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Dueck, J. (2016). *Common sense about Common Core: Overcoming education's politics*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.

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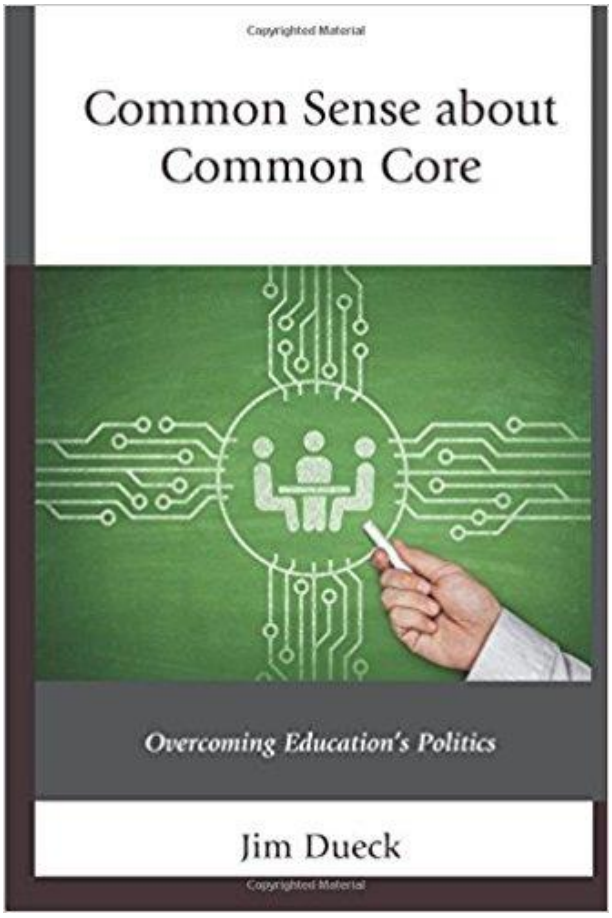

Jim Dueck titles his book *Common Sense about Common Core*. He promises to use research to challenge the misrepresentations offered by the Common Core's opponents. He accuses the right of misrepresenting the Common Core as federal overreach, and the left of supporting teachers at the expense of children. Unfortunately, despite the book's proclamations, the author is decidedly in favor of the standards, has cherry picked studies that support his claims, and offers little engagement with competing studies nor competing philosophies. At times, competing perspectives are raised in a sentence only to be dismissed without time devoted to understanding their arguments. For this reason, the book is a piece of propaganda, rather than, as I had hoped, a thoughtful guide and assessment of the Common Core. This review, therefore, is an effort, first, to assess Dueck's arguments against what he left out and, second, to suggest that debates over the Common Core are also about the purposes of democratic education.

Neem, J. N. (2017, October 18). Review of *Common sense about Common Core: Overcoming education's politics,* by J. Dueck. *Education Review*, *24*. http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/er.v24.2253

Dueck rightly argues that the Common Core emerged at the impetus of governors and chief state school officers, not the federal government, following the failure of efforts to create national subject area standards under Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Yet, he writes, "polls demonstrate that much of the blame for public opposition is based on the belief that Common Core is a federal initiative" (p. 12-13). In contrast, he argues, the standards are voluntary and determined at the state, not federal, level. Yet these circumstances do not make the Common Core a grassroots movement. The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers relied on the Gates Foundation to fund their initiative, and hired the consulting firm Student Achievement Partners to develop the standards. The standards were developed by foundation leaders, business-oriented nonprofits, and testing companies. Moreover, under President Barack Obama's Race to the Top initiative, states were encouraged to adopt the Common Core standards to access additional money (Neem, 2015).

In addition to pointing out misrepresentations of the Common Core by conservatives fearful of federal overreach, Dueck throughout his book also blames teachers' unions, which, he argues, "exist to represent their members and not the students; therefore, this bias prevents the school system from being highly accountable and transparent" (p. x). This statement is good rhetoric, but again, important context is missing. The phrase sounds damning, but in fact all unions exist to protect adults in the workplace and to give them agency against more powerful employers. The right to form unions is, for this reason, a civil and human right, and fundamental to freedom in the workplace.

That said, there is no doubt that teachers' unions are part of a complex problem, especially in large urban areas. But Dueck does not assess them as part of the problem, but instead as the fundamental problem. He ignores how many of the country's highest performing states and districts are unionized, while many of the country's lowest performing states and districts are not unionized (DiCarlo, 2010). This situation would suggest that unions *per se* are not the issue. Rather, the questions are how to provide a high quality education to all students given America's racial segregation and economic stratification, and how to do so in regions overseen by large educational bureaucracies.

Dueck's answer is widespread quantifiable standardized assessments. He writes with wonder that "for the first time in the history of education, teaching performance is quantifiable" (p. 113). We can now evaluate every American teacher's specific contribution to student learning. Therefore, he continues, teachers "should be paid for what really matters: student learning and success" (p. 131). Teachers, he claims, do not want to be accountable, so their unions resist any effort to ensure that American classrooms have effective educators. "The power of teachers' unions should never be underestimated and cannot be overestimated," he warns, ignoring the power of all the other well-funded players in education reform, including conservative think tanks and the largest foundations in the world (p. 146). When some teachers complain that not all subjects are assessed, his answer is to create tests for those, too.

Yet linking student performance to individual teachers is not common sense; it's statistically suspect. Student performance depends on many factors, including outside of school factors such as poverty. Within schools, institutional culture also matters, and this culture is generated not by one teacher but by teachers, administrators, and students and their families collectively. Moreover, every teacher is dependent on the work of other teachers. For this reason, the American

Statistical Association (2014), which represents neither unions nor education professors, concluded that using Value-Added Measurement (VAM) formulae to assess specific teachers is to misunderstand the limits of what VAM can measure. First, they note, a "majority of the variation in test scores is attributable to factors outside of the teacher's control" (American Statistical Association, 2014, p. 7). More important in relation to Dueck's argument, VAM scores have "large standard errors mak[ing] rankings unstable, even under the best scenarios for modeling" (American Statistical Association, 2014, p. 7). Thus, statisticians argue, VAM scores should not be used to assess individual teachers.

But, alas, Dueck is convinced that reasonable people cannot disagree about the Common Core and the use of VAM and high stakes tests to improve student performance. For this reason, he finds it astounding that the Common Core has become a political question. In chapter four, he blames interest groups and misinformed presidential candidates for public misunderstandings of the Common Core. In chapter 5, "Trust or Accountability," he argues that policymakers better embrace national standards because trust in government and unions is declining. If teachers and policymakers want to justify the taxes that they are raising for education, they need to earn citizens' trust. This is true, as far as it goes, but again only scratches the surface and misses the larger context. Dueck never pauses to ask why trust is declining, something that historians and social scientists have been asking for some time.

In the case of public schools, for a long time Americans worried about public schools in general, but ranked their local public school highly. We knew that there were problem schools, especially in high poverty urban areas and in rural areas. Education reformers also knew that schools, even when successful, could always do better. Starting in the 1970s, however, conservative think tanks and politicians launched a full-scale attack on all public institutions. This story can be followed in many books, including, for example, Angus Burgin's *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression* (2012) or Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos* (2015). The use of the trust vs. accountability framework and its political origins and purposes, can also be traced in Beryl Radin's *Challenging the Performance Movement: Accountability, Complexity, and Democratic Values* (2006) and Donald P. Moynihan's *The Dynamics of Performance Management: Constructing Information and Reform* (2008).

Indeed, the politics of the Common Core reflect more than simply misinformed voters and presidential candidates. They represent a broader shift in American governance shaped by a purposeful attack on the legitimacy of public institutions. Public schools and Social Security have been the hardest to take down because they have widespread support among the middle and upper class. By reframing the debate over public schools as one about unions, reformers have had much rhetorical success, since unions are significantly less popular in American public opinion than either teachers or local schools. Yet, as we see with the current Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, we have also authorized a full-scale attack on the existence of public common schools. There is no doubt that public institutions must earn citizens' trust, and that all public employees have a duty to embrace effective reforms that improve the delivery of public goods. But Dueck offers little historical context to explain declining trust. Is public trust declining because of widespread institutional failure, because of a decades-long attack on public institutions, or both? By evading these questions, Dueck presents the Common Core as a necessary response to institutional failure. But what if Americans' loss of faith in public schools has more to do with politics than the schools themselves?

One might add that relying on high-stakes tests to evaluate individual teachers is not only a questionable practice, but defies the common sense Dueck claims to offer. Many of the world's top-performing school systems invest less on assessing teachers at the output end than on investing in teachers on the input side, what Jal Mehta, in his brilliant book *The Allure of Order* (2013) calls "inverting the pyramid" (p. 269). After examining the history of education reform in the United States, and noting that since the 19th century policymakers have sought to impose standardized assessments to overcome perceived system failings without fostering significant improvements, Mehta asks us to rethink rather than to rinse and repeat. "The entire American educational sector," Mehta argues, "was put together backwards" (2013, p. 269). We fail to recruit the best people into teaching, and then we seek to assess and coerce improvement through bureaucratic means and standardized assessments. We do not respect teachers. Following the model of successful nations, Mehta argues, Americans need to invest in teachers by recruiting among the best college graduates, which would mean reasonable pay, providing better clinical training in their subjects and pedagogy, and then offering teachers the autonomy and status of other professionals. Yes, teachers need to earn citizens' trust, but they also need to be trusted if we want America's most talented scholars to become teachers. Teaching is too complex a task to be measured by a few standardized assessments. Indeed, doing so can cause real harm to the goods and practices that help students learn and grow (Mehta, 2013, p. 269).

One way that high-stakes tests and VAM assessments could harm America's schools is by narrowing the curriculum because teachers feel too much pressure to focus on test scores. They will then teach to the test. Certainly, as Grant Wiggins (2005) has argued, we must always plan backward. Teaching to the test is legitimate if the ends are the right ones, and the means chosen to achieve those ends are appropriate and effective. This requires asking ourselves whether the Common Core sets out appropriate ends. First, we must clear some space. Dueck argues that citizens and political leaders are wrong to conflate standards with curriculum. The Common Core, he argues, sets standards, but "curriculum content is the discretion of the state and local school boards" (pp. 24-25). There is some truth in what he says. Unlike earlier standards efforts, the Common Core does not stipulate what specific knowledge one must learn in every subject, but instead outlines a set of practices or methods that apply to the domains of knowledge. The specific choices of what to teach and how to teach it remain up to states and localities. This is an important distinction between the Common Core and the earlier standards movement under Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton.

Yet the standards, when combined with the kinds of high-stakes assessments that governors of both parties have embraced, and that President Obama encouraged in Race to the Top, can have a downstream impact on the curriculum. As schools and teachers focus on the test, they have less time to focus on other curricular matters, including teaching subject matter knowledge. To Dueck, protests about narrowing the curriculum are "a meaningless slogan" because the curriculum is, he believes, too "crowded" (pp. 118-19). Students simply do not have time to master the "basics" when they are expected to learn art, physical fitness, science, and social studies. Dueck offers a legitimate argument, but it is not "common sense." Many parents and citizens believe that access to these areas of knowledge is essential to the kind of public education they want to offer America's children. Dueck disagrees, but he offers no acknowledgement that there might be reasons to disagree with him.

Considering the Common Core will have an impact on the curriculum because

teachers can, and should, Dueck argues, teach to achieve the curriculum's goals (teaching to the test), does the Common Core offer the right ends? The answer to this question goes to the heart of why we engage in public education. The Common Core limits the purposes of public education to "college and career readiness." In other words, the Common Core presumes that the primary purpose of public schools is to generate human capital in order to prepare people for the workforce. Is this enough? Or does democratic education ask more from us? What about preparing citizens? What about our collective obligation to foster the capacities of each child? What about bringing a diverse society together in common institutions? These ideals animated the founders of our public schools, including Horace Mann. Are they no longer relevant?

Given that the Common Core focuses on skills, moreover, what value does subject matter knowledge hold? Studies make clear that one cannot think critically without this type of knowledge (Hirsch, 2016). In the case of the mathematics standards, skills and content are aligned. The goal is to help students think about the subject matter of mathematics. In the language arts, history and social studies, and the sciences, however, the emphasis is on skills without content. Ideally, these skills would encourage students to learn the subject matter more effectively. Yet this will only happen if the pressure to raise test scores does not lead teachers to drill skills without taking the time to offer insights that can only come when students engage in the richness of what the academic subjects offer. One hopes that the Common Core will deepen students' engagement with subject matter, but there are good reasons to fear that it may do the opposite.

These questions raise an issue with a long and divisive history in discussions of liberal education. In many ways, the Common Core is an effort to revive the colonial grammar school, which was replaced after the American Revolution with private academies and public high schools. Grammar schools focused on technical mastery of linguistic skills, whereas the new public high schools provided young people access to academic knowledge. What is the relationship between skills and knowledge? The Common Core emphasizes the trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric), updated with modern terms. And Dueck is correct that the trivial skills are vital to developing students' capabilities to learn: "when teachers argue that their testing programs force them to narrow their instruction to basic skills, poor results on system tests demonstrate that a poor job is being done to ensure mastery of basic skills" (p. 119). Yet do we want students to use these skills to learn knowledge? Or do we want these skills primarily because that's what employers are seeking in graduates? Can we teach skills without knowledge? These questions have been asked since Plato's time, and they continue to be relevant today.

In conclusion, Dueck's claim to offer "common sense about Common Core" does not achieve its stated goals. Because Dueck offers a one-sided argument that never engages with contending philosophies of education and contradictory evidence, he offers a poor guide for making sense of the Common Core's virtues and vices. Instead, he provides insight into the minds of the Common Core's advocates, who do not see themselves as engaging in politics. Dueck believes that we should be "overcoming education's politics," as the subtitle of his book states, but in a democracy, education is always a political question. We disagree sometimes because, as Dueck concludes, we do not understand an issue well or are misled by special interest groups. We also disagree sometimes because thoughtful, reasonable people do not assess the evidence the same way, or because we disagree on the moral and philosophical goals of democratic education. And so the conversation must continue.

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