

Jamie Gass and Charles Chieppo: Common Core Education Is Uncommonly Inadequate

The federal intrusion in schools also brings standards that are academic-lite.

By JAMIE GASS AND CHARLES CHIEPPO

Massachusetts student test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and SATs were unremarkable in the early 1990s. Then, after a landmark educational reform in 1993, state SAT scores rose for 13 consecutive years. In 2005, Bay State students became the first to score best in the nation in all grades and categories on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The students have repeated the feat each time the tests have been administered.

How to explain this turnaround? The state's educational success hinged on rigorous academic standards, teacher testing and high-quality tests that students must pass to graduate from high school. All locally developed, these three factors aligned to produce amazing results.

Unfortunately, Massachusetts dropped its own standards in 2010 to join 44 other states (and the District of Columbia) in adopting the flawed standards of the Common Core. This is an educational program sponsored by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers that has been championed by the Obama administration.

Common Core recycles a decades-old, top-down approach to education. Its roots are in a letter sent to [Hillary Clinton](#) by Marc Tucker, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, after Bill Clinton's presidential victory in 1992. The letter laid out a plan "to remold the entire American system" into a centralized one run by "a system of labor-market boards at the local, state and federal levels" where curriculum and "job matching" will be handled by government functionaries.

Today, many advocates of national education standards embrace these same anti-academic impulses. In a 2011 speech before the National Governors Association, [Bill Gates](#), whose foundation has been Common Core's major funder, called on states to essentially brush aside liberal arts departments and fund public college and university disciplines based on their job-creation potential.

Compared with Massachusetts' former standards, Common Core's English standards reduce by 60% the amount of classic literature, poetry and drama that students will read. For example, the Common Core ignores the novels of

Charles Dickens, Edith Wharton and Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn." It also delays the point at which Bay State students reach Algebra I—the gateway to higher math study—from eighth to ninth grade or later.

Stanford University Emeritus Mathematics Professor R. James Milgram—the only academic mathematician on Common Core's validation committee—refused to sign off on the final draft, describing the standards as having "extremely serious failings" and reflecting "very low expectations."

This academic-lite approach has been tried before—and it failed. In 1998, Connecticut had higher reading scores than Massachusetts. But just as the Bay State was pursuing clearly articulated academic goals, Connecticut chose a curriculum that put soft skills (such as cultural competence and global awareness) on a par with academic content. By 2005, Connecticut was one of seven states that had outsized drops in reading scores, falling by nearly 10 points in seven years.

Common Core's problems aren't just academic. Three federal laws explicitly prohibit the U.S. government from directing, supervising or controlling any nationalized standards, testing or curriculum. Yet Race to the Top, a federal education grant competition that dangled \$4.35 billion in front of states, favored applications that adopted Common Core. The Education Department subsequently awarded \$362 million to fund two national testing consortia to develop national assessments and a "model curriculum" that is "aligned with" Common Core.

The standards were generally adopted by governors' offices and state boards of education eager for Race to the Top money. The state legislatures that fund American K-12 education were largely bypassed.

Several states, including Texas, Virginia and Nebraska, declined to adopt the Common Core standards. Meanwhile, grass-roots movements in at least 15 other states are fighting them. Common Core has been put on hold in Indiana and Pennsylvania. Michigan's House of Representatives has voted not to fund implementation.

The federal government and the D.C. groups behind Common Core don't have records that inspire confidence. None of them can point to a program of theirs that has clearly improved student achievement in the past two decades. And in Massachusetts, the likely result of the Common Core is that the gains of the past 20 years will slowly but surely recede.

Mr. Gass directs the Center for School Reform at Pioneer Institute, a Boston-based think tank where Mr. Chieppo is a senior fellow.