

# Policy Focus

## A Candid Look at Common Core

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT FROM THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

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### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Americans increasingly expect to be able to tailor their lives according to their unique needs and preferences. Employment practices are becoming more flexible as a growing number of Americans telecommute and use new technologies to work at odd hours and from remote locations. Americans pick and choose their entertainment at the time of their convenience.

Sadly, too much of American education ignores the benefits of such flexibility and specialization, instead moving in the opposite direction toward one-size-fits-all schooling. This includes the push for all states to adopt Common Core national standards in English-language arts (ELA) and mathematics for grades K-12. The purpose of Common Core was to provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students should know to be prepared for college and their future careers. However, there is growing concern that having uniform standards will negatively impact students, schools, and state budgets.

Rather than raising standards, experts warn that Common Core's standards are no more rigorous than the average existing state standards. Unsurprisingly, the curriculum is being used to advance a partisan political agenda, showcasing pro-labor union and pro-universal healthcare materials, along with more graphic adult books that some parents find objectionable. Common Core can also hinder the individualization sorely needed in K-12 education.

While all children need to learn the basics, there are many paths to get them there. There are better ways than embracing a national curriculum developed by Washington to ensure that children master necessary knowledge and skills.

## WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

American children deserve a first-rate education. Sadly, efforts advanced through the federal government haven't achieved that goal. As more details about Common Core standards are revealed, public concern is mounting that:

- **The Standards Lack Rigor.** Leading experts who reviewed the Common Core standards report that they're no more rigorous than the average state standards.
- **Common Core Costs are Much Higher than Anticipated.** Common Core-aligned tests are costing states twice as much as their previous state assessments.
- **Common Core is Narrowing the Curriculum.** Recommended curricula are raising concerns that great literature is being crowded out by informational texts. As schools scramble to prepare for Common Core assessments, many feel pressure to teach from the ready-made lesson plans rather than tailor courses to students' unique needs.
- **Politicization and Inappropriate Material.** There is growing controversy over the recommended Common Core materials. Texts effectively cheerleading for the Obama Administration's policies, including pro-healthcare and labor union materials. Some parents also object to the graphic adult content included in Common Core. There are better ways to ensure all children get the basic information they need!

## MORE INFORMATION

### The History of Common Core

In 2010, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) released the results of their Common Core State Standards Initiative, a unified set of standards in English-language arts (ELA) and mathematics for students in grades K-12 nationwide.

While Common Core was publicized as a state-led, voluntary initiative, in reality, it's an offer states couldn't refuse. In this regard, Common Core resembles previous federal education initiatives requiring state participation if they wanted their share of billions of federal dollars.

In 2009 President Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced that to be eligible for a portion of \$4.35 billion in Race to the Top funding, states had to adopt [college- and career-ready standards and assessments](#), namely, Common Core. They also had to join [one of two federally funded testing consortia](#): Achieve, Inc.'s, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARC) or the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). They received [\\$170 million and \\$160 million](#), respectively, in [federal grants](#) to develop Common Core-aligned assessments. States applying for waivers from

existing accountability mandates also had to agree to adopt college- and career-ready standards.

Thus far 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted Common Core, while Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia have not. Minnesota has adopted the ELA standards only. The goal of Common Core is ensuring students are college- and career-ready, and assessments aligned with the Common Core standards are scheduled to be administered during the 2014-15 school year.

Common Core is the latest standards initiative involving the federal government undertaken in recent decades.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), enacted in 2002, required regular testing and promised that by the year 2014, all students would be proficient in reading and math. Under NCLB, schools must make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward that goal or face sanctions. Common Core focuses more on standards and testing, but loosens the consequences for schools and states that do not demonstrate improved student achievement. Importantly, unlike NCLB, Common Core has no express school choice provision allowing parents to move their children to better schools if necessary.

While most Americans agree that standards are integral to accountability and improved student performance, Common Core has raised several concerns among policymakers, the public, and parents.

## Are Common Core Standards Rigorous?

A leading argument for Common Core is that all students will be held to universally high standards. Several leading experts, however, contend that the Common Core ELA and math standards are less rigorous than many states' previous standards. In fact, University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education Dean Andrew C. Porter, an early supporter of Common Core, noted that the Common Core standards are "firmly in the middle of the pack of current curricula," and do not emphasize the basic skills that students in top performing countries are expected to master.

Research indicates less than one-third (32 percent) of high school graduates are prepared to succeed in a four-year college. Standards that better prepare students are clearly needed. Yet several experts, including those on Common Core review committees, conclude that the concept of college-readiness is weak, geared toward minimal competencies such as graduating high school or avoiding remedial classes at two-year community colleges.

University of Arkansas Professor Sandra Stotsky and former U.S. Department of Education senior policy advisor Ze'ev Wurman warn that Common Core's notion of college- and career-readiness "may decrease, not increase, student achievement."

## A Politicized Standard

A number of experts serving on Common Core review committees who were supportive of

the standards in theory now express concern that **academic rigor was compromised for the sake of political buy-in.**

For example, there was **only one math-content expert** on the 25-member Common Core validation committee, Stanford University mathematician James Milgram. He explained that numerous questionable content decisions were approved to make Common Core standards “**acceptable to the special interest groups involved.**” Milgram concluded that the Common Core is “in large measure a **political document**...written at a very low level and does not adequately reflect our current understanding of why the math programs in the high achieving countries give dramatically better results.”

Controversy also erupted in 2012 when it was reported that recommended Common Core ELA **informational texts** included a *New Yorker* article that was sympathetic to the Affordable Care Act, also referred to as ObamaCare. President Obama’s **Executive Order 13423**, “Strengthening Federal Environmental, Energy, and Transportation Management,” was another recommended informational text. This school year it was also revealed that **pro-labor union reading material** was being assigned to third graders as part of the recommended Common Core curriculum under the auspices of teaching students about American rights and responsibilities.

Another controversy erupted this year when it was revealed that **non-academic, personal information is**

**being collected** through the **Common Core testing consortia** about students and their parents, including family income, parents’ political affiliations, their religion, and students’ disciplinary records—all **without parental consent.** That information, including **Social Security numbers** of students in at least one state, is being **shared with third-party data collection firms**, prompting a growing number of parents to **opt their children out of Common Core.** Senator Edward Markey (D-Mass.) also sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan last month demanding to know **why his department had authorized such expansive data collection.**

## Common Core’s Costs

Official estimates indicate that for every \$1 in federal funding states will receive for adopting Common Core they’ll have to **spend \$4 to implement it.** Altogether Common Core will cost participating states **nearly \$16 to \$17 billion.** The cost to school districts is projected to reach **\$166 million** nationwide over the next five years. This year state lawmakers also experienced sticker shock when PARC and SBAC rolled out the new assessments—which were twice as expensive on average as states’ previous assessments, about **\$22 to \$27** per test.

## Parents, Not Government Mandates, Are the Best Accountability Mechanism

Secretary Duncan has stated that our current schooling system is “**outmoded and broken.**” He

also insists that having various state standards is “absolutely ridiculous” because, “[We are all part of one system](#) of learning that begins at birth and never stops.”

For all the noble intentions associated with Common Core, it rests on the faulty premise that a single, centralized entity knows what education is best for [all 55 million students nationwide](#).

Most Americans agree that education in the United States needs an overhaul; however, centralizing critical education decisions in Washington, D.C., further isolates parents and the primary accountability role they play.

University of Arkansas professor Jay P. Greene explains, “Nationalized approaches lack a mechanism for continual improvement. ... Once we set national standards, curriculum, and assessments, they are nearly impossible to change. If we discover a mistake or wish to try a new and possibly better approach, we can’t switch. [We are stuck with whatever national choices we make for a very long time](#). And if we make a mistake we will impose it on the entire country.”

This is a [leading concern](#) among numerous experts. They advise rather than require a single set of academic standards, policymakers should review the evidence in states that had the top standards already (including [Massachusetts and California](#)) and encourage states to adopt similar ones. Policymakers can also choose to have results of students from their states on ongoing international reading, math,

and science assessments reported separately from national results to see how they compare.

Ultimately, though, parental choice programs are the best way to ensure that students are educated to high standards, without compromising the diverse education options needed to meet their unique, individual needs. Importantly, unlike accountability initiatives involving the federal government, all schools face immediate rewards for success or consequences for failure under school choice, since parents are empowered to enroll or transfer their children in chosen schools as they see fit.

### **School Choice Creates Standards Without Discouraging Customization**

This year, [nearly 245,000 students](#) attend schools of their parents’ choice through 32 voucher and tax-credit scholarship programs operating in 16 states and D.C., as well as one educational savings account (ESA) program in Arizona.

Fifteen years of [scientific research](#) consistently show that participating students have higher graduation and college attendance rates, as well as improved reading and math scores than their peers. These are compelling findings, especially since students using these programs are more likely to come from low-income families and had previously attended underperforming public schools.

Importantly, private schools get results without the inflexibility of a cookie-cutter education system. Private schools participating in parental choice programs offer an array of curricular choices, from Montessori to back-to-basics. Most private schools administer standardized tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or Terra Nova, and report results directly to parents.

Thus regardless of the particular academic program offered, private schools must continue offering the rigorous academic programs children need and parents think are best—or risk losing students to other schools.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

You can help improve education for all students and fight needless, government micromanaging of our educational institutions!

- **Get Informed:** Learn more about Common Core and education issues! Visit:
  - [Independent Women's Forum](#)
  - [Heartland Institute](#)
  - [Pioneer Institute](#)
- **Talk to Your Friends:** Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

- **Become a Leader in the Community:** Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.
- **Remain Engaged Politically:** Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

## ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

The Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

We rely on the support of people like you! Please visit us on our website [www.iwf.org](http://www.iwf.org) to get more information and consider making a donation to IWF.

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