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The War on Inequality, Global Inferiority & Low Standards: Common Core State Standards

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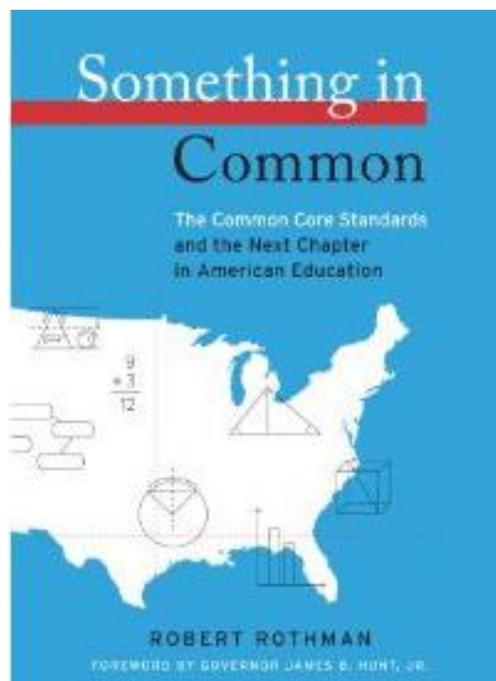
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This short volume projects the voice of a military staff officer writing a history of a victorious campaign. Unfortunately, winning a campaign (the development and adoption of the common core) is not the same as winning the war (actually implementing the core effectively and universally). If winning the war is further

defined as actually achieving national educational equity and maintaining the economic primacy of the United States (two key and explicit common core rationales presented in this book), this campaign may prove to be a showy yet ineffective diversion.



The book is military in its precision; methodical, orderly, and well-organized. Within chapters, points are made and then typically followed by enumerated and well-aligned sub points. **Robert Rothman** describes the historical development of national standards efforts over the past thirty years and then marches through critical material defining the standards, the assessments, implementation, and challenges. This organization is an asset making the volume readily accessible and understandable.

It is a staff officer's perspective; the narrative and the memorialized conflicts are those of politicians, vested interest groups and policy wonks. It is not the voice of field practitioners. There is little reference to educators other than through their national organizations. A review of the endnotes reifies that this is a report of a political campaign. News reports and comments by

vested interest organizations and think-tanks are the most frequent citations. There are references to descriptive reports and books but peer-reviewed research references are almost completely absent. However, beginning with the *Foreword*, it is immediately clear that this is the voice of a partisan supporter whose career has been almost exclusively inside-the-beltway and predominately in think tanks.

A comprehensive chronology of the various conflicts and battles is provided but there is a bias. When explaining how George W. Bush was influenced by the "Texas miracle," the ensuing controversy was dispatched in a half-sentence which said the miracle may have been "... over-stated and masked high drop-out rates." (p. 47). In the eyes of many observers, this is an understatement. Likewise, the heading "Some Opposition Emerges," (p.113) catalogues a rather substantial list of "some"

opposition. A third example is in the reference to the use of artificial intelligence in scoring open-ended responses. Despite the thorny, seemingly intractable, unresolved challenges of this effort, they are minimized with the phrase, “. . . still some problems... .” (p. 159).

The purpose of the book is to be the “definitive volume” describing the development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The book summarizes this topic and the major related activities succinctly and accurately. Yet, it falls short in not thoroughly examining major philosophical assumptions, thoroughly developing critical concerns, and omitting key technical issues. Nevertheless, if it is not the definitive volume, it earns its place on the bookshelf along with works that explore the omissions.

The foreword is by North Carolina’s Governor James Hunt who proclaims the foundations of CCSS as equity, global competition, and the independence and integrity of the standards development process (pp. x-xi). These three principles are repeated in various ways throughout the book. The major omission is the failure of the book to make a rational, scientific or convincing case that these three proclamations – particularly the first two – are, in fact, true or will become true through the CCSS effort.

The introductory chapter, titled “A New American Icon,” portrays the standards as being no less than the “third revolution” in

American education (p. 7). The first chapter describes the recently unveiled standards and the verities of these standards while the second describes the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century efforts at developing state and national standards. The third chapter describes the development of the CCSS. These three chapters are basically historical and include a sound summary of *Goals 2000*, the differences between states, the effect of the NCTM standards, President Clinton’s failed effort at establishing a national test, and the perceived flaws of different state standards under NCLB. For those seeking a brief summary, this section serves well.

The fourth chapter, “Great Expectations: How the Common Core Stands Apart,” is a general description of the structure, content and various facets of the standards themselves. For readers desiring such an overview, the chapter may be among the most valuable in the book.

Chapter 5 describes the state adoptions of the standards. Perhaps the most interesting aspect is how the normal state curriculum adoption process was side-stepped. Pronounced as a virtue and as a symbol of robust action (rather than federal dictates), three vested interest organizations basically did an end-around on the federal as well as the state policy making apparatus. Other than token activities, there was no local involvement in these decisions. Basically, the Council of Chief State school Officers (CCSSO), the National Governors’ Association (NGA) and the National Association of State Boards of Education

(NASBE) were the decision-makers and they were generously supported by federal grants and Gates Foundation money. A sub-group of NGA, ACHIEVE, was the key standards development organization.

Note that none of these organizations are elected or legally appointed to be making educational policy decisions. Further, a number of critical decision making meetings were closed (p. 53) and the standards development process was also closed except for short review windows. Pearson and McGraw Hill, who have enormous corporate vested interests in the standards and the process, were heavily involved. It is arguably true that this may have been the only way to accomplish the task of developing a “consensus” set of standards. However, when the NGA and CCSSO self-published a glowing “validation” of their own work (p.75), an independent reviewer could reach the conclusion that this affair is a little too cozy.

To its credit, a good portion of the chapter lists the objections, debates and conflicts surrounding the CCSS and its adoption. However, most of these are treated in a single paragraph.

The implementation of the standards is the following chapter. This chapter lists a cornucopia of activities that give the overall impression of a massive and broad implementation front. However, as the author reminds us, earlier efforts at “standards based reform crashed on the shoals of implementation.” Simply revising curriculum documents does not mean that classroom practices change. Arguably the

most vital area, professional development, is given a scant two pages and places great faith in multi-state consortia. The shortcomings of hotel ballroom inservice programs are recognized, but the reader is left adrift as to what besides on-line training will be used. In an economy where federal, state, and local budget cuts have virtually eliminated capacity building activities, the auguries are dark. The author is likely prescient in noting the roles of textbook and software corporations and the coercive effects of high-stakes assessment – which may prove the strongest of implementation tools. However, these have not proven decisive in the past. All in all, the implementation steps represent the most difficult set of problems and have the weakest proposed solutions.

The two assessment consortia, to which the standards are inseparably welded, are given expansive treatment in Chapter 7 and a great deal of attention is paid to “authentic” and “higher order” assessments to which the consortia have committed themselves – with some backing off. Allusions are made to the incorporation of classroom assessments in the accountability system but these are not well-developed and only vaguely referenced. The author recognizes that open-ended, constructed response assessments are far more expensive and will likely pose serious cost and practical obstacles.

Not addressed is the contradiction between the requirements that a test that must be standardized and uniform for fair accountability decisions cannot also be

open-ended. Vermont's defunct portfolio system is repeatedly extolled as an exemplar. Not mentioned is the fact that this system failed because of this same inherent contradiction and high costs.

Some of the most interesting and useful information is included in examples of the test content, but whether this can be brought to scale is an open question. Readers new to the CCSS will find this informative.

The final chapter of the book, Challenges, comprehensively lists the obstacles. They form quite a daunting array and the reader is left to speculate as to whether the book's up-beat overall narrative will or can be realized. Among the more prominent obstacles:

- Costs – The \$330 million of federal grants were for developing assessments only. Administration and scoring are not covered. One assumes the states will be asked to pay for these costs. This could be a huge and determinative factor in the fate of the effort. Further, items such as replenishing the pool of test items calls for an ongoing and unceasing effort as test items move through the cycle and are released to teachers. Field testing also represents untallied costs.
- Artificial Intelligence – Tests are to be scored by computer. In theory, this will automatically adapt to the infinite number of student learning paths. This is said to still have some problems (p. 159) although other sources say the

development of the procedure is probably impossible.

- Professional development, as noted, is necessary but the capacity is weak and unproven. Twenty years of test-based accountability has not provided us with a clear path for resolving this problem.

Critical Concerns

While the book is well-organized and complete in most regards, there are a number of important issues that are not addressed, could have been better developed, or simply don't enjoy external, independent verification.

"We need standards in order to be economically competitive – This claim is presented in the foreword and is repeated throughout the book. It is arguably *the* linchpin rationale for uniform national standards. However, this claim is simply asserted and never documented. When examining the pillars of economic development, performance on international tests is neither a predictor nor correlate of economic well-being. This unexamined premise is mindlessly echoed by CCSS advocates as well as by Secretary Duncan and President Obama. It is troubling that this most prominent foundation has no demonstrated basis in fact.

High scoring nations have uniform and high national standards – As Whitehurst and others point out, this is, at best, an uncertain claim. Nations are split. Some decentralized systems score high and some centralized systems score lower. Interestingly, PISA points out the importance of decentralized

curriculum, instruction and autonomy in high scoring countries.

International Benchmarking – No evidence is presented that international benchmarking of tests will advantage children or the economy although it is repeatedly touted as a defining virtue of the CCSS. Assuming that certain characteristics of a culture are causative of other attributes is to engage in the fallacy of the “false cause.” Correlation is not causation. South Sea islanders used this same form of reasoning to justify their adoption of the “cargo cult” as a means of economic development.

Equity – This is also presented as a rationale for uniform high, national standards. Unfortunately, the last 20 years of standards and test-based accountability has not resulted in a closing of the achievement gap despite repeated assurances by standards advocates. Alas, as the author recognizes, standards, by themselves, do nothing to mitigate these disparities. Little on the horizon indicates this will change. The effect of repeating this assertion that standards will resolve inequities is to mislead society and ignore the huge wealth and social disparities that characterize our nation.

Top Down Accountability – For the CCSS to work, they must be coupled to tests and top-down accountability (p.135). In reviewing the effectiveness of this approach, the National Research Council says such an approach will not be sufficiently robust to close the achievement gap.

College and career ready – The claim is made that work skills are the same as college skills (p.54). This statement is not likely to be endorsed by many labor economists. In fact, the demonstrable span of necessary skills is so vast as to make such broad and vague claims ridiculous.

Research Based - The college and career ready standards are said to be based on research (p.66) but none is quoted. Instead of evidence, testimonials by Haycock, Hunt, the Center for American Progress, the Heritage Foundation, Education Sector, Rudy Crew and others are provided. By page 99, the research is reduced to being “not rock solid.” This standard is then further reduced to “best available evidence.” Then, the criteria are reduced yet again to the statement that the CCSS will have to be implemented before we can determine “if they are indeed valid.” (p.99). This leaves the evidence of the validity of the CCSS as the consensus opinions of the privately convened and selected committee members.

The Negative Claims - Arguably more interesting than what the standards are, is the litany of proclamations throughout the book of what they are not:

- They are “not national” or “federal” standards – The nationally uniform nature of these standards and the fact they must be adopted before a state can receive federal RttT money or a NCLB waiver makes this a claim that cannot be reasonably accepted. To contend otherwise requires too close a parsing of words.

- The standards are “not imposed.” (p. xi). As noted directly above, the threat of losing all federal education aid casts a strong and compulsory shadow on states.
- They are “not a national curriculum.” – The author frequently repeats this assertion. Learning standards are specified for every grade level and are accompanied by “anchor standards,” learning progressions, “staircases,” examples, “well-known materials,” and “sample performance tasks.” The standards are accompanied by the mantra that high stakes consequences are necessary to hold schools “accountable.” The author also notes, more than once, that teachers will conform their teaching to the test specifications. The claim is empty and semantic. It’s a national curriculum.
- “Standards do not transform schools.” – This is frequently repeated and is certainly a true statement on its face. However, the magical properties the main narrative extols exudes exactly the opposite message. There is a contradiction between the expressed claims and the unstated claims.
- Math and reading standards do not represent all of the necessary aspects of education. This is another obvious truism but it has to avoid the body of research that indicates this form of accountability system narrows the curriculum.

Predictions

Rothman correctly poses the question as to whether the CCSS will ultimately be a success or “whether they will create just another set of tests?” (p.156)

While the author recognizes the problems before the CCSS, at least to the point of briefly describing them, they do not shake his faith in the efficacy of the reform. A reasonable person could look at these same problems and conclude that they are of such magnitude as to be dispositive of the effort.

The primary obstacle is the ideological faith in the CCSS, obscured by gilding in the text’s countless testimonials. This myopia prevents seeing the research on test based accountability systems. They have only weak (and even negative) effects. The complete absence of a “research base” in this book is indicative and troubling. To be sure, the CCSS is likely to be qualitatively better than other efforts, nationally uniform and (perhaps) driven by uniform cut-off scores. This does not mean, however, that this monolithic structure will be effective. Increasing the outward elegance and uniformity of a non-functioning system is no measure of its workability.

The second dispositive factor is cost. In an economically challenged nation (with a strong political faction contending we are spending too much on schools) and major federal cuts on the horizon, it is doubtful that the effort will be funded adequately. The federal grants only cover development costs. The costs of test administration, professional development, test

replenishment, and test scoring may simply prove too huge. State governments may prove incapable (or perhaps unwilling) of providing new expenditures of this magnitude. Then there are the unanticipated costs. A totally unknown cost rests, for example, in the fact there is no assessment of the hardware and software capabilities of local schools to carry-out the computer based assessments. Massive investments in computers and software may be required.

Third, higher order skill testing is basically incompatible with a standardized, reliable, accountability based approach. Open-ended responses as well as formative and adaptive testing go beyond the limits of the item response theory assumptions used to design the tests. In other words, the promised sophistication of the tests outruns the reality. Add to this the theoretical (and not ready for prime time) use of artificial intelligence to score open-ended items and the probability of success becomes quite low.

Finally, the promise of equity requires investment in social and support programs. Rothman overlooks this vital necessity. Never explicitly stated, the book embraces an assumption that schools can single-handedly overcome poverty -- while providing richer and higher levels of educational experiences to all. A sobering fact is that Goals 2000 and NCLB failed to

register a single turn-around of a major urban school district. There is nothing to indicate that this new version will overcome the failures of the earlier attempts. It simply beats the dead horse more uniformly and with elegance.

But does this mean that the effort will be a complete loss? For those districts who had a chaotic curriculum (and there are many) the alignment of subject matters by grade, the integration of commercial instructional materials, and the establishment of a clear direction represent an undeniable improvement.

But will it provide equity, close the achievement gap, or bring a new promise of higher level and richer experiences to our most needy? There is nothing here that gives much promise. Most likely, we will "create just another set of tests." Most likely, the grandiose promises will continue as they have in the past (and will still carry the same name) but will be down-scaled to fit the purse and the limitations of our measures.

The CCSS campaign may be won but that campaign will not win the war.

About the Reviewer

William J. Mathis is the Managing Director of the National Education Policy Center, University of Colorado Boulder. He previously served as superintendent of schools for the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union in Brandon, Vermont and was a national superintendent of the year finalist as well as Vermont superintendent of the year. Earlier, he was Deputy Assistant Commissioner in New Jersey and worked with a number of colleges and universities on a full-time or adjunct basis. He has published and presented to a wide variety of professional and lay audiences on finance, assessment, accountability, school vouchers, cost-effectiveness, education reform, history, special education, and Constitutional issues. He serves as a member of the Vermont state board of education and on the national board of directors of the Rural School and Community Trust. He previously served on the board for the Association for Education Finance and Policy.



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