

The Education Writers Association casts its narrowing gaze on Boston

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Many billions have been spent, and continue to be spent, promoting the Common Core Standards and their associated consortium tests, PARCC and SBAC. Nonetheless, the “Initiative” has been stopped in its tracks largely by a loose coalition of unpaid grassroots activists. That barely-organized amateurs could match the many well-organized, well-paid professional organizations, tells us something about Common Core’s natural appeal, or lack thereof. Absent the injection of huge amounts of money and political mandates, there would be no Common Core.

The Common Core Initiative (CCI) does not progress, but neither does it go away. Its alleged primary benefit—alignment both within and across states (allegedly producing valid cross-state comparisons)—continues to degrade as participating states make changes that suit them. The degree of Common Core adoption varies greatly from state to state, and politicians’ claims about the degree of adoption even more so. CCI is making a mess and will leave a mess behind that will take years to clean up.

How did we arrive in this morass? Many would agree that our policymakers have failed us. Politicians on both sides of the aisle naively believed CCI’s “higher, deeper, tougher, more rigorous” hype without making any effort to verify the assertions. But, I would argue that the corps of national education journalists is just as responsible.

Too many of our country’s most influential journalists accept and repeat verbatim the advertising slogans and talking points of Common Core promoters. Too many of their stories source information from only one side of the issue. Most annoying, to those of us eager for some journalistic balance, has been some journalists’ tendency to rely on Common Core promoters to identify the characteristics and explain the motives of Common Core opponents.

An organization claiming to represent and support all US education journalists sets up shop in Boston next week for its annual “National Seminar”. The Education Writers Association’s (EWA’s) national seminars introduce thousands of journalists to sources of information and expertise. Many sessions feature journalists talking with other journalists. Some sessions host teachers, students, or administrators in “reports from the front lines” type panel discussions. But, the remaining and most ballyhooed sessions feature non-journalist experts on education policy fronting panels with, typically, a journalist or two hosting. Allegedly, these sessions interpret “all the research”, and deliver truth, from the smartest, most enlightened on earth.

Given its central role, and the profession it represents, one would expect diligence from EWA in representing all sides and evidence. Indeed, EWA claims a central purpose “to help journalists get the story right.”

Rummaging around EWA’s web site can be revealing. I located website material classified under their “Common Core” heading: 192 entries overall, including 6 EWA Radio broadcast transcripts, links to 19 research or policy reports, 1 “Story Lab”, 8 descriptions of and links to organizations useful for reporters to know, 5 seminar and 3 webinar agendas, 11 links to reporters’ stories, and 42 links to relevant multimedia presentations.

I was interested to learn the who, what, where, and how of EWA sourcing of education research and policy expertise. In reviewing the mass of material the EWA classifies under Common Core, then, I removed that which was provided by reporters and ignored that which was obviously purely informational, provided it was unbiased (e.g., non-interpretive reporting of poll results, thorough listing of relevant legislative actions). What remains is a formidable mass of material—in the form of reports, testimonies, interviews, essays, seminar and webinar transcripts, and so on.

So, whom does the EWA rely on for education policy expertise “to help journalists get the story right”? Which experts do they invite to their seminars and webinars? Whose reports and essays do they link to? Whose interviews do they link to or post? Remember, journalists are trained to represent all sides to each story, to summarize all the evidence available to the public.

That's not how it works at the Education Writers Association, however. Over the past several years, EWA has provided speaking and writing platforms for 102 avowed Common Core advocates, 7 avowed Common Core opponents, 12 who are mostly in favor, and one who is mostly opposed.¹ Randomly select an EWA Common Core "expert" from the EWA website, and the odds exceed ten to one the person will be an advocate and, more than likely, a paid promoter.

Included among the 102 Common Core advocates for whom the EWA provided a platform to speak or write, are officials from the "core" Common Core organizations, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the National Governors Association (NGA), the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and the Smarter-Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). Also included are representatives from research and advocacy organizations paid by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other funding sources to promote the Common Core Standards and tests: the Thomas P. Fordham Institute, the New America Foundation, the Center for American Progress, the Center on Education Policy, and the Business Roundtable. Moreover, one finds ample representation in EWA venues of organizations directly profiting from PARCC and SBAC test development activity, such as the Center for Assessment, WestEd, the Rand Corporation, and professors from the Universities of North Carolina and Illinois, Harvard and Stanford Universities, UCLA, Michigan State, and Southern Cal (USC).

Most of the small contingent of Common Core opponents does not oppose the Common Core initiative, standards, or tests *per se* but rather tests in general, or the current quantity of tests. Among the seven attributions to avowed opponents, three are to the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (a.k.a., FairTest), an organization that opposes all meaningful standards and assessments, not just Common Core.

The seven opponents comprise one extreme advocacy group, a lieutenant governor, one local education administrator, an education graduate student, and another advocacy group called Defending the Early years, which argues that the grades K-2 Common Core Standards are age-inappropriate (i.e., too difficult). No think tank analysts. No professors. No celebrities.

Presumably, this configuration of evidence and points of view represents reality as the leaders of EWA see it (or choose to see it):

102 in favor and 7 opposed; several dozen PhDs from the nation's most prestigious universities and think tanks in favor and 7 fringe elements opposed. Accept this as reality and pro-CCI propaganda characterizations of their opponents might seem reasonable. Those in favor of CCI are prestigious, knowledgeable, trustworthy authorities. Those opposed are narrow minded, self-interested, uninformed, inexpert, or afraid of "higher, deeper, tougher, more rigorous" standards and tests. Those in favor of CCI want progress; those opposed do not.

In a dedicated website section, EWA describes and links to eight organizations purported to be good sources for stories on the Common Core. Among them are the core CCI organizations Achieve, CCSSO, NGA, PARCC, and SBAC; and the paid CC promoters, the Fordham Institute. The only opposing organization suggested? — FairTest.

There remain two of the EWA's favorite information sources, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) that I have categorized as mostly pro-CCI. Both received funding from the Gates Foundation early on to promote the Initiative. When the tide of public opinion began to turn against the Common Core, however, both organizations began shuffling their stance and straddling their initial positions. Each has since adopted the "Common Core is a great idea, but it has been poorly implemented" theme.

So, what of the great multitude who desire genuinely higher standards and consequential tests and recognize that CCI brings neither? ...who believe Common Core was never a good idea, never made any sense, and should be completely dismantled? Across several years, categories and types of EWA coverage, one finds barely a trace of representation.

The representation of research and policy expertise at EWA national seminars reflects that at its website. Keynote speakers include major CCI advocates College Board President David Coleman (twice), US Education Secretary Arne Duncan (twice), Secretary John King, Governor Bill Haslam, and "mostly pro" AFT President Randi Weingarten, along with the unsure Governor Charlie Baker. No CCI opponents.

Among other speakers presented as experts in CCI related sessions at the Nashville Seminar two years ago were 14 avowed CCI advocates², one of the "mostly pro" variety, and one critic, local education administrator Carol Burris. At least ten of the 14 pro-CCI experts have

worked directly in CCI-funded endeavors. Last year's Chicago Seminar featured nine CCI advocates³ and one opponent, Robert Schaeffer of FairTest. Five of the nine advocates have worked directly in CCI-funded endeavors.

In addition to Secretary John King's keynote, this year's Boston Seminar features a whopping 16 avowed CCI proponents, two of the "mostly pro" persuasion, and one opponent, Linda Hanson, a local area educator and union rep. At least ten of the 16 proponents have worked in CCI-funded activities.

One session entitled "The Massachusetts Story" might have invited some of those responsible for the rise of the Commonwealth from a middling performer twenty years ago to nation's academic leader ten years ago (some of whom feel rather upset with the Commonwealth's adoption of Common Core Standards in 2010). Sandy Stotsky, for example, wrote many of the English Language Standards in the 1990s, might be the country's most prolific writer on CCI issues, and lives in Boston. Instead, EWA invited three after-the-fact regional leaders who promote the CCI.

In general, some of EWA's most called-upon experts work in think tanks. EWA loves think tanks. While in Chicago, they could have invited scholars affiliated with the Heartland Institute, a staunch opponent of the CCI. But, they didn't. For the Boston meeting, they could have invited scholars affiliated with the Pioneer Institute (e.g., Sandy Stotsky and R. James Milgram, both of whom served on the CCI's evaluation committee); Pioneer is arguably the country's leading source of scholarly opposition to the CCI. But, they haven't.

Turns out, the only think tanks that matter in EWA's judgment are *national* think tanks. Not being located in Washington, DC, Heartland and Pioneer might be considered "regional" think tanks, despite all the effort they put into national issues. Instead of inviting locally-based think tankers opposed to the CCI in Chicago and Boston, EWA preferred to fly CCI think tank advocates out from DC.

For the "reform" side of education issues, in general, EWA invitations appear stuck inside a tight little circle. EWA frequently calls upon Harvard-affiliated folk (e.g., Chingos, Ferguson, Fryer, Hess, Ho, Kane, Long, Loveless, Mehta, Putnam, Reville, Rhee, Sahlberg, Schwartz, West). EWA is also quite fond of anyone who has worked for Chester "Checker" Finn (e.g., Petrilli, Pondiscio, Northern, Smarick, Brickman, and Polikoff).

There are many thousands of education researchers in the world, thousands of higher education institutions, and hundreds of relevant research journals. But the EWA has chosen to rely almost exclusively on an infinitesimal proportion of it for expertise. Ironically, the tiny group on which they depend comprises some of the world's most poorly read and censorious researchers.⁴

EWA likes the Fordham Institute especially well. Within the past few years, EWA has conferred upon Fordham an EWA best web site award and, to Fordham's Robert Pondiscio, a National Award for Education Reporting in the "Education Organizations and Experts" category. Fordham and Pondiscio accepted their awards in Nashville.

Several possible explanations for the Education Writers Association expertise sourcing myopia come to mind, such as a lack of resources, convenience, naïveté, passivity (e.g., expecting experts to contact them rather than looking for them), and an irresistible attraction to money and power (e.g., EWA sponsors seem very well represented at EWA venues). But, chief among them, to my observation, are elitism and a wholesale conflation of celebrity for expertise. Far too often, the EWA features "expert" opinion from someone who is well known as a commentator on education policy generally (or, at least, well known generally) but who knows next to nothing about the topic at hand.

At EWA seminars, whether national, regional, or topical, one observes an effort to make good use of local education researchers and university professors, but not just any. There are several universities in Tennessee, but Vanderbilt professors overwhelmed the agenda at EWA's Nashville meeting. Likewise, there exist many universities in the Chicago area, but EWA preferred to invite those from the University of Chicago and Northwestern, the two most elite. Boston University is hosting next week's Boston meeting, and several of its academics will be involved in session panels. But, twice as many will come from Harvard.

In a variety of ways, the Education Writers Association functions to centralize expertise sourcing. If there were no EWA, the thousands of education journalists who attend their seminars would initiate all their expertise sourcing on their own. The result, in the absence of EWA's suggestions, would be a much wider variety of expertise sourced. And, the US populace would much better informed.

The EWA is run by education journalists with national ambitions. Through efforts such as the EWA Seminars, the national group imposes its bias toward Washington, DC power and celebrity on its thousands of members. As a result, it serves not as muckraker or spokespersons for the less powerful, but largely to boost the public relations push of the wealthy established interests.

Could all this just be sours grapes? After all, right there on its web site EWA offers in large, bold letters "Opportunities for Exposure". If one is dissatisfied with the *status quo*, why not take them up on their offer? The body of the text reads "Sponsorship, Exhibition, & Advertising Available Now!". Oh, right, that's why.

¹ Not counting the few sources delivering neutral information, nor the "reports from the front lines" panels of teachers and school administrators (most of whom, at EWA meetings, appear to support the CCI).

² Michael Cohen (Achieve), Terry Holiday (Commonwealth of Kentucky), Jamie Woodson (TN SCORE), Dennis Van Roekel (NEA), Amber Northern (Fordham Institute), William Schmidt (Michigan State U), Sandra Alberti (Student Achievement Partners), Jacqueline King (SBAC), Laura Slover (PARCC), Tommy Bice (State of Alabama), Kristen DiCerbo (Pearson Inc.), Kevin Huffman (TN DOE), Lisa Guernsey (New America Foundation), and Robert Pondiscio (*Education Next*, Fordham Institute)

³ Morgan Polikoff (USC, Fordham), Andy Isaacs (Everyday Math, U. Chicago), Dana Cartier (IL Center for School Improvement), Diane Briars (NCTM), Matt Chingos (Brookings), Scott Marion (Center for Assessment), Chris Minnich (CCSSO), James Pellegrino (U. Illinois-Chicago), and Andrew Latham (WestEd).

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<http://nonpartisaneducation.org/Review/Resources/DismissiveList.htm>