Standardized testing reinforces students to memorize information; however, memorization does not equal an understanding of application. Therefore, the current standardized testing system does not adequately prepare students for college and career success. The article suggests that the U.S. education system focus more heavily on application-based learning. Teachers often feel that students benefit from
activities and hands-on learning to support what they are learning in the classroom. However, activities such as these require more time and resources than are currently being invested into public education. And, of course, with the required curriculum and pressure to “teach to the test” that teachers face, the available time to spend on such projects is more limited than ever (Moye, Johnny J., Jr., William E. Dugger, and Kendall N. Stark-Weather).

In addition to application-based learning opportunities, there are many subject areas in skills which have been neglected overall in order for teachers to have the time to focus on standardized testing. Grinell and Rabin point out that many creative subject areas, such as music and arts, have been being steadily more and more neglected in public schools during recent years. As a result of not allowing students to follow their own interests, they have become disengaged and apathetic towards school and learning overall. (Grinell, Smith, and Colette Rabin). Therefore, it is clear that the focus in public education needs to move away from the concepts of standardized testing and required curricula, as Common Core suggests. Instead, policy makers should redirect time and resources to promoting all areas of interests for students, and allow students to follow their natural curiosity for various subjects.

Conclusion

The standardized tests that accompany Common Core are created through for-profit, private companies, such as Pearson. These companies, like all private organizations, exist for the goal of making a financial profit (Chomsky, Noam, and Arianne Robichaud). If the United States government reallocated the financial resources going towards standardized tests to longer school days and greater resources for public school systems, teachers would have the time and money to invest in hands-on learning and social-emotional skill development opportunities. Doing so would benefit students, as well the entire education sector, and prepare students for long-term success.
Works Cited


