

A CALL FOR COMMON CONTENT

Core Curriculum Must Build a Bridge from Standards to Achievement

We, the undersigned, representing viewpoints from across the political and educational spectrum, believe that whether children live in Mississippi or Minnesota, Berkeley or the Bronx, our expectations for their achievement should be equally high.

We therefore applaud the goals of the recently released Common Core State Standards, already adopted in most states, which articulate a much clearer vision of what students should learn and be able to do as they progress through school. For our nation, this represents a major advance toward declaring that “equal educational opportunity” is a top priority—not empty rhetoric.

We also caution that attaining the goals provided by these standards requires a clear roadmap in the form of rich, common curriculum content, along with resources to support successfully teaching all students to mastery. Shared curriculum in the core academic subjects would give shape and substance to the standards, and provide common ground for the creation of coherent, high-quality instructional supports—especially texts and other materials, assessments, and teacher training.

To accomplish this, our nation must finally answer a question it has avoided for generations: What is it, precisely, that we expect all educated citizens to have learned? What explicit knowledge, skills, and understanding of content will help define the day-to-day work of teaching and learning?

With U.S. education’s long history of state administration and local control, the very idea of common curriculum guidance will strike many as overly controversial. The fear of centralization, institutional rigidity, and narrow-minded political orthodoxy is deeply engrained in our political sensibility—beginning with our Constitution’s implicit delegation of education’s governance to the states.

But now, in an era when states are coming to recognize the national importance of a coherent education system, they are working together to find ways to raise expectations for all. They are showing a willingness to trade state-by-state invention and reinvention for a more shared implementation of successful practices together with the possibility of greater economies of scale—in effect, to create a new and more consistent system.

Common curriculum guidance does not represent a straitjacket or a narrowing of learning possibilities. States’ use of the kinds of curriculum guidelines that we advocate in the core academic subjects would be purely voluntary, comprising only about 50 to 60 percent of what is to be taught—leaving room for state, regional, and local variations to reflect student contexts and state and local prerogatives.

The curriculum guides we seek would offer a practical roadmap for achieving the goals set by standards in the limited instructional time available to teachers. They would illuminate grade-level expectations for teaching and learning progressions for students. They would provide a coherent, substantive, sequential plan that clarifies the knowledge and skills that students are expected to learn in the core academic subjects. They would enable the creation of all kinds of matching resources—technology offerings, texts, and teacher-made materials, as well as field trips and other outside-of-school resources—which teachers could use, share, and adapt across state and district lines, confident that their students were being adequately prepared for each succeeding grade and for the academic demands of college and career.

To be clear, by “curriculum” we mean a coherent, sequential set of guidelines in the core academic disciplines, specifying the content knowledge and skills that all students are expected to learn, over time, in a thoughtful progression across the grades. We do not mean performance standards, textbook offerings, daily lesson plans, or rigid pedagogical prescriptions.

While the work before us begins with the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics, we want to stress that a quality education should also include history, geography, the sciences, civics, the arts, foreign

languages, technology, health, and physical education. Standards-setting and curriculum development must be done for these as well.

All teachers and students will ultimately profit from thoughtful curriculum guidance based on the demands of the disciplines and an understanding of how children learn at various stages of their development. In a society much more diverse than that of our forebears, we expect that this work—deciding what knowledge and skills are most essential for our children to have and how they can best be acquired—will be challenging. Yet educational quality and equity demand that our schools take on this important task.

Why Common, Rich Curriculum Content Is Key to Systemic Reform

At any age and in any field, what we already know enables us to understand, retain, and employ new knowledge. Knowledge accumulation begins from the earliest days of life. It builds through years of verbal and nonverbal interactions with parents, caregivers, and teachers, who model spoken language and help young children develop vocabulary, concepts, and theories about the world. As might be expected, children from more economically advantaged backgrounds typically have an early start in this process of knowledge acquisition—with a significant advantage in oral language skill and information mastery by the time they enter preschool.

These differences turn out to be crucial: high-quality research demonstrates that disparities in oral language and general knowledge at school entry explain most of the effect of socioeconomic status (SES) on elementary school performance.¹ It is not poverty in itself, but poverty's accompanying life conditions that help explain performance gaps that begin at home and extend into secondary school and beyond.

Today, the information we need to minimize these performance gaps is in our hands, waiting to be used. Thanks to advances in cognitive science, we now understand that reading comprehension—so essential to almost all academic learning—depends in large part on knowledge.² In experiments, when students who are “poor” readers are asked to read about a topic they know well (such as baseball), they do much better on comprehension measures than “good” readers who know less about the subject.³

The systematic effort to establish common, knowledge-building content must therefore begin as early as possible. The younger we start, the greater the hope that we can boost achievement across all schools and classrooms, but especially among our most disadvantaged students.

Further, by articulating learning progressions linked to a grade-by-grade sequence for how learning should build over time, a defined curriculum will better enable each teacher to build on what students have already been taught. Students will also benefit, as they will be much less likely to find themselves either struggling to overcome gaps in their knowledge or bored by the repetition of what they have already learned.

Some will fear that this is a call for an antiquated vision of schooling, centered on the rote memorization of dry facts or the superficial coverage of hundreds of pieces of inert information. It is not. A crucial feature of the common core standards is that they seek to identify a lean set of concepts and ideas that are central to applying knowledge in each discipline. Dozens of studies have found that greater content knowledge enables better critical thinking, problem solving, reasoning, and analysis.⁴ Thus, the goal of teaching students to “think critically” about any particular subject requires a curriculum that builds knowledge upon knowledge.

Others may fear that grade-level curriculum expectations will discourage teachers from attending to the needs of students who are achieving above or below grade level. Yet, when used by well-prepared teachers as a guide to the learning process, a curriculum sequence will allow teachers to see where each student is along a learning trajectory for the discipline, as well as where students are expected to go and how to help them get there.

Finally, some may fear that common curriculum guidance will neglect important cultural referents or ignore the diversity of student experiences. However, as national curriculum standards in several high-performing nations illustrate, a modern conception of curriculum in a diverse nation is explicitly mindful of how to attend to cultural connections, and

how to leave room for local adaptations and resources that enable students to connect to the curriculum from their different vantage points.

In nations with core curriculum standards, such as Finland, Singapore, and South Korea, this systemic approach—coupled with equitable resources and strong teacher training—has resulted in both very high average achievement and a diminishing gap between high- and low-achieving students. These countries have demonstrated that a sequential curriculum in the core subjects from school entry through eighth or ninth grade prepares virtually all students for college or careers—whether in a set of required courses or in electives tailored to students’ various interests and postsecondary goals. This kind of support is at least as necessary in the United States, where children tend to change homes and schools more frequently than in other industrialized nations⁵—and disadvantaged children, in particular, may change classrooms, schools, districts, and even states at alarmingly high rates.

Student Curriculum to Guide Staff Preparation, Development, and Evaluation

Currently, there are efforts underway to develop assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards. But, as the past 30 years of the standards movement has shown, without attention to curriculum, standards are not specific enough to guide the development of valid measures of student progress. Simple logic suggests that it is impossible to assess student learning accurately when there has been no decision about what it is they are expected to learn. In order to create a rational system, we must begin with standards, then adopt curriculum and curriculum materials, and then develop assessments—in that order.

Countries that already enjoy the benefits of a knowledge-rich curriculum are able to design course-related assessments—tying classroom and system-wide evaluations to what students are actually being taught. Rather than waste time prepping for what might be on the test, students and teachers can be confident that mastering the course content will prepare them for what they will be asked to demonstrate and do.

With rich curriculum content, meaningful assessments, and quality teaching resources in place, we would finally be ready to dramatically improve teacher preparation, development, and evaluation. New teachers would enter classrooms having already studied and practiced teaching the curriculum they are to use. Their on-the-job professional development would be based on the curriculum, giving them common ground to work together, observe each other, and share and refine lessons. And, how much more meaningful and fair could teacher evaluation become once teaching is based on common learning expectations and a common professional understanding of what constitutes excellent instruction?⁶

If teacher preparation, on-the-job professional development, texts and other instructional materials, and assessments could all be tied to the curriculum, we would have a better foundation for identifying teachers’ strengths and weaknesses, for helping them do better, and for telling those who can’t improve to find new jobs.

Recommendations

In calling for the development of common curriculum content, we are well aware that this will require a sea change in the way that education in America is structured. We do not believe that it will be easy, but are convinced it is necessary to raise achievement nationally and narrow our disgraceful achievement gaps. Specifically, we call for the following:

1. Developing one or more sets of curriculum guides that map out the core content students need to master the new Common Core State Standards. States could collaborate with each other in the development of their curricula, each could develop its own, or they could adopt an exemplary curricula developed by an independent organization. Regardless of its origins, each curriculum guide should be coherent and sequenced, and lead to roughly the same store of student knowledge and capabilities by grade 12. Each should approximate what students in other high-performing countries study at comparable ages. And, each should establish a content sequence for teaching that reflects the best of what is known about how students build knowledge upon knowledge, concept upon concept.

2. Involving teachers, content experts, and cognitive scientists—not just curriculum designers by trade—in the development of such curriculum guides. Of these, expert teachers tend to be the most overlooked. But they have special insights into the interaction between content knowledge and the ways students acquire it—including students’ most common mistakes and misunderstandings, and the most effective methods to help overcome them.

3. Writing the common core curriculum guides with care and restraint, such that—when taught at a reasonable pace, with reasonable depth—they would account for about 50 to 60 percent of a school’s available academic time. Such curricula should allow sufficient time to add important content desired by teachers, the local community, district, or state. For example, some states may want to add state history; individual districts might want to use local resources to expand upon particular art or science topics; a particular teacher may want to incorporate his love of art into English classes; and a particular class of students may want to extend the planned unit on thermodynamics. Teachers will want to tailor instruction to the academic needs, interests, and experiences of students in their classrooms, and will need the curricular space to do so.

4. Including sample lessons, examples of acceptable levels of student work, and assessments that help teachers focus instruction as well as measure student outcomes. We do not, however, recommend that any specific pedagogical approach be adopted for broad-scale use. If the curriculum guide calls for the structure and movement of the solar system to be learned in the fourth grade, then supporting materials may offer ideas for how to teach it. But some teachers may choose to have students spend a week building scale models of the solar system, others may give an engaging lecture followed by a NOVA video; others may integrate the lessons with other concepts (such as the chemical properties of gasses and solids) or disciplines (such as drawing and writing about planetary characteristics).

5. Establishing a non-governmental quality control body, with a governance structure composed of professionals: teachers, content experts, cognitive scientists, curriculum designers, and assessment authorities. This body could help judge the strengths and weaknesses of particular curricula, as well as the quality and relevance of the textbooks, trade books, software, classroom materials, and assessments developed to support their implementation. Such a body might also sponsor research on the effectiveness of various curricula and approaches in reaching the Common Core State Standards, and oversee periodic (possibly every five years) revisions.

6. Creating state teaching quality oversight bodies to work on linking student standards and curriculum guidance to teacher preparation and development and to ensure that sufficient resources are allotted to these efforts.

7. Increasing federal investments in implementation support, in comparative international studies related to curriculum and instruction, and in evaluations aimed at finding the most effective curriculum sequences, curriculum materials, curricular designs, and instructional strategies.

¹ Rachel E. Durham, George Farkas, Carol Scheffner Hammer, J. Bruce Tomblin, and Hugh W. Catts, “Kindergarten Oral Language Skill: A Key Variable in the Intergenerational Transmission of Socioeconomic Status,” *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 25, no. 4 (2007): 294–305; David Grissmer, Kevin J. Grimm, Sophie M. Aiyer, William M. Murrah, and Joel S. Steele, “Fine Motor Skills and Early Comprehension of the World: Two New School Readiness Indicators,” *Developmental Psychology* 46, no. 5 (2010): 1008–1017, http://128.143.21.143/temp/grissmer_motorskills.doc; and Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children* (Baltimore: Brookes Publishing, 1995).

²For a fuller explanation of why this is so, see E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

³ Donna R. Recht and Lauren Leslie, “Effect of Prior Knowledge on Good and Poor Readers’ Memory of Text,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 80, no. 1 (1988): 16–20.

⁴ Marilyn Jager Adams, “The Challenge of Advanced Texts: The Interdependence of Reading and Learning,” in *Reading More, Reading Better: Are American Students Reading Enough of the Right Stuff?*, ed. Elfrieda H. Hiebert (New York: Guilford, 2009), <http://www.childrenofthecode.org/library/MJA-ChallengeofAdvancedTexts.pdf>.

⁵ General Accounting Office, *Elementary School Children: Many Change Schools Frequently, Harming Their Education* (Washington, DC: GAO, 1994); and Larry Long, “International Perspectives on the Residential Mobility of America’s children,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54 (1992): 861–869.

⁶ For more on this, see David K. Cohen, “Teacher Quality: An American Educational Dilemma,” in *Teacher Assessment and the Quest for Teacher Quality: A Handbook*, ed. Mary Kennedy (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

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