

## **The 50 Year History of the Common Core**

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### **Abstract**

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) represent an historic shift in K-12 curricular policy. Yet, few have explicitly traced the lineage of the CCSS and linked them to the decades-old standards-based reform movement. This essay situates the CCSS within the larger historical context of standards-based reform. It concludes with a discussion of recent literature comparing them to past standards, implementation traps, and their potential for increasing equitable outcomes amongst minoritized students. One goal of this work is to serve as a reference for policy and curriculum students. Another is to provide context for and the linkages between the numerous curricular reforms many veteran educators have witnessed throughout their careers. By doing so it provides a counter-narrative to common notions of disjointed reform.

Keywords: Common Core State Standards, standards-based reform, Elementary and Secondary Education Act

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### **Introduction**

After their passage in 2010, the vast majority of states in the United States adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS outline specific skills in English language arts and mathematics, and seek to bring national cohesion to the K-12 instructional core (Durand, Lawson, Wilcox, & Schiller, 2016; Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). By displacing the 50 sets of state standards with one largely uniform set of content standards, they represent a seismic, heretofore unseen turn in curricular policy (Marrongelle, Sztajn, & Smith, 2013; Porter, Fusarelli, & Fusarelli, 2015). Yet, by further delineating the

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skills and knowledge American K-12 students should develop, they are also aligned with the lengthy history of standards-based reform (SBR) (Gamson, Lu, & Eckert, 2013; Kornhaber, Griffith, & Tyler, 2014).

Though history is an important tool for interpreting, understanding, critiquing, and implementing school reform (Barth, 2013; Earley, 2000; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002), few analyses of the Common Core do more than give the history that made them possible short shrift. Aside from Kenna and Russell III (2014), and Rothman's (2011) excellent book, cursory summaries that quickly mention *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* abound. Ironically, the CCSS are often described as *historic*, or as representing an *historic shift* in curriculum and instruction, yet few have fully explicated why this is.

Thus, this article provides context for and the linkages between the numerous curricular reforms many veteran educators have witnessed throughout their careers. As Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) noted in their longitudinal study of school reform, seasoned teachers often experience change as a seemingly endless, disjointed cycle. This essay offers a counter narrative that may provide clarity for teachers, administrators, professors of education, policy and curriculum students. Comparisons between the CCSS and past standards, common implementation traps, and their potential for increasing equitable outcomes amongst underserved students will be discussed herein as well.

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### **The History of the SBR Movement: Early Seeds of Reform**

Since the advent of the American public school, no shortage of efforts have been made to create a semblance of *common standards*. In 1892 the National Education Association's *Committee of Ten* argued for a standardized high school curriculum, or a "national system of education that aims at certain common results and uses certain common means..." (Makenzie, 1894, p. 148). By the early 20th century several regional organizations were using a loose framework of standards to grant accreditation to high schools (Cooperative Study of Secondary School Standards, 1939). In doing so their goal was to create clearer, more articulated college pathways for American secondary students. To this end, seven *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* were drafted in 1918. They sought to provide a common set of physical, academic, social, vocational, and ethical objectives for students (National Education Association, 1918). The first common transportation code was quickly adopted in 1939 by all 48 states in the Union, and gave way to the now ubiquitous yellow school bus (Rothman, 2011). And by 1968, sociologist James Coleman was already reexamining the history of the *common curriculum*, and its inability to ameliorate home and background differences between Black and White pupils (Coleman, 1968).

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Throughout the 20th century educators and policymakers reacted to major foreign and domestic developments by introducing a range of historic policies. *Brown v Topeka Board of Education* (1954), *Lau v Nichols* (1974), and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (1975) reflected a growing restlessness regarding equality of opportunity for pupils. These mandates attempted to desegregate schools, support English learners, and provide accommodations for students with disabilities, respectively. Before *Brown*, de jure segregation and discrimination were severely curtailing the aspirations of Americans of color. One report, drafted in 1947 by President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights, lamented, "Whatever test is used—expenditure per pupil, teachers' salaries, the number of pupils per teacher, transportation of students, adequacy of school buildings and educational equipment, length of school term, extent of curriculum—Negro students are invariably at a disadvantage" (Lawson, 2004, p. 98). Many of the subsequent school reforms were an attempt on the part of the federal government to remedy this. They were also part of what was becoming an ever-growing federal role in K-12 education.

### **ESEA and NAEP**

Perhaps no 1960s reforms better reflected the government's new role, or did more to set the stage for SBR, than the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) and the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP). ESEA was passed in 1965 as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty. The first federal education law of its kind, it was designed to remunerate public schools with large concentrations of children in low-income families (*Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, 1965).

In its first year ESEA provided \$1.3 billion to states and school districts through its five Title programs (Alford, 1965). The largest allotment, a full \$1 billion, went to schools that met the Title I designation (remaining funds were apportioned for Title II, school library resources and textbooks; Title III, supplemental educational services; Title IV, educational research; and Title V, grants for state departments of education). Two factors determined Title I status: the number of students whose families earned annual incomes of \$2,000 or less, and the number of students whose families received aid-to-dependent-children (McKay, 1965). Funds were *categorical*—they could be used for salaries, school staffing, building construction, new curriculum, or any related resources, so long as those items were narrowly and clearly tied to special programs designed to meet the needs of low-income students.

Regrettably, loose coupling and mismanagement soon gave way to program abuses. In many instances, funds were spent on non-categorical

items that were not clearly connected to students in poverty (e.g., furniture and color televisions for superintendents' offices, Thomas & Brady, 2005). Nor did the new law lead directly to the establishment of content standards. This may have been predicted, as ESEA was intentionally designed to allay fears of unprecedented federal accountability and a loss of local educational sovereignty. Its language included a clause which stated that the federal government would not attempt to guide, change, or direct curriculum, instruction, or staffing in any school or district (similar clauses are contained in subsequent ESEA reauthorizations).

NAEP, however, was better able to influence the instructional core. First administered to American students in 1969, the goal of NAEP was "to assess the condition and progress of education in the United States" (Messick, 1985, p. 90). It provided the first sets of comprehensive, valid, nationwide data on student performance, with the aim of supporting evidence-based decisions across the states (Tyler, 1967). In his history of NAEP, Jones (1996) outlined the lofty initial specifications for the assessment: each test administration would focus on at least one of 10 areas—reading, writing, science, mathematics, literature, social studies, citizenship, art, music, or career development; only "U.S. residents of ages 9, 13, 17, and 'young adults'" would be sampled; a citizen panel with diverse views would frame learning objectives for testing; exercises aligned with the objectives and with scoring rubrics would be designed; for content validity, performance tasks and short answer items would be used instead of multiple choice questions; equal thirds of assessment items would be easy, moderate, and difficult; exercises would be presented in print and via tape recording; and results would only be provided by age and subgroup, not by individual state, district, school, or student (p. 15).

Needless to say, some of these recommendations have since been compromised or discontinued. The use of item-response theory in 1984 led to the inclusion of multiple choice items and scale scores, tape recorders and aural presentations were suspended due to budget cuts, and test results have since been made available for states and districts, for example (Jones, 1996; Messick, 1985). By the late 1980s, NAEP was also undergoing increasing standardization. Overseen by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), they designed NAEP performance standards, introduced the concept of *proficiency*, and incorporated more difficult items that were aligned with its most rigorous standards (Cohen & Snow, 2002).

In less than three decades, NAEP's role evolved from merely reporting results to promoting an agenda of reform and improvement. By the 1990s NAEP had become a definitive guide on "what students should be able to do" (NAGB, 1991, as cited in Linn & Dunbar, 1992, p. 178). Its present day influence on the CCSS is evident in the Core's

emphases on informational text, text complexity, and argumentative and informational writing. More broadly, NAEPs use of criterion-based, rubric-scored exercises presaged the use of authentic, performance, and formative assessments—hallmarks of sound instruction today (Lapointe & Koffler, 1982; Linn & Dunbar, 1992).

### **A Nation at Risk**

Nevertheless, President Reagan’s commitment to a limited federal government threatened the existence of ESEA, NAEP, and the newly established U.S. Department of Education (USDE) (Sunderman, 2010; Thomas & Brady, 2005). After campaigning on abolishing the USDE, the president seemed to be making good on his promise when his 1981 budget cut expenditures for education, and served fewer Title I students than in the 1970s (McDonnell, 2005). What helped move the federal government closer to the “instructional core” of schools and towards strong rhetoric for an “excellence agenda” was the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* (McDonnell, 2005, p. 27). The report was shrouded in stirring, if not hyperbolic pleas for rigor and standards (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Achieving the same political effect as the Russian launching of Sputnik in 1957 and the *Coleman Report* in 1966, *A Nation at Risk* electrified a cross-section of Americans.

To be sure, the report has been and continues to be fiercely contested. Some have taken umbrage with its assertions that poor student performance is a failure of local schools and not the American social order (Bass & Gerstl-Pepin, 2011). Others have questioned whether schools can easily reconcile the competing goals of economic equity and individual success (Strike, 1985), and the federal government’s ever-expanding role in public education (Chatterji, 2002). It has also been criticized for offering vague prescriptions incapable of greatly altering local school and classroom practice (Ginsberg & Wimpelberg, 1987). Still others have condemned it for authorizing divestment in public schools and a shifting of funds and resources to the private sector (Earley, 2000; Good, 1996).

These rebukes notwithstanding, *A Nation at Risk* magnified the national dialogue surrounding SBR. In addition to lambasting what it cited as low expectations and poor academic standards in schools, the report issued a call for equality of educational outcomes across racial and class lines. Its authors demanded more rigorous content, higher expectations, more time spent in class on learning, and better skilled and trained teachers. “Four years of English; three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies... a half year of computer science,” and two years of a foreign language were recommended as the new high school graduation requirements (Ravitch, 2000, p. 413).

Before the National Commission's report, courses such as *cheerleading* and *bachelor living* often held the same status and credit toward graduation as calculus and physics, and some states held physical education as their only high school graduation requirement (Ravitch, 2000). After the report, however, high schools increased their core course (e.g., mathematics, English, science, history) requirements by an average of 1.6 years (Stevenson & Schiller, 1999). They increased the number of students in the college prep track by nearly 14%, and reduced the number of students in the vocational track by about 12% as well.

The Commission also made several recommendations for teacher preparation. These included higher standards for university prep programs; more competitive, market-based salaries; tying retention and promotion decisions to teacher performance; and a clearer delineation of *novice*, *skilled*, and *expert* teachers. Their recommendations would be seen again decades later by those arguing for the strategic management of human capital (see Odden & Kelly, 2008; or Odden, 2011). In all, the Commission accomplished its goal of getting many states and districts to demonstrate formally raised expectations. Just as important, it followed with language similar to that used by Truman's Committee on Civil Rights and by ESEA's earliest proponents to emphasize the goal of equitable educational outcomes.

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### **Summits, Curricular Wars, and Standards**

Though the work of the National Commission was widely hailed and even implemented to varying degrees, its suggestions were still largely seen as "exhortatory" (Stevenson & Schiller, 1999, p. 266). Leaders at the 1989 Education Summit sought to change that. The Summit was attended by a bipartisan contingent of the nation's governors and showcased a young Bill Clinton, then Governor of Arkansas. It led to the National Education Goals Panel, which had as its primary objectives the development of nationwide standards and assessments.

Content standards, it was proposed, would outline clear knowledge and skills for all students to master, while performance standards were to clarify what *mastery*, and the levels above or below it, meant (Linn, 2000). Newly developed assessments were to measure the extent to which students were mastering standards. They gained political traction partially because it was believed that having state standards and tests would make it possible to achieve the Panel's other goals (e.g., subject matter competency, 90% high school graduation rates). Those objectives were ultimately passed into legislation as the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, and fortified by the 1994 Improving America's Schools Act (IASA). It appeared that the U.S. was finally developing

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the apparatus necessary to stay academically ahead of international competitors.

Yet, the IASA and the SBR movement were not without problems. For one, there was a sizable gap at the onset between policy and practice. There was too little research on vertical (e.g., elementary, middle, high school) and horizontal (e.g., all third grade teachers) policy implementation, and, more importantly, on what good, standards-based classroom instruction encompassed (Chatterji, 2002). This made it exceedingly difficult for some to adapt. Among those who struggled most were leaders and teachers in impoverished or small districts, as they often lacked expertise and adequate technical information (Nelson & Weinbaum, 2009).

In addition, the IASA allowed exemptions for English learners and special education students, choosing to emphasize school, district, and state achievement instead. That some of the neediest subgroups would be ignored surely ran counter to the spirit of the Act. Just as problematic was the great variation in standards across states; a product of the federal government's inability to reconcile its respect for states' rights, particularly on matters regarding education, with its need for a valid quality control measure (Linn, 2000). President Clinton and Congress opted for an approach that strongly supported the authority of the states by allowing them to receive funds for creating their own unique standards and testing initiatives. This ensured that the federal government was not nationalizing the standards movement. However, it also made it impossible to ensure that the states' standards met consistent criteria for quality. As a result, the state standards were neither well-aligned to their own state assessments (Porter et al., 2011), nor closely supportive of accountability-related student achievement (Chatterji, 2002).

There was a range of technical concerns as well. The validity of classroom and large-scale assessments; the congruence between state and district assessments and national testing standards from the American Educational Research Association and the American Psychological Association; and whether educators were clear and consistent in their construct definitions of standards were all brought into question (Chatterji, 2002). Clarifying precisely what *content* and *performance standards* meant, on what they would be based, and how they would be interpreted also created considerable acrimony (Linn & Baker, 1995; Ravitch, 2000).

For example, there were fierce, multifaceted debates over curriculum content during the 1980s and 1990s that impacted the first attempts at state standards. Those siding with Allan Bloom (1987) and advocating a more classical curriculum believed that students should learn about the core values of Western European civilization. These could be found primarily in the Western literary canon. Diane Ravitch (1989) and her followers supported a multicultural curriculum that paid homage to

America's pluralistic roots. Multicultural proponents argued that greater time and exposure should be given to all of America's ethnic groups, so long as the representations were supportive of a national identity. In contrast, critical theorists like Hilliard (1978) and Carruthers (1999) maintained that the problem was not one of too few people of color in the curricula, but that what was taught about people of color was fundamentally wrong. From their position, simply adding more information about Blacks would do no good if it failed to expose stereotypes about Africa, or uphold ancient Egypt as a Black civilization that greatly influenced the West.

To say the least, these were not easy disputes to resolve. When coupled with the fact that there was no federal standards benchmarking tool and very little accountability, one can understand why the early attempts at state and national standards were minimalist and vague (Superfine, 2005). Still, President Clinton attempted to provide support for standards that would normalize what all students were to learn and what it would mean to be proficient in each state. He and Congress provided \$2 billion in SBR funds to states, and redirected the \$11 billion Title I budget to help leaders of impoverished districts adopt the reforms. Additionally, ESEA, the Higher Education Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act were all modified and reauthorized to support the reform effort. By the end of Clinton's second term, 48 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington D.C., had developed content standards. Only 19 states had them when the Act was passed in 1994.

In the final analysis, President Clinton's standards-based reform movement represents one of the true watershed moments in American education policy. The IASA and its attending policies legislated the notion that all students, not just the affluent, should be taught rigorous standards. Without this scaffolding in place for a clear, consistent curriculum, modern discussions of a *common core* would have likely been much less optimistic.

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### **Impatience, No Child Left Behind, and the Unfunded Mandate**

Even with the inherent difficulties that attended the IASA, in hindsight, the law and its implementation could be considered tame when compared to its next iteration, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). Indeed, NCLB was far more conceptually aggressive and ambitious. Depending on one's perspective, it either reflected a genuine impatience from the federal government with the lack of reform and student achievement in the states, or a genuine attempt to privatize public education and make it further beholden to market forces (Apple, 2007; McDonnell, 2005). Its mandates, such as tying funds and penalties to the adequate yearly progress (AYP) of individual subgroups, represented a marked



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shift from Congress' traditional philosophy of letting states autonomously respond to policy. At the same time, it continued the longstanding programs of ESEA and IASA (e.g., Title I, a focus on reading), as well as the synthesis of standards and assessments that began with Goals 2000. While clearly following the lineage of the IASA, its enactment of accountability measures differed significantly from its predecessor. Two of these differences will be detailed below.

The first and perhaps most controversial difference was that NCLB mandated that 100% of students be *proficient*, or at grade-level, on state standards by 2014. State Educational Agencies (SEAs) and Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) were to make incremental but steady annual progress toward this goal through the law's AYP provision. This facilitated an important shift from grade-span to annual testing. Keeping in line with its stated mission "To close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind" (NCLB, p. 1425), the 100% proficiency mandate was lauded by some for facilitating positive changes in national practice. For instance, a review conducted by Lauen and Gaddis (2012) showed that accountability pressures helped teachers and leaders better align curriculum and instruction, use data in a more skilled manner, and make greater efforts to differentiate instruction.

On the other hand, the mandate was roundly criticized for being infeasible (Ho, 2008; Linn, 2003) and for being a catalyst of unethical practices (Cohen-Vogel, 2011; Lauen & Gaddis, 2012). Boher-Jennings' (2005) case study explored how notions of accountability led to a potentially unhealthy focus on students near the margins of proficiency at one Texas elementary school. Such students were referred to as "bubble kids" (p. 241). This focus spawned other practices, such as a rise in special education referrals to remove struggling students from the testing equation, nearly eliminating recess for some students, and redefining *equity* and *good teaching* as a myopic emphasis on those just above or below the proficiency cut score. In a study of testing-related school personnel practices, Cohen-Vogel (2011) found that the emphasis on students' test scores in some districts was beyond excessive. She argued that in addition to directing teachers to teach to the test, administrators scheduled school time to the test, reclassified students to the test, retained students to the test, disciplined pupils to the test, and even catered school meals to the test.

Linn (2003) opined that asking every American student to reach proficiency was simply too ambitious. This may be evidenced by the fact that after nearly a decade of implementation, 49% of the nation's LEAs were unable to meet AYP in 2010-2011 (Center on Education Policy, 2012). Making a more technical point, Ho (2008) contended that because of its widely divergent interstate cut scores and sensitivity to students near those scores, the concept of proficiency may rest on a faulty validity

argument. Therefore, while the goal of proficiency for all may have been based on a positive supposition, its measurement posed statistical and evaluative problems that went largely unaddressed.

The second difference between the IASA and NCLB is that the latter required the disaggregation and reporting of test score results by ethnic, income, and ability groups. The group mandate was deservedly commended for its emphasis on the historically underserved, and for attempting to ensure that professional educators were held accountable for educating those whose needs have not often been prioritized (Bass & Gerstl-Pepin, 2011; McDonnell, 2005; Thomas & Brady, 2005). However, the intent of and political support for this portion of the law did not escape criticism.

Arguing through the lenses of sociopolitics, history, and economics, Bass and Gerstl-Pepin (2011) posited that the greater political and economic power historically afforded to Whites and withheld from Blacks offers an explanation for many systemic gaps (e.g., test scores, graduation rates) in Black and White peoples' lives. The fatal flaw in NCLB, as they saw it, was that it encouraged and funded testing systems as opposed to real strategies for curing political and economic inequality. In addition, some pointed out the irony that despite the mandate's *prima facie* mission to better support impoverished students, it actually led to an impoverished, constricted curriculum in some low-income LEAs, and a less-fulfilling schooling experience for the students who needed it most (Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Milner IV, 2013).

NCLB differed from the IASA in a number of other ways. NCLB went much further in scrutinizing the work of teachers and students (Wiseman, 2012); it more directly led to *high-stakes* testing, which is often used to determine high school graduation, grade promotion, and track placement (Sunderman, 2010; Superfine, 2005); and the funds attached to it were both less than its statutory needs and were appropriated in a much stricter manner (Nelson & Weinbaum, 2009). Indeed, the Department of Education went so far as to withhold \$738 million from the state of Georgia for failing to meet the federal timeline for designing testing systems (Superfine, 2005). The most important difference, however, was that NCLB upped the accountability ante—for better or worse. It directly outlined what the acceptable levels of learning were, clarified which groups must reach those levels, and tied SEA and LEA funds and penalties to their achievement or failure of those goals. While the Act was far from perfect, it elevated discussions of equity and the use of standards to achieve it in American schools.

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### Comparing the CCSS to Past Standards

In December of 2015 President Bush's *No Child Left Behind* was officially superseded by President Obama's *Every Student Succeeds Act*. In between the two policy bookends was the development, broad acceptance, and beginning implementation of the *Common Core State Standards*. Though the ESSA is clear in its detachment from national standards—its positioning mirrors past ESEA authorizations, including the inaugural law—federal funds were provided for the adoption and use of internationally supported standards and assessments via the *Race to the Top* competitive grant program (USDE, 2009). In an attempt to minimize confusion, some have emphasized that the CCSS were not *created* by the federal government (Kornhaber et al., 2014; Porter et al., 2011; Rothman, 2011). Instead, they were the product of an interstate consortium of policymakers, scholars, and educators. Initial stakeholder groups included the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governor's Association, who were primarily responsible for the earliest drafts, as well as the Hunt Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy, the Education Trust, the National Research Council, the National Education Association, and various coalitions of teachers, parents, and community groups who were invited to read and respond in their respective states (see McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013, for a thorough analysis of the groups supportive or critical of the CCSS).

That said, several rigorous comparisons of the CCSS to the state standards they supplanted have been conducted. Porter et al. (2011) published a now seminal work comparing the Common Core to previous state standards, the NAEP assessments, and standards from other nations. They found that the CCSS in both mathematics (CCSSM) and English require greater cognitive demand than the previous state standards and are better aligned with NAEP assessments. Despite not aligning well with them, they are somewhat more rigorous than standards from Finland, Japan, and Singapore—much ballyhooed nations that perform well on international assessments (e.g., the Trends in International Math and Science Study, or TIMSS), yet, combined, do not have half of the population of the United States.

Cobb and Jackson (2011) found fault with Porter et al.'s conceptual definition of focus, and argued instead for the stricter interpretation found in the CCSSM, that focused standards demonstrate a consistent emphasis of key ideas and skills. Essentially, the debate was over little more than Porter et al.'s incorporation of cognitive demand into their definition. Still, Cobb and Jackson maintained that the CCSSM are an improvement over past standards in that they are more focused and

more coherent (articulated over time in a logical, sequential manner). They agreed, moreover, that the Standards not only provide consistent expectations across states, but better support states' capacity with respect to curriculum and assessment. Schmidt and Houang (2012) took umbrage with the definition of focus in Porter et al. as well, and used an original measure of congruence to assess the fit between the CCSSM, state, and international standards. They, too, asserted that the CCSSM were coherent and focused. Calling them "world-class standards," they found that 89% of the content in the CCSSM matched that of high-performing nations (p. 300). They also found that they contain fewer topics and are more rigorous than the state standards, and would likely better prepare students for NAEP.

In English language arts some researchers have turned their attention to the CCSS' emphasis on text complexity, and have contrasted this from past standards. In short, the CCSS are much more explicit here. They have been applauded for more specifically and clearly endeavoring to prepare students for rigorous, 21st century reading (e.g., Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013; VanTassel-Baska, 2015); and they offer triangulated, mixed-methods guidelines to establish text complexity (see National Governors Association & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, Appendix A). Nevertheless, some have been critical of the premise presented for increasing text complexity (Gamson et al., 2013; Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013), and with how it is operationalized in the Common Core (Frantz, Starr, & Bailey, 2015; Williamson, Fitzgerald, & Stenner, 2013).

For example, Gamson et al. (2013) compared 258 elementary readers that were published over a 100 year span to analyze the CCSS' claims that school literacy texts have become less complex. In spite of some mixed results (e.g., upward trends in third grade text complexity, downward trends in sixth grade text complexity, overall increases in word difficulty, overall decreases in textbook sentence length and reading difficulty), the authors' final conclusion was that the rigor of elementary texts has not declined over the past half century—a position also held by Hiebert and Mesmer (2013). Finding, then, that the undergirding claims of the CCSS are historically unsupported, Gamson et al. questioned whether its framers may be "hastily attempting to solve a problem that does not exist and elevating text complexity in a way that is ultimately harmful to students" (p. 388).

Furthermore, the CCSS provide rather open-ended criteria for establishing text complexity: consideration of qualitative factors, such as levels of meaning and knowledge demands; consideration of quantitative factors, such as Lexile levels and Flesch-Kincaid scores; and a more nuanced matching of readers to texts and tasks, on the part of the teacher, and based on factors such as student motivation and reading

purpose. Though the criteria allow for flexibility, others see them as problematic. Considering the existing quantitative supports, even the Core's framers acknowledge their limitations and admitted that "new or improved [tools] are needed quickly if text complexity is to be used effectively in the classroom and curriculum" (CCSSO & NGA, 2010, p. 7). Heeding the call, Williamson et al. (2013) proposed that educators seek alternative methods for determining appropriate complexity levels, and demonstrated the utility of a parametric growth-curve approach. Extending the discussion, Frantz et al. (2015) cautioned educators to be mindful of the relationship between syntax and text complexity, and chided the CCSS for not emphasizing syntactical complexity. In sum, the CCSS appear to be far from perfect, but represent an improvement over past standards.

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### Conclusion

As is typical with curricular reform, there are unanswered, difficult questions of implementation that still need to be addressed, and that are being experimented on daily in American schools. One question has to do with teacher preparation. The best professional development (PD) is often long-term, cyclical, collaborative, and well-coordinated across levels and actors. Such approaches, however, are infrequent (McDuffie, Drake, Choppin, Davis, Magaña, & Carson, 2015; Zhang, 2014). This is somewhat paradoxical, as states began adopting the Common Core in 2010, yet, after several years, there are still swaths of educators professing to have received only between 0-10 hours of PD on them (Ajayi, 2016).

Another question concerns whether states and individual schools have the capacity to implement the CCSS in a tightly coupled manner. The concept of *loose coupling* attempts to explain why schools, districts, state boards of education, and the federal government can be both connected and vastly separate in terms of policy understanding and implementation (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Weick, 1976). Because of the decentralized nature of U.S. K-12 education, it has long been an impediment to curriculum reform (Porter et al., 2015; Young, 2006). The nationalized structure of the CCSS seemed capable of resolving these issues. Yet, in practice, the standards have often been political fodder, with over 110 bills in 32 states proposing to revoke them or their testing apparatus at the time of this writing (see <http://www.ccrslegislation.info>).

Adding further complexity is the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which is the direct policy successor to NCLB. The ESSA took a noncommittal stance towards the Common Core. Early on, state adoption of the CCSS was prioritized by the U.S. Department of Education. The Department gave quid pro quo relief from NCLB provisions to states

that agreed to implement them. The language of the ESSA, however, realigns with past federal policy positions averse to influencing national curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The Act makes it clear that it is no longer the intent of the federal government to “influence” or “incentivize” the adoption of any “academic standards common to a significant number of States” (ESSA, 2015, p. 130). Exacerbating this seeming lack of coherence are customary reform issues of school and district expertise, teacher preparation, instructional leadership, and technological and curricular resources. Without effective, multilevel responses to these concerns, the loose coupling of the CCSS appears imminent.

Important questions about equity and improved outcomes for all learners must be asked as well. As a reform, the CCSS are much less explicit about race, class, language, and ability than was NCLB. Of course, this is easy to understand. NCLB was the eighth federal reauthorization of ESEA. Though it was supportive of achievement gap-closing curricula, the 670 page law also contained numerous provisions for training teachers and leaders; providing drug, alcohol, and gun free schools; preventing hate crimes; securing mentors for needy youth; establishing community learning centers in high-need areas; and implementing scientifically-based research, among other deeds (NCLB, 2002). NCLB was not a set of content standards, but a much more far-reaching federal policy that sought to use statutory measures to [ostensibly] create more equitable outcomes for historically underserved children—much like other ESEA reauthorizations before it.

The CCSS, on the other hand, are entirely centered on the instructional core. Like the state standards before them, their purpose is to outline the specific content knowledge and skills American students should develop as they transition across grade levels. Unlike NCLB, there are no federal sanctions or penalties attached to violating the Common Core, and the standards make no mention of subgroup reporting or adequate levels of progress for students of color, English learners, or others. The dialectical nature of the CCSS should be viewed in this light. They are both a logical outgrowth of five decades of reform, and an about-face to 20 years of standards-based legislation. Their inherent rigor and focus on college and career readiness seem to represent a tide capable of lifting all boats. Yet, by lacking comprehensive resources for minoritized students, they may not be able to “close achievement gaps, any more than the same icing will transform different cakes” (Kornhaber et al., 2014, p. 20).

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