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The Common Core in the Context of Standards-Based Reform

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I have participated recently in several debates and question and answer sessions about the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). While I have come to expect some outlandish claims, some based on legitimate fears as well as those clearly based on political opposition, I was surprised by questions implying that the standards would limit students' aspirations to pursue advanced coursework, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. The more I talked with the people raising these questions, the more I realized that their opposition to the CCSS was in fact an opposition to what they thought standards-based education meant. The CCSS were bearing the brunt of this opposition because this was their first exposure to standards-based education. There is no link between standards-based education and either lowering students' aspirations or limiting access to advanced coursework. In fact, there is solid evidence that the standards-based movement has led to a significant increase in enrollment in higher-level mathematics and science courses over the past 30 years. A quick check of Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) enrollment and success rates will support this claim.

Standards-based education is an approach to education where learning expectations, called content standards, are clearly defined, the level of achievement on these content standards are articulated as performance standards, and student mastery of these standards is measured through the use of aligned assessments. The original conception of standards-based reform included "school delivery standards," which are considered the policy makers' end of the bargain for providing students with a legitimate opportunity to learn the standards. I provide a brief chronology of the standards movement to help make clear that the CCSS are following a natural progression of standards-based education and will try to allay concerns that common standards should not restrict opportunities for excellence.

Standards-Based Reform Highlights

Standards-based approaches to education have been well-established in this country for at least 30 years. While some might quibble over the exact origin and others may wonder why I left out or included a specific highlight in my chronology below, most would agree that the following six major publications and/or laws are key markers along the path toward the Common Core State Standards. In other words, I argue that the CCSS are a logical progression in our standards-based movement.

1983: The standards-based reform movement can be traced to a report commissioned under President Ronald Reagan, called **A Nation at Risk**, that documented how far the U.S. educational system had fallen behind other nations. It led to a bipartisan interest in improving our nation's educational system and included the often-repeated quote, "*If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we*

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might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves.” The full report can be found at:

http://datacenter.spps.org/uploads/sotw_a_nation_at_risk_1983.pdf

1986: The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) produced the landmark *Science for All Americans* that was an attempt to define the key aspects of science that all Americans should know and understand in order to be considered scientifically literate. It focused on six “big ideas” of science and served as the foundation for many more specific definitions of science content standards that followed:

<http://www.project2061.org/publications/sfaa/default.htm>.

1989: The first major set of content standards was produced by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) called the *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards*, generally known as the “NCTM Standards.” The NCTM standards have served as the basis for many subsequent state content standards in mathematics (<http://standards.nctm.org>).

1989: In 1989, a coalition of state governors concerned about the “ailing state of America's public schools” proposed **Goals 2000**, a set of eight national educational goals for the nation's public schools to be achieved by the year 2000. The document created a framework for implementing the goals and provided incentives for the states to cooperate in meeting the goals. While the goals were created under President George H. Bush, they were encoded in law in 1994 under President Clinton (<http://www2.ed.gov/legislation/GOALS2000/TheAct/index.html>).

1994: The 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act, called the **Improving America's Schools Act (IASA)**, was signed into law by President Clinton. This law signaled a major change in the federal role in state education policy by requiring that all schools (and not just Title I schools) adhere to state-defined content standards and administer state-wide standards-based assessments in language arts and math at least once each in elementary, middle, and high school. While all schools were required to participate in the standards and assessments, only Title I schools were subject to the school accountability provisions of IASA (<http://www2.ed.gov/offices/OESE/archives/legislation/ESEA/brochure/iasa-bro.html>).

2001: The **No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)** of 2001 was the next revision to the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act and considerably increased the requirements of IASA. Statewide standards and assessments in language arts and mathematics were required at every grade 3-8 and once in high school. Science was required to be tested once each in elementary, middle, and high school. Unlike IASA, NCLB required all public schools to be held accountable for meeting strict accountability requirements. One of the main criticisms of NCLB was that all states were required to hold schools accountable for ensuring that essentially all students would score proficient or better by 2014 on statewide assessments, but this notion of “proficient” differed considerably across states (<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>).

2010: In part to deal with the issue of the significant variability of “proficient” across states, but also to raise the levels of expectations for students in all states, the National Governors Association and the Council for Chief State School Officers created the **Common Core State Standards (CCSS)** that were eventually adopted by 46 states. The CCSS were able to capitalize

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on lessons learned for the past 25-30 years about how best to construct content standards to ensure that the end of high school expectations line up to the requirements of credit-bearing courses in postsecondary institutions (<http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/download-the-standards>).

Excellence and Equity

One of the challenges when trying to raise the “floor” for all students is to make sure the “ceiling” is not lowered for some students. The discussion about how to support both excellence and equity goals has been going on for a long time. It is a legitimate social justice issue to ensure that all students have opportunities to learn knowledge and skills that will provide them with viable options after they leave public school. On the other hand, some are concerned that, given the limited resources of public schools, focusing on having all students reach an important performance threshold will necessarily limit the attention that teachers provide to high performing students. There is some evidence that this occurred during the No Child Left Behind era when schools were known to have focused on the “bubble students” or those scoring just below the “proficient” cutscore. This was a predictable response given that the NCLB accountability system only rewarded schools for having students score “proficient” and did not provide any incentives for schools to move students up to the more advanced levels of performance. Importantly, this was a response to the accountability system. It was not the standards that limited the performance of students.

A key accountability goal expressed as part of several national and state-led initiatives and articulated by the CCSS is that all students will be college and career ready when they graduate from high school. The CCSS are more rigorous than nearly all current state standards and help support this more challenging goal. Of course, students will vary in how well they have learned the critical knowledge and skills such that some will barely demonstrate college and career readiness by the end of the twelfth grade while others will far exceed those expectations much earlier in high school. These latter students will continue to be challenged through advanced courses (e.g., AP, IB), dual enrollment in college courses, and other opportunities as they are today. The new assessments being developed by both assessment consortia will be able to report performance for students at widely varying levels of understanding.

The standards, themselves, do not limit what type of specialized paths students may pursue in high school, whether it be a STEM-focus including calculus and physics or technical education for those targeting a specific career trajectory. If the CCSS were written to require mathematics through calculus as some claim they should (never mind that no state standards required this before), it could actually limit options for most students with interests other than STEM. The CCSS provide a solid foundation in mathematics that will allow all students to develop critical quantitative literacy that they will need to be successful in the 21st Century as well as allowing all students to pursue more advanced coursework in STEM and related fields. There is no question that teachers and schools will need to differentiate instruction and curricular offerings appropriately to provide students with a range of challenging learning opportunities. But this would be true for any set of standards and curriculum. Again, the Common Core State Standards can provide a common foundation for all students while allowing high achieving students to excel in any field they choose.