

# The Common Core Standards: A Defense

BY GRANT WIGGINS



L

et's remind ourselves why the Common Core is just common sense.

*There is no Nebraska algebra or Virginia reading.* There is little disagreement about what constitute good outcomes in reading writing and math, yet by allowing the states to define those outcomes, place them willy-nilly in different grades, and test for them idiosyncratically we put students in a mobile society at a great disadvantage. (We also invite politically-correct science standards). To have everyone in the country studying the same subject at the same time makes it easier for families to cope with school changes and makes it far easier for teachers to find colleagues and gain expertise.

*Mississippi.* According to NAEP, only 19% of 8th grade math students are proficient or advanced. Yet according to the state's tests, 65% are proficient or advanced. For decades this has been a national scandal: the states have vastly different—and often low—standards for proficient performance, and in the weak states their students are being consistently misled on where they really stand.

---

Part of the power of the standards is that they give us *principles* to create and to argue from rather than just leave us in a world of strong opinions or naked power.

---

*NAEP as long-time harbinger of low standards.* Speaking of NAEP, for 30 years we have known that even the best state standards are tested too leniently. Note that in the math chart for Mississippi that nationally only 34% of 8th grade students are proficient or advanced. NAEP results have for *decades* revealed that what counts as proficient in every state is really a minimum competency level of performance in the wider world, as this English Professor reminds us. Long before the two assessment consortia, in which “more difficult” tests are promised, NAEP test results have consistently shown that our students are poor at meaning-making and transfer of learning—something to be highlighted in the new tests. Alas, what many critics of Common Core forget is that it has been politically untenable for states to fail or warn a third to a half of their students—yet, this is in fact the reality of where students stand in terms of genuine readiness.

*The shocking 40% remediation rate.* The whole impetus for common core was “college and workplace readiness.” The stark reality is found in the shocking number of students who must take remedial courses in college—on average 40% of students. Surely even the harshest critics of Common Core do not think this is an acceptable situation. As I recently argued, high school teachers have far too often been unaware of what college work demands, as many recent studies have shown. Why should that be tolerated?

*The power of scale.* With national standards comes an explosion of common resources, from both commercial and non-commercial sources. While lots of the anti-common-core talk bemoans the influence of behemoth companies, the fact is that Common Core permits small organizations like mine to create materials and find an audience—something we could not do when there were 50 different sets of standards. And all one has to do is look at the Teaching Channel, EngageNY, and shared lesson sites to realize that teachers now have an extraordinary trove of materials to choose from, across all the states—and those resources will only grow.

*No loss of creativity.* As I argued in a previous blog post, far too many people conflate standards with curriculum. The standards

do not inhibit curricular innovation or imaginative teaching. The standards are like building code. It is foolish to argue that building code inhibits the architect from creating a beautiful and functional dwelling. Yet, there is a lot of hysterical talk now about just such inhibition. As I argued, there is nothing in the standards or the external tests that requires slavish test prep as the local response. This is just an utter failure of imagination, a misunderstanding of the Standards, and a lack of will from educators locally.

Look, no one I know likes or wants heavy-handed accountability, stupid tests, and burdensome state regulations. I have written on why I think value-added modeling is a disaster as a single-year evaluation system, and I commend Randi Weingarten for demanding a fair lead-in time on testing yesterday. But to blame that on the common core itself is like blaming the 1st amendment for the failure of kids to stop swearing. Part of the power of the standards is that they give us *principles* to create and to argue from rather than just leave us in a world of strong opinions or naked power. It is those very standards that give us the platform as educators to demand justification for *any* process or policy that undercuts their meaning and power. (Note that Randi supports the Core.)

Far too much of the resistance to the standards is driven by adults and their issues, in my view, rather than by consideration of what kids are entitled to. Kids are entitled to a great education that prepares them for achieving their dreams. Kids are entitled to consistency across teachers and schools—and in transition from schools to colleges. Kids are entitled to teachers who focus on outcomes not merely good intentions or coverage. Without a tighter alignment between each student’s experience and the wider world we are hurting their dreams and limiting their options.

I lived through an earlier time of no common standards; I taught in an era when you could pretty much do what you wanted. It was fun for teachers but not so great for average or struggling learners. (Hard to believe, but in 1960 only half of Americans graduated from high school.) We have rightly taken on the moral burden of educating everyone; good for us. We can’t back off that commitment now.

*Grant Wiggins is the president of Authentic Education in Hopewell, NJ. Grant is perhaps best known for being the coauthor, with Jay McTighe, of Understanding by Design®, the award-winning and highly successful program and set of materials on curriculum design used all over the world, and of Schooling by Design. This article is reprinted with the generous permission of the author.*