GPS for Social and Emotional Learning from One Who Traveled the Common Core Highway

By Karen Nussle   November 2019

Key Points

- Race to the Top allowed Common Core advocates to implement the new standards with astonishing speed. But the fast implementation came with some liabilities.

- Shortening the natural cycle of policy change led to confusion once Common Core hit schools and backpacks. This confusion gave opponents an opportunity to define not only the policy but also the intentions of those who created it.

- Social and emotional learning advocates should take four concrete lessons from the Common Core era: Resist the allure of speed and scale, take time to define the problem and get the terminology right, communicate early and often, and establish the circle of trust.

If you, like me, are a fan of the navigation app Waze, you probably do not drive without it. At the risk of dating myself, Waze is the citizens band radio of this century. It is a crowdsourced app that will modify your route based on the information posted by thousands of users in your geography, all in real time.

As a result, you always know the traffic situation. You know where the police are lurking, where the speed cameras are, where potholes are, and even where roadkill is. Wouldn't it be great if we had a version of Waze for public policy advocacy, with real-time advice on the route to travel to be most successful based on other policy travelers' experience?

The beauty of this is not to just give advice on what to avoid (such as traffic pileups), but to simply give more information as to what one might encounter on certain routes. As we all know, no road traveled is perfect. We always encounter hazards. I'm going to attempt to give this type of navigation advice for social and emotional learning (SEL) advocates based on the difficult road Common Core State Standards (CCSS) advocates have navigated.

Some have already weighed in on this topic.[1] Many have written about what went wrong in the Common Core effort because there is a lot to say with the benefit of hindsight. But let's be clear: At the end of the day, most states still have a version of CCSS in place. And nearly all states have better, more rigorous standards in place now than before the Common Core effort began.[2] In that sense, the effort was a success. But there were hazards along the way—potholes, traffic due to volume, roadblocks, rubbernecking delays, and so forth. It's hard to know for sure, but some might have been avoidable.

From late 2013 until mid-2016, I headed an organization whose mission was to support Common Core advocates in helping communicate about its benefits for students and correct the record where critics were getting it wrong. We were a bit late to the game, but our efforts were important to ensuring

that accurate information was available to policymakers, the public, and the media. In this capacity I worked closely with all the organizations involved in creating and advocating for the CCSS, and I had a unique vantage point for seeing how the policy was being implemented, or not, across the country.

In general, there was one overarching takeaway from this major policy change initiative. Those who developed the CCSS were heroically well-intentioned. There was and continues to be urgency about ensuring all kids get the skills they need in the 13 years we have them from kindergarten to 12th grade. The need was real.

In response to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and an accountability system with real consequences for schools and states, many states had dumbed down their standards to look better in the NCLB accountability system. Policymakers and educators recognized this as a huge disservice to students and families in their communities and wanted to fix the problem. I believe that SEL proponents are dealing with a similar situation. They know social and emotional skills are extremely important for kids and help drive academic and life success, so they are eager to formally incorporate these skills into the expectations for what all students should be taught.

When there is an urgent need, the goal is always to fix it as quickly as possible. When we had an opportunity to go faster than we originally thought possible to improve academic standards nationwide, we took it in the form of Race to the Top. But going faster came with some liabilities. Because the natural cycle of policy change, and the time it takes to implement it, was shortened, confusion ensued when the new standards hit schools and backpacks. This confusion gave opponents an opportunity to define not only the policy but also the intentions of those who created it. For example, some opponents suggested that Common Core was an effort to indoctrinate children with a particular political or even religious ideology. Absent a clear explanation of what Common Core was and what it was attempting to accomplish, this kind of radical claim was a social media gold mine.

In the business world, there's a common saying: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast."[3] CCSS ran smack dab into the center of this phenomenon. A well-represented group of really smart people (most of them educators) collaborated to do something wonky and boring: update the education standards for K–12 education. They didn't anticipate their work getting politicized. How could they have known? Up until this point, education policy had been the rare place where bipartisanship was still practiced. At all levels of government, Republicans and Democrats had conventionally collaborated on education. I am hopeful that Common Core was not the breaking point of that great tradition. But regardless, education policy in the current environment has a new political edge that SEL must navigate.

As I look back on the road my colleagues and I traveled and the experience we gained, I'd like to offer four concrete ideas SEL advocates should consider when working out the strategy—or their route guidance—for advancing SEL.

Lessons SEL Can Learn from the Struggles of CCSS

The experience of Common Core should be instructive for SEL advocates and can be summed up in a few broad categories.

Resist the Allure of Speed and Scale. Because of the urgency I mentioned above, I think those of us in education reform are often overly fixated on policy solutions that can scale quickly. It might have been possible at some point in the past, when education policy enjoyed a more bipartisan ecosystem. But in today's highly partisan climate, I think we need to give up the notion that we can have both scale and speed. Education policy affects every single child in the country. Everyone has an opinion, and social media platforms make it difficult for policymakers to get ahead of potential critics. No education reform idea or policy can be "out of the box" or "plug and play" and be expected to be successful in the long term. Because one thing we learned with CCSS is that there just isn't enough trust for policy ideas that don't originate locally—and local solutions take time.

Most people never knew or have forgotten how the CCSS came to exist. It was a herculean effort. Led by governors and chief state school officers, dozens of educators from across the country gathered and reviewed the academic standards of the states that had the best outcomes. Their goal was to determine

what the current best academic standards were in the country and then improve on them.

They set out to do the hard work so that each individual state would not have to reinvent the wheel. They were trying to be *efficient*. They thought if they collectively created the literal "gold standards," they would be doing a service to the country and the education community—especially because they were just developing the minimums that each state could build on. But once opponents branded the effort as centralized, exclusive, and Washington driven, even the states that had educators intimately involved lost the ability to show their own local involvement in the end product. Trust had been lost.

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Further, scale inevitably leads to geographic imbalance and discrimination. In education policy, "scale" means having as many students as possible governed by the new policy. Let's just say we decide (as many states have) that we want to ensure that all students can read proficiently by the end of third grade. How would we implement that policy across the country so as many students as possible have the chance to be proficient readers by the time they enter fourth grade?

Well, if we are focused on covering as many students as possible as quickly as possible with this single policy reform, our focus will necessarily be on the big cities primarily on the coasts; that's where the highest concentrations of kids are. But this means we are not focused on the huge number of students who live in the middle—the rural, working poor. By focusing on scale we create an imbalance in the way we roll out the policy that is unintended but has consequences.

In his bestseller *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, David Brooks talks at great length about the kinds of connections needed in a community to help initiate and sustain change. His bottom line? "Relationships don't scale."[4] This is particularly

true in the business of education—and it's at the heart of SEL. It's a relationship business. It's a local community business. It's intensely personal. Parents and community leaders fundamentally and swiftly reject the notion that anyone from outside their community knows better than they do on how to serve the students they see every day.

So how should SEL proponents move forward? CCSS was often criticized for not having been "tested." They claimed no evidence existed. SEL could fall victim to the same charge. So proponents should be ready to shine the light on the schools or systems that are already doing this successfully and have data to back it up. These examples will encourage others to follow, helping scale happen more organically.

Some SEL practitioners have been doing exactly that for some time now—literally years. Districts and schools have taken this notion of "testing" SEL practices seriously and have given great respect to the complexity of implementation. That work needs to continue, be given support to grow, and be given exposure so others can learn from it.

CCSS was also branded as a one-size-fits-all policy. This was hard to combat because, well, we actually did want all students to achieve the same minimum academic standards. That was the point. But this criticism really resonated with parents—given that no two students are the same. If SEL proponents aren't careful, they may be vulnerable to this same charge—that there is one particular "way" to do SEL right.

Advocates could avoid this by taking the recent National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development report and developing a playbook for how individual communities could use the report's guidance.[5] Ideally, there would be a tool kit to help them conduct their own customized process for determining what changes they might make to instruction, professional development, school staffing, and the range of other policies that SEL integration touches and the report recommends. The tool kit could guide local leaders on ensuring they are reaching out to and including all stakeholders—parents, students, educators, business leaders, civil rights advocates, disability advocates, and community leaders, to name a few. Such a process would allow the integration of SEL practices to truly reflect the community's values and vision.

While this work is being done low to the ground, national organizations can be most helpful by highlighting best practices and giving localities a choice among a variety of good implementation options. States and localities will have to do the hard work. It's slow and tedious, but when we explored these conversations with CCSS, it worked. We found it was possible to create long-term commitments to new policies that last longer than the current political terms.

At the end of the day, SEL practices that are effective and embraced by teachers and families will not be the same in every school district. But that will be OK. The goal, just as with CCSS, is not uniformity. It's to create a quality standard as a base that practitioners can then build on and customize.

Take Time to Define the Problem and Get the Terminology Right. Based on conversations with those I know in the SEL field, terminology is emerging as a potential issue. What exactly is SEL? Is it a new concept? Why is it now emerging as a "new" thing for schools to focus on? If it's not new, what does my school already do to teach SEL skills to students? Is there a hidden agenda? These are the legitimate questions parents will ask.

CCSS had these same issues and paid a big price over time for not addressing them early on. Beyond the education reform inner circle, no one had clearly defined the problem that CCSS was trying to solve. In addition, it happened so fast that it took teachers by surprise. So when it hit classrooms, teachers were not necessarily on board. And when parents came calling, teachers were not equipped to explain what the standards were, why they needed to change, and how instruction was going to change to meet the new expectations.

Similarly, with SEL, the key question is: What is the problem we are trying to solve? Advocates need to define the problem and get the terminology right. National organizations can develop the tools that will help local communities identify their unique SEL-related deficiencies and determine custom definitions and policy solutions that work for their unique circumstances.

For example, we know anecdotally that parents think kids are not getting enough in the way of "life skills" at school. Regardless of how you define this term, this might be the opening through which SEL advocates can start the conversation with parents and community leaders about potential SEL-related policy changes. The "what we are trying to solve" may be different depending on the audience. For some, it's producing better citizens. For others, it's preventing behavior problems and improving school climate. It can be a "both and," but it needs to be a deliberate conversation so parents understand the end goal.

The words "common core" were misunderstood and disliked. The general public had no idea what we were talking about. "Common" was thought to be everything from mediocre, to average, to national. By using terminology that was not defined, unpopular, and mistrusted, our opponents could make it anything they wanted, and that made driving up the negatives extremely easy. They leveraged the average person's "gut" reaction to classroom-level changes that had not been explained and seemed unnecessary.

It seems that SEL could have similar "brand" problems. The words "social and emotional learning" are not words you hear commuting on the bus or at a weekend soccer game. What does "social and emotional learning" even mean? The average parent doesn't trust such language—and maybe they shouldn't. It's OK for educators to use this language with one another. Every profession has a language that insiders speak. But SEL advocates need to be diligent—and disciplined—about promoting a translation that works for parents and does not give opponents an easy target to assign nefarious motives to suspicious terminology.

I believe SEL advocates are sensitive to the potential "brand" problems and they are actively thinking through these issues. They are careful to ground their work in strictly "evidence-based" curriculum and have acknowledged that while SEL itself is not new, the strategies for how to teach it are. These are important attributes that will help as the effort is expanding and maturing.

One final point on terminology. SEL advocates should be sensitive to today's reality that words now carry a political charge. As an example, the education reform community is currently trying to navigate the tricky difference in meaning between "equity" and "equality." For most people, this is a small word choice difference. In the education ecosystem, the difference is seismic.

I believe the members of the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development are sensitive to this, and I believe they worked hard to thread the needle. But more work needs to be done, and communities need tools to help them navigate these issues. Some have wondered: Why aren't we just calling this "character education"? That's what SEL essentially is, after all.[6] Recently, I came to learn that the term "character education" is a politically charged term for many on the left. That was news to me. It doesn't matter whether you think that's silly. It's a reality and one that SEL advocates should pay attention to and help local communities navigate.

Communicate Early and Often. As we all are moving fast and have too much to consume, quality communication is getting shortchanged—in both delivery and consumption.

This was a big lesson with CCSS. I talked earlier about how the "problem" was not defined or communicated. Too few states and districts informed parents about the new standards. In their defense, they didn't know they needed to; standards were a wonky, technical thing that most parents did not know or care much about.

So how parents found out that something had changed was often one of two ways: the appearance of homework assignments that they didn't recognize or social media posts excoriating said homework assignments. Nothing moves faster on the internet than a crazy math worksheet. In many instances, the math problems that made the rounds on the internet had nothing to do with Common Core. And some were just plain bad instructional content. But once they were out there, there was no going back.

CCSS developers and advocates thought that if they got the policy substance right, the rest would take care of itself. In this instance, the substance was quite technical. But they knew educators understood the value and need for standards. So they thought if they produced exceptional standards, the implementation would be fairly routine.

Take the third-grade reading example from earlier. The education policy establishment did the research and discovered that reading by the end of third grade was crucial to many other education milestones. They then told policymakers what they found. The policymakers thought that made sense, and in some states, they passed laws that made third-grade reading a requirement.

Elementary schools knew what to do and went to work. No broad communications strategy was needed to explain why all of a sudden we were requiring students to demonstrate reading comprehension by the end of third grade. CCSS advocates saw updating and raising standards as similar. They didn't know they needed a communications plan, and when they realized they did, their efforts to develop one were overcome by the speed of adoption brought on by Race to the Top and the swift backlash that followed.

Because of the nature of SEL, advocates and allies at all levels need a thorough and comprehensive communications plan—one that considers educators, community leaders, parents, and other stakeholders and informs them early and often. The communications plan needs to address specific questions that these stakeholders are likely to ask, including:

- What is the problem SEL advocates have identified and want to solve?

- Who is proposing to solve it? Who will be involved in developing the new policy?

- What exactly is the new policy, and why is it right for our state or community?

- What flexibility do local leaders and educators have in customizing the policy?

- How will it be implemented? What exactly will change and when?

- How will teachers be trained to carry out SEL with their students?

- How will parents be informed? What opportunities will there be to give feedback on the policy before it's implemented?

There are sources of information that educators trust, and there are sources that parents trust. These sources are *not* politicians or national commissions in Washington, DC. They are more likely other educators and parents. Engaging a small number of educators and parents to be trusted spokespeople is extremely important. Featuring them in meetings and all forms of communication will give credibility to the message being delivered.

At the district level, all communication must have parents in mind as the main audience. This communication also has to seek and reflect parent concerns and be in formats and on platforms they use regularly (such as social media). I don't believe there can be too much communication to parents when making changes to how and what kids learn in school. And to my first point above, this process needs to be given appropriate time to play out; it can't be rushed. Louisiana, with leadership by John White, has given us an example of how to do this successfully.[7]

Establish the Circle of Trust. Because of the lack of clear terminology and communication, Common Core implementation fell prey to various agendas. Publishers eager to secure contracts rushed to stamp "Common Core–aligned" on their materials—some of which were never changed to align to the new standards. Teachers facing mobs of confused and frustrated parents blamed CCSS for the new homework they did not feel ownership of or had not been trained to understand themselves. Political forces, mainly on the right, who had no history of concern about the quality of public education, suddenly became experts on the Obama administration policy that was certain to ruin our schools and our children (despite having been a widely bipartisan initiative with support from the Bush administration and many Republican governors).

Meanwhile, there was no entity, nationally or in any given state, that was working to clarify or counter any of this misinformation. Anyone (particularly parents) who researched CCSS could not find any information that was either positive or from a trusted source. The circular firing squad commenced.

There are some steps that SEL advocates can take to avoid similar dynamics from hijacking their initiative.

Establish the Local Leaders of Change. I have already talked about the need for a customized, local approach to SEL policy. As part of that, leaders of change should be identified. While educators and school system leaders are important, they are not enough. An effort should be made to identify a small but diverse group of leaders who will lead the advocacy and communications efforts.

Examples might include a prominent Parent Teacher Association parent, a prominent business leader, a faith leader, and people representing key constituencies depending on the territory (such as a farmer, Latino leader, factory supervisor, military member, community college leader, or tribal leader). This group does not have to be big—but simply a handful of people who are committed to be "on call" as the effort is rolled out. Such a group will make it hard for opponents to attack the SEL policy motives or assign it to a political agenda of faceless, nameless bureaucrats. By associating their name with the new SEL policy and "testifying" to its importance for local students, these leaders give credibility to the effort, and that builds trust in the community that needs to accept the policy change. These volunteers will need to be supported in this effort with materials that help them communicate about all the questions outlined earlier.

Don't Sell Something Old as New. SEL is not really a new notion. Schools have been doing it for decades (as excellently argued here).[8] Neither was Common Core. In a way, SEL is going back to basics. Seizing the opportunity to stake out this ground was something we could not do with CCSS, and it may be helpful with parents and potential conservative critics. Parents instinctively know that schools have been doing some form of SEL since, well, they were in school. They recognize it from their own experience. If all of a sudden it is repackaged and passed off as something "new," it will trip their distrust meter. They will be suspicious of why they are being "sold" on something that seems fairly straightforward.

Mind the Politics. If you must get politicians and policymakers involved (and in some states this may be unavoidable), be sure to bring them along from the beginning, in a bipartisan manner, and prominently involve stakeholders they trust from their political side of the aisle. Adding politicians to the mix is not always conducive to building a coalition that is high on trust. After all, politicians get elected by highlighting differences, not similarities, with opponents.

So, the group of local leaders described above will be crucial in this effort. Politicians must see that the effort is broad-based and inclusive of constituencies they care about (and get elected by)—

not an issue available to them for scoring political points. If SEL becomes linked to one party or the other (locally or nationally), it will be doomed as a broad effort and only possible then in politically aligned states and localities.

Research the Opposition. Do some preemptive thinking about who the opposition will be and where their political strength lies. How, where, and why will they come after the concept? Opposition to SEL could come in many forms. Traditional liberals may not like it because they think it adds yet another burden to an already overburdened teaching corps. Conservatives might think it's a distraction from the core basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic that we already can't seem to get right. Libertarians may think it's yet another government overreach into what should be a parental responsibility.

Many of these very arguments have already appeared in print.[9] Look to other recent fights over education policy in the state or district for clues as to who the opponents might be and what their concerns are. Do not just ignore them as "outliers." I can't stress this enough. Your opponents may have powerful friends or platforms to disseminate their views. Ignore them at your peril. Plus, if you take time to understand why they are opposing it, there may be compromises to be made. Turns out it can help to actually talk to, and listen to, your opponents.

The bottom line is that SEL advocates need to develop a broad base of support at the state or local level that crosses traditional political lines. Without a core group of diverse stakeholders who trust each other, destructive political dynamics can take hold. And while at the national level this type of cross-party collaboration seems impossible, state and local leaders do it all the time. The key for the advocacy community will be to demonstrate that there is no political downside for engaging with these stakeholders on this issue. The result will be a nexus of trust that can deliver the needed policy changes to make SEL a reality.

Conclusion

All innovation requires some level of risk. I genuinely applaud and appreciate the many funders and practitioners who have been regularly willing to pursue risk in education reform. Their work has led to vital improvements in our education system.

What we have learned from past efforts, CCSS not the least among them, is that any large-scale change to American K–12 education needs to be done in a context that resonates with parents at the local level and that acknowledges the discomfort we all have in taking risks in this sector. In the public sector, risk-taking must be transparent to the most important stakeholders—which, in education, are parents. Advocates must be able to explain why parents should take the risk, what happens if they don't take it, why now is the time to take it, how it will affect their child, who is funding it, and—perhaps most importantly—how they will know if the risk pays off. If these questions are discussed and answered with parents and local community leaders, it will decrease the likelihood that the issue gets politicized.

Any large-scale change to American K–12 education needs to be done in a context that resonates with parents at the local level and that acknowledges the discomfort we all have in taking risks in this sector.

For various reasons, the average parent did not understand the risks associated with *not* adopting the CCSS. As a result, many parents rebelled against discomfort associated with making the changes it required (e.g., higher expectations, new teaching methods, new and different tests, etc.). And national organizations with big political agendas leveraged the issue to fuel their political machines. It's vitally important that SEL advocates forcefully and coherently communicate the threat of *not* incorporating SEL competencies into the K–12 curriculum—students who lack empathy, the ability to self-regulate or collaborate with others, or standards of personal integrity.

SEL advocates have much they can learn from large-scale reform efforts such as CCSS to help them navigate the road to successfully integrating the development of social and emotional capacities alongside rigorous academic expectations in schools.

We have the ingenuity, creativity, and technology to get the policy right. Based on my experience with CCSS, I think the real questions are: Do we have the patience? Do we have the humility? Do we have the grace? Can we as leaders demonstrate the key social and emotional skills—empathy, respect, character, creativity, and collaboration—to move this agenda forward on kids' behalf?

In the current climate, it is rare to see advocates and policymakers demonstrate these skills. But in recent years the field has grown because of healthy, authentic relationships that spanned the political spectrum and put students' needs first. I remain optimistic that, if we pay attention to the navigational guidance of past journeys, we can continue to make important large-scale improvement in education on behalf of our most precious national resource— our kids.

About the Author

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Notes

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4. David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019).

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8. Greene, "The Moral and Religious Roots of Social and Emotional Learning."

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