

The Fight Against Common Core: Focus on the Right Fight

A. Patrick Huff, PhD

Field Supervisor

Department of Educational Leadership & Counseling Department
Whitlowe R. Green College of Education
Prairie View A&M University
Prairie View, TX

Abstract

The opposition to the Common Core State Standards has grown in intensity among politicians, and the general public. Talk show personalities have come out on either side with the usual left versus right spin that has divided the two camps very well. At stake are some key issues that carry lots of dollar signs related to funding from the federal government and tax-exempt foundations. For parents, many are coming down on the opposition side to Common Core for personal reasons related to quality of education for their children and the right to have a voice in what is taught at the public schools their children attend. Unfortunately, they are misguided. They are not misguided from the standpoint of wanting to have a voice in their child's education, but misguided in how to go about achieving that aim. This article addresses what should be the primary focus of every parent and school educator. The central issue in school reform is not the Common Core standards, or any other standards based curriculum. The focus of the fight to regain public education lies in the Accountability System and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

The latest article by Stephanie Simon (2014) highlights the continued battle raging over the Common Core Standards. Ms. Simon does an excellent job of laying out the two sides and showing where this showdown is headed. The article points out how the moms of America are gaining some momentum and creating a groundswell of support for their cause. It is good to see the moms across the country rising up and fighting this federal agenda, but it is also unfortunate to see so many fighting the opposition not realizing they are fighting the wrong issue. They are right about these standards completely federalizing public education. They are right that Common Core continues to dumb down the students causing this problem that businesses and colleges are seeing with ill equipped graduates. The problem is not so much in the standards as it is in the method of delivery and the accountability system that forces teachers into scripted lessons meant to equip students to take a standardized test.

The Monster in the Middle of the Room That Isn't Talked About

The monster that has kept the public school accountability system on course for at least thirty years is the standardized testing format. This format is now completely engrained in every public school across America. Most of the moms fighting Common Core grew up with this type of education and know nothing else. They have always taken a standardized test once a year that purported to measure their academic progress. What they need to realize is that education in the public schools did not always operate this way. This format started gradually in the early 80's and incrementally moved from a benign accountability measuring system to the behemoth that we have today. The use of the standardized test to grade schools virtually has a lock on every facet of the student's academic program. By that I simply mean that the vast amount of time spent in a teacher's lesson preparation goes to support those essential elements that will be found in some capacity on the state mandated test. These essential elements are called TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) in Texas. For a comparison in your state, look for those cognitive skills that are embedded into lesson plans identified as essential skills to learn in each grade. These cognitive skills usually have a name to identify the skill set. A supporter of keeping the status quo would ask, "What is wrong with that? If what a student needs to learn to be college and career ready is taught through the essential elements, and those are evaluated through the test, is not that what we are looking to accomplish?" The answer to that question is a whole different topic and one for another article, but suffice it to say that through the essential elements and the subsequent test, information and knowledge is controlled by those who create the content essential elements. What is taught through the essential elements is that which is tested and therefore that which is valued. If it is not on the test, it is not taught. One has to ask the question, what is being left out of what should be a well-rounded liberal arts public school education? Ask that question to the business leaders and college entrance evaluators. Apparently much is left out due to the outcry from those business owners and college entrance evaluators who see the students after they have taken the tests, passed the tests, and graduated.

There will not be any change in this outcome of deficiency if Common Core is removed and another set of standards is put in its place. The reason for this is that the controlling mechanism that produces the deficiency is left in place. That controlling mechanism is the standardized testing, accountability system. If moms want to fight a fight that will truly change the landscape in public education the outcomes based accountability system is the enemy you want to go up against. Common Core is simply the next evolution of the same standards that have been in place for many years. Some of the language may be different, and some of the standards may be introduced at a different grade level, but it is pretty much the same old standards put in a new wrapper. If the school landscape is to change, the accountability system currently in place has to be eradicated.

Adequate Yearly Progress Insanity

To understand the accountability system and the grip it has on educators in every public school system in America, one has to wrap their brain around the term *Adequate Yearly Progress* (AYP). This is a term every school administrator knows, but most of the public is unaware of this key element of school accountability. Remember when President Bush declared that by 2014 every student in America would achieve proficiency on the state test? That was said back in 2002

when No Child Left Behind was made the law of the land for all public schools. That was a nice proclamation to make if it was intended as a goal. Instead it was put into law and it set in play a time-bomb that would lead to most of the public schools in America failing to achieve standards in their school report card by 2014. All students, being proficient, translates to 100% in statistical terms. I state the obvious simply to make a point and let it sink in. Who in their right mind would make into law that all students would pass the state test? Well, that's just what President Bush did. Not a goal, but a law. This meant that schools had to begin moving toward 100% in their passing percentages each year. This is why the passing percentages for the schools rose each year. Most of the public is completely unaware of this part of the accountability system. We were moving toward 100%. But a funny thing happened on the way to becoming proficient. As we moved closer to 2014, more schools failed to meet standards, not less. But what did the schools fail? They failed to meet standards of AYP. They failed to meet the percentages required for that year's AYP mandate.

After two years of failing to meet standards of AYP, a school must go into the *school improvement program*. Unfortunately, once a school goes into this program, they rarely improve. That's because just as you think you are making progress toward meeting standards, the standards go up. Remember, schools have to reach the 100% mark. Are you beginning to see the picture? It's a fixed game. Once a school fails for five years in a row in the same subgroup, the state has the authority to restructure the school. The restructuring can take the path of turning the school into a charter school. Another option is to simply close the school. Both of these options become a seriously disruptive action to everyone in the school community. Most educators who work in these schools lose their job. This is not because teachers are not working tirelessly to try and get their students to pass. It is because the reality is not every student will pass. They never have, and they never will. I know we don't want to say that, or admit it, but it is the truth. With the school accountability system that is in place, every student has to pass or severe penalties go in place. The fact that every student will not pass is the reality; schools in low-income, high poverty areas are the target schools and the first to fail. But eventually with AYP moving to the required 100%, all schools will fail.

School Standards = AYP

In 2011 (TEA, 2012), the federal AYP standard to pass Reading/Language Arts was 80% and Math was 75%. That means that as a group all students collectively had to achieve an 80% and a 75% passing rate for the school to *meet standards*. These percentages also pertain to each individual subgroup. Each ethnicity, English Language Learner, Special Education, and Low Socio-Economic students collectively as a subgroup, had to meet the percentages. That's what standards are according to AYP. For the purposes of school accountability, standards are not educational goals or essential elements built into the curriculum. Standards are the AYP percentages. When a school does not meet AYP, it is reported that they *failed to meet standards*. Standards according to the accountability system are the AYP percentages required for that year. Most people outside of education observe that a school did not meet standards, and they make assumptions that the school is a bad school. They think that the sanctions placed on the school are justified. They think that these sanctions will force teachers to work harder and do a better job in the classroom. Sanctions will force the schools to improve, and if they don't improve, they deserve what they get. Do you see the danger in this thinking? It is playing directly into the

hands of those who wish to control the education agenda. In 2011, 33% of the schools in Texas failed to meet AYP (Cain, 2011). I use Texas, as an example, simply because I live in Texas and also experienced the high stakes testing format as a middle school and high school principal in Texas. Nationwide, there was a 48% failure rate (Usher, 2011). If you want to see the trend in your state, research the AYP failing percentages for schools beginning in 2011. You will see a sharp increase in school failures. This is due to the percentages becoming out of reach for many schools, especially in the urban districts with high rates of poverty. But wait, that would mean that No Child Left Behind was leaving behind the very students it purported to want to help. Could that be true? Unfortunately, it is the truth. By 2012, the AYP percentages went up to 87 % for Reading/ELA and 83% in Math (TEA, 2012). At this point, failure was expected to be rampant. Superintendents and principals were in a state of panic. The handwriting was on the wall. Everyone was going to fail by the time we get to 2014, because every student will not pass. The net result was that many would have failed but AYP was put on hold by the U.S. Department of Education (TEA, 2013).

The Waiver

Another interesting development happened on the way to 2014. President Obama offered the *waiver*. The Elementary and Secondary Waiver Package disbanded AYP and released the schools from the 100% mandate. You see you can't have every school district in America fail. That would only point out the obvious that the system was not working and was rigged from the start. With the panic by superintendents at a fever pitch, President Obama just happened to have an answer to the problem. He would use his pen and by Executive Order decree a waiver would be offered to every state if the state could devise its own accountability system that demonstrates rigor for college and career readiness. The Waiver would rescue the states from the requirement of 100 % proficiency on the test by 2014.

Oh, wait.... just two important items have to be in the plan that each state submits. The first mandatory requirement to acceptance into the waiver is the state must agree to adopt the Common Core State Standards. The second mandatory requirement for the waiver is to link the evaluation of teachers and administrators to the outcomes of their students on the test. Just those two things and the waiver can be yours. Forty-five states accepted initially. Five states abstained. Unfortunately, those five states have mostly been approved for the waiver, as well, due to their new accountability plans having the necessary ingredients. Linking the evaluation of the teacher to their student's outcomes on the state test has never been done in Texas. A new teacher appraisal format will be piloted for the 2014-2015 school year. Word is that it will have an element linked to the student's outcomes.

Facing Reality

AYP was disbanded for a short term. This was done to give states time to submit their new plans for accountability and bring in Common Core, and make sure that every teacher will move in lock step since their evaluation depends on getting their students to pass the state test. Now that every state is essentially in unison, AYP has returned wrapped in a different format that is somewhat more complicated than the old AYP formula. Since the accountability system and AYP is now used again to grade schools, look for many schools across the country to begin

failing again. Failure is the plan. With the fear of failure, control is obtained. A state of fear is good for those who wish to control education.

Moms of America, please see this article for what it is. It is good you are fighting for your children. You are, however, fighting the wrong enemy. Concentrate on ridding your state of the accountability system in place and return the schools to the rightful control of those independent agencies called the local education agency. LEA's are the local districts governed by school board members that you elect. At the present time, school board members have very little authority. Federal law, built around the standards (AYP) controls the academic decisions of school boards. Those that control education would like nothing better than to move parents out of the picture through eliminating school boards. Charter schools are springing up all over the country. Laws have been enacted in State Legislatures that allow for additional charters. Charter schools do not have school boards. When politicians speak of *school choice*, they mean charter school promotion and vouchers. Anyone who pushes school choice is in the hip pocket of the corporations that benefit from charter schools and vouchers. If your conservative Republican representative or candidate mentions school choice, understand who is funding their campaign. If your liberal Democrat candidate promotes Common Core, understand that they're in the hip pocket of corporations that benefit from Common Core. Get the picture. Please, let's all wake up and realize that we have been played.

Here are the changes that must be made in order to get our school systems to the point where we can begin to put the pieces back together.

1. The Accountability System must be dismantled. Local school districts must regain control and it can't be accomplished as long as the federal accountability system remains in place.
2. Standardized Tests used to demonstrate a student's gained knowledge and worthiness for graduation needs to end. A standardized test should be used only for diagnostic purposes to help a student in their educational path. That's it, end of story. I'm sorry if that makes the Testing Industrial Complex upset.
3. Allow the local school districts to determine which curriculum is right for their students in their local area. This is what existed prior to Common Core. Can you imagine? Local ability to choose your own curriculum. Now that is real school choice.
4. Return the teacher to their rightful place as the purveyor of knowledge in the classroom. Any use of technology needs to be supplemental, and not used as an instrument that replaces the teacher. The art of teaching must be allowed to continue. If this is not done an educational aide, at a greatly reduced cost to the school district, will soon replace the teacher. One aide to 50 students is a pretty good deal for the school district. Think about it, if all the aide has to do is direct the student to what lesson is scheduled for viewing in the tablet or laptop a teacher's independent knowledge and experience is not needed. The grading is instantly done, as well. What a great system! Heck, make it one aide to 100 students!! Sorry for the sarcasm, but what difference does it make if the student looks to the electronic device as the source of information and knowledge. At that point, the device becomes the teacher.

This is a starting point. If these four changes are made we will be a long way down the path of authentic school reform. Taking our schools back is the rightful path every parent and

educator in the profession should be fighting for. Don't be led down a path that leads to nowhere. Organize and fight the good fight; but fight the right fight.

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