PIONEER
EDUCATION

Common Core, School Choice & Rethinking Standards-Based Reform

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Foreword by Patrick J. Wolf

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Executive Summary

The Common Core curriculum standards represent the culmination of three decades of federally driven centralization of curriculum decision-making, away from parents and local educators and toward state and national officials. At each stage of this process, failure to achieve lofty educational goals or to improve international competitiveness in math and science has been used as justification for additional centralization, until we reached the endpoint of national the Common Core.

Curriculum standards-based reform has been promoted by some advocates as useful primarily for the sake of accountability, in conjunction with deregulation of schools. When married with school choice reforms, standards-based tests have been portrayed as providing valuable information to assist families in making informed choices among schools. But, in reality, curriculum standards-based reform has meant something very different for most schools. State and national officials have sought to use the standards along with various policy levers, including testing, teacher licensure, textbook adoption, and others, to guide teachers in creating excellence in the classroom. At the local level, most schools work dutifully to "align" (conform) all aspects of their academic operations as well as train their teachers to instruct in the manner envisioned in the curriculum standards. The standards thus function as both curriculum central planning and proactive blueprint for local academic operations. This reality is quite far from the notion of standards as an after-the-fact measuring stick to evaluate results combined with reduced prescription on how those results should be achieved. It is also at odds with the dynamic, innovative environment sought by school choice advocates.

After several years of Common Core implementation by the overwhelming majority of states, results are in on both international assessments and the respected National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Unfortunately, the trends range from mediocre to downright poor. After several decades, originating long before standards-based reform, of small gains that were not substantial enough to improve our international competitiveness but were still positive, we are now seeing the first statistically significant declines in student achievement. Math achievement at grades 4 and 8 has declined compared to four years ago—the most intensive period of Common Core implementation—especially for lower performing students who were already behind. U.S. international performance in math on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) remained far from the top tier, which was led by Singapore. Overall U.S. results in reading on the NAEP at grades 4 and 8 are not significantly different compared to four years ago, but there were significant declines for lower-performing students. International results in reading showed flat performance for U.S. 15-year-olds but a decline at grade 4.

The disappointing results of Common Core are important to understand because they are representative of broader problems with standards-based reform. Common Core was launched on an explicit premise that it would address our internationally uncompetitive mathematics curriculum, which has most of our students taking Algebra I in 9th grade, two years later than students in high-achieving nations. This, along with other flaws in the curriculum, results in far fewer American students being prepared for math-based careers, including for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) majors in college.

Despite the explicit initial focus on improving the competitiveness of our math curriculum, the final Common Core math standards still aim to prepare most students for Algebra I in 9th grade, no more advanced than previously. Common Core's highly political, consensus-driven, insider-dominated approach was too timid to replace the uncompetitive, lower level math that preceded it. Instead, it promoted various instructional methods favored by its developers, including some long-standing progressivist dogmas that reach back many decades, are not well-supported by research, and are at odds with the curricular approach of high-achieving nations. These elements are embedded in the various Common Core-based tests, which are designed to drive instruction in the direction envisioned by the Core and its developers. Additional information and examples of these problems are detailed in the section of this paper focused on Common Core. (Unfortunately, state curriculum-based tests are often similar in nature.) One of the results has been a parent backlash that first drew national attention to Common Core in Indiana private schools, where the state had coerced Common Core-based testing, resulting in Common Core math. It is time for the federal government to allow states to rethink standards-based reform, as well as to adopt fundamentally different approaches to education reform.

In parallel to these curriculum standards-based reforms in the public schools, there has been a steadily growing parallel reform movement to extend private school choice to a

broader group of families than ever before through tuition grants ("vouchers") or tax credits. America has a long history of vibrant, independent private education, one that actually precedes that of our public schools. American private schools have historically operated in a highly autonomous manner, with diverse academic approaches and a range of other civic, ethical, and religious educational goals. A growing body of research supports that American private schools strengthen social and civic ties in addition to their strong academic record.

School choice programs aim to empower parents financially to select the most appropriate education for their children while encouraging innovation, dynamism, and competition to meet their needs. High quality research increasingly documents the long-term benefits of school choice programs for participating students and even some benefits for students in nearby schools who do not participate. Yet, because of the potential such programs bring for added government regulation and control, they also represent a risk that must be carefully managed if their promise is to be realized without irreparably harming the very thing that proponents wish to extend. It is common in foreign countries that provide public funding for private schools that curricular autonomy is lost over time. Such tendencies are apparent in the U.S. as well. In the name of poorly designed "accountability," nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of school choice programs that involve public funds require that participating private schools administer a single curriculum-based test as a condition of participation. Even less well known is that such tests inherently pressure schools to adopt the curriculum on which they are based in order to permit students to score well. Therefore, they should never be mandated. Often, such mandates were not originally part of a choice program but were added at a later date. However, the good news is that 95 percent of the (more numerous) tax credit school choice programs do *not* include harmful mandates of this type. Depending on the program, a tax credit may either accrue to the student's parent or to a donor contributing to a scholarship organization. In the latter case, even parents of limited means who pay little in taxes can still benefit. Since funds in tax credit choice programs are viewed as non-public funds, such programs seem far more likely to resist regulatory overreach.

While private school choice offers the boldest break with the top-down, curriculum central planning model of school reform that has been dominant recently, there is also a great deal of room for rethinking curriculum standards-based reform within the public sector. Instead of continuing to impose a single, stultifying set of curriculum standards on all schools in a state, states could allow Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and charters to choose from a broad, vetted state list of diverse standards and aligned assessments. State vetting would focus on technical review and seek to avoid imposing any curricular or pedagogical uniformity. LEAs and charters would select the standards-based assessment that best align with their local curricular vision and needs. Over time, some of the same standards-based assessments would be approved in multiple states, resulting in scale and encouraging investment in innovative instructional materials. States would develop different approaches to accountability that fit their needs. This model would require a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education under current law. At the next reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Congress should eliminate the mandate that every state must impose a state-wide set of curriculum standards on all local school systems and charter schools within its jurisdiction. States should be able to experiment with different approaches to education reform and accountability that do not require all local schools to follow the same, centrally planned curriculum content and sequence. Under this model, local initiative would drive reform instead of the central testing tail continuing to attempt to wag the local curriculum dog. President Donald Trump said as a candidate that he wished to return education to the local level—this step would be essential in fulfilling that promise.

Another option for states that is closer to the current system is to try to build on the pre-Common Core Massachusetts reform model. Of the small number of states with quality state-wide curriculum standards before Common Core, Massachusetts was the most successful at raising student academic achievement. The task for policymakers seeking to emulate this state's era of success would be to develop curriculum standards that avoid the typical, mediocre, local consensus product—most likely by engaging a core team of visionary curriculum standards drafters with a clear, ambitious goal—and develop a broader process for input, buy-in and local implementation.

Additional recommendations and detail are included in the Conclusion.

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Foreword

By Patrick J. Wolf

Public Administration scholar Paul C. Light likens management reforms to ocean tides.[1] Reforms wash in and recede, leaving new contours to the beach. The four reform tides that Light identifies are Scientific Management, War on Waste, Watchful Eye, and Liberation Management. All four tides are in tension with each other but no two of them conflict more directly than Scientific Management, defined by standardization and command-and-control, and Liberation Management, defined by decentralization, choice and competition.

In this report, Theodor Rebarber and Neal McCluskey describe the current clash in the education policy arena between the Scientific Management reform of Common Core curricular standards and the Liberation Management reform of parental school choice. Common Core standards are literally an attempt to standardize what students in various states across the country are supposed to learn at specific points in their educational experience. The managers of educational systems then are expected to use Common Core aligned standardized tests to verify that the correct lessons have been both taught in specific ways and learned, and to hold school leaders and teachers accountable when students fail to achieve proficiency. The Common Core approach is straight out of the Scientific Management playbook.

Parental school choice, in contrast, is the educational embodiment of Liberation Management. Parents are free to select the public or private school their child attends. School leaders are free from government control to make the environment and program of their schools distinctive, even daring, in design and operation. Educators are free, to the extent permitted by school leaders, to deliver instruction in whatever way they think will best provoke learning in their charges. Success is judged mainly based on parental satisfaction with the school's achievements in nurturing multiple aspects of their child's development. Assessment is conducted primarily to inform parents and school personnel about each child's areas of strength and weakness, generally referred to as "formative assessment."[2] If parents are disappointed with their child's progress in school, and they think that the school is at fault, they are encouraged to vote with their feet in favor of a rival school of choice that they think will better serve their child. The mere threat of such transfers motivates schools of choice to deliver the student results that parents desire, generating a "rising tide" of quality that lifts all boats.[3]

Standardized testing of student achievement, generally referred to as "summative assessment," is a consideration for proponents of both Common Core curricular standards and parental school choice. For Common Core supporters, summative assessment is central to education reform. "You don't know what you don't test," they are fond of saying to justify the use of multi-day standardized student exams for school accountability purposes.

The role of summative assessment varies across parental school choice programs. For all public forms of school choice—including public charter schools, magnet schools, and open-enrollment—standardized testing using the official state accountability exam is mandatory, with stakes attached to the school-level test results. For private school choice programs supported by public funds—including vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, and Education Savings Accounts—standardized testing is a matter of policy design. Of the 54 programs in 27 states plus DC, 41 percent of them have no student testing requirements, though some participating schools administer such tests voluntarily. Another 30 percent of private school choice programs require private schools to test the students participating in the choice program but allow the school to select the specific summative exam to use. Only 24 percent of private school choice programs mandate that participating private schools administer the official state accountability exam, which generally is Common Core aligned, to their choice students.[4] This last set of Liberation Management education reforms come with a strong rip-tide of Scientific Management tugging at them.

Rebarber and McCluskey spend much of the first half of the report carefully documenting the development, rise, and recent stumble of curriculum standards-based reform, including of the specific type known as Common Core. They point out that two models of Common Core-like reforms emerged at the dawn of this movement. The first model, which they call "curriculum central planning," was highly prescriptive regarding educational content, method, and sequencing. The second model included more choice in its design, borrowing from Liberation Management to balance a reform otherwise dominated by the principles of Scientific Management. When push came to shove, the more prescriptive model won.

What was achieved by the adoption of some form of the Common Core curricular standards in English and Math by 45 states and the District of Columbia? The authors demonstrate that "most results to date have ranged from mediocre

to outright poor." Common Core supporters who expected scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress, the "Nation's Report Card," to surge from 2013 to 2017 in the wake of Common Core's widespread adoption and intensive implementation, were perplexed when, instead, NAEP scores in several grade levels and subject areas actually declined, especially for lower-performing students who were already behind. A separate analysis, focused on the 14 states that adopted the most Common Core aligned test, Smarter Balanced, with data from 2016 and 2017, reports a mix of modest gains and modest losses in math proficiency across those two years.[5] In English language arts (ELA), only one state using Smarter Balance tests registered a gain in student proficiency rates from 2016 to 2017: California, with a meager advance of 0.1 percentage point. Thirteen Smarter Balanced states recorded losses in ELA proficiency rates across the two years, with the proportion of Vermont students reaching the benchmark dropping by 4.0 percentage points. National achievement declines were not what Common Core advocates had promised. What about the alternative?

Much of the second half of the report describes publicly funded private school choice as an alternative reform to Common Core. Private schooling was widespread in America during the Colonial period and throughout the 19th Century.[6] By 1840, when common public schools were just getting started, "roughly 90 percent of white, adult Americans (were) literate," the authors point out. Private schooling has remained attractive, especially to communities of students with distinctive religious and philosophical backgrounds or educational needs. The cost of private schooling has remained a burden for many families, however, as a household that chooses to send their child to a private school still has to pay taxes in support of public schools their child is not attending as well as increasingly more expensive private school tuition. Public funding of private school choice represents an attempt to make private schooling options accessible to poor families as well as rich ones.

Does it work? As the authors point out, that depends upon how you define program success. "Gold standard" experimental evaluations tend to report modest positive effects of private school choice programs on student test scores, but some rigorous studies conclude that school choice has no or even negative effects on test outcomes. Private school choice may have larger and more consistent positive effects on how far students go in school, called educational attainment, but only three private school choice programs have been evaluated based on their attainment effects so far.[7] The authors point out that educational freedom counts for something as well, and arguably should count for a lot when evaluating education reforms. When families are free to choose their child's school, public or private, the voluntary associations that result may promote civic comity.

Other countries, besides the U.S., have long experience with the public funding of private school choice. These mostly European or Commonwealth countries—including The Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, and Canada—tend to blend school choice with an extensive set of regulations on participating private schools. In The Netherlands, for example, private schools receiving government funds must follow the national curricular standards and employ government-certified teachers. The authors of this report caution against the U.S. adopting the European model of heavily regulated private school choice. They want the Liberation Management reform to remain free of most encumbrances.

Rebarber and McCluskey teach us much about Common Core curricular standards and publicly-funded private school choice. The full vision of Common Core was that a scientific consensus regarding student educational development would be embraced voluntarily by every U.S. state. Tests aligned with the standards then would demonstrate accelerated progress towards high rates of student educational proficiency. Perhaps we should not be surprised that an inherently political process involving the education of over 50 million children instead would become dogged by disagreements, protests, and a general sense of disappointment. It is a tall order to manage scientifically the teaching of children from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon, and the source of the Mississippi to its delta. Diversity has long been a hallmark of these United States, especially in the area of education. At its essence, this fine report gives us good reasons, at least in the area of K–12 education, to favor more *pluribus* and less *unum*.

Introduction

The Common Core curriculum standards represent the culmination of nearly three decades of federally driven centralization of curriculum—including content, pedagogy, and curriculum-based testing—in American K–12 education. Over the course of this period, decisions moved further away from schools and school systems upward toward higher levels of government. As the most recent iteration of this broader movement, often referred to (somewhat misleadingly) as "standards-based reform,"[8] the national Common Core represents a policy response to the limited success of earlier versions, which shifted control from local communities and schools to government bureaucracies in state capitals. At each stage of this project, begun in the early 1990s, policymakers have seen failure to achieve promised results as justification for more centralization and control over curriculum. Yet, key underlying assumptions—a prescriptive federal role and central curriculum planning by government officials not responsible for the operation of schools—have largely gone unquestioned. It is past time to begin questioning these assumptions, especially for schools of choice.

Common Core curriculum standards represent the culmination of nearly three decades of federally driven centralization of curriculum

School choice represents a fundamentally different strand of education reform that has developed in parallel to the curriculum standards movement over roughly the same time period. Starting with the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program established by the Wisconsin legislature in 1990,[9] an increasing number of states have established programs that empower parents—often of limited or moderate means—to afford private education for their children by either: a) enabling them to direct public funds to pay for tuition at a school of their choice ("vouchers"); or b) providing tax credits that make private funds available to pay for tuition at a school of their choice, such as through tax benefits directly to the parents or for donations to nonprofit organizations that offer scholarships. Twenty-nine states and Washington, D.C., have private school choice "voucher" or tax credit programs and most well-designed evaluations in the United States and abroad, have found significant benefits over time for participating students, especially in longer-term life outcomes.[10] While this promising movement still directly affects far fewer students than Common Core and standards-based reform, it continues to grow in numbers and acceptance, and there is no logical limit on its ultimate impact.

A more limited form of school choice has also been attempted within the public school system, including semi-independent "charter" public schools. While addressing this branch of reform is beyond the scope of this paper, Jeanne Allen of the Center for Education Reform and her colleagues (among others) have astutely warned against the gradual encrustation of regulations that have increasingly threatened charter flexibility, innovation, and ability to meet the diverse needs of families.[11] On the other hand, school choice, especially full private school choice, is predicated on offering educators the opportunity to establish institutions with curricula and academic programs that differ greatly from what is available in other public or private schools, and allowing parents to select the school that best meets the needs of each individual child.

Two Visions of "Standards-Based Reform": One Wins

At the dawn of the "standards-based reform" movement in the early 1990s, two ostensibly different approaches for what this would mean in practice became influential among advocates and policymakers. The first was outlined in an article written by Marshall Smith of Stanford University with colleague Jennifer O'Day entitled "Systemic School Reform."[12] In brief, state curriculum standards would serve as the fulcrum on which policymakers would manipulate various policy levers—including, but not limited to, student tests, teacher training, and curricular materials—to create an "aligned" system that would guide local educators in implementing excellent teaching in the classroom. We refer to this approach as the "curriculum central planning" model.

A second approach was popularized by Chester E. Finn, Jr., who described a system in which curriculum standards defined what students should know and be able to do, schools had flexibility on how to help students learn the material, aligned assessments measured student learning results, and there were positive incentives or interventions for schools based on their success or failure. This model did not necessarily assume school choice for regular public schools, framing standards-based reform primarily in terms of accountability

for results and touting wide freedom for local schools and educators in designing curriculum and teaching. Finn promoted a version of this approach to conservative and libertarian education reformers who, until then, had focused almost exclusively on market reforms through private school choice. For example, at a gathering at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C., in 1990, Finn described a vision of reform where school choice and curriculum standards-based reform would function harmoniously together, "a choice scheme that incorporates clear information by which parents can see if Johnny or Buffy and their schools are or aren't meeting certain standards."[13] From a practical standpoint, curriculum standards-based tests would thus be a source of information used primarily by parents, at the end of a school year, to inform their choice of schooling for the subsequent year. Parents still appear to be driving the process, but good information would allow the market mechanism to function more efficiently. This model, when married to school choice policies, may be referred to as "informed parental choice." Many conservative-leaning reformers, especially influential elected officials and their staffs, were ultimately persuaded and it became common for proposed reforms to attempt to integrate school choice reforms with curriculum standards-based reforms.

Over the ensuing decades, the actual implementation of curriculum standards-based reform has overwhelmingly tended to resemble the "curriculum central planning" approach rather than either of Finn's visions of "informed parental choice" or, in the traditional public schools, deregulation and accountability (i.e., primarily based on test scores). Within the traditional public schools, curriculum standards-based testing has only rarely been used as the basis for strong consequences in pursuit of accountability. Closings of traditional public schools as a result of poor academic performance remain extremely rare. Political opposition and established public school administrative practices largely stymied efforts by the Obama Administration to incentivize states to implement state-wide, test score-based accountability through teacher evaluations.[14] Financial rewards based on school-wide or individual teacher performance on curriculum standards-based tests are not widely implemented and inconsistently funded. Despite the statutory language of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), students in schools labeled "in need of improvement" often were not given the meaningful choice of a better public school; districts evaded and stonewalled with such tactics as releasing test results earning the school the "in need of improvement" label long after the time to transfer had ended, or simply not telling parents they were eligible to move their child.[15]

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Thus, especially among traditional public schools, Finn's model of deregulated schools, parent-driven school choice, and accountability for results has mostly remained a rhetorical vision. At best, it has been implemented only on the margins. In retrospect, this should not be surprising—it is not the way in which public bureaucracies normally operate, and centrally planned curriculum standards provided government policymakers a powerful new tool by which to control and standardize the very core of school and classroom operation: *what* and *how* teachers teach.

Instead, most states have implemented curriculum standards-based reform largely consistent with Smith and O'Day's approach. This development has certainly been the case in recent years with the implementation of Common Core. State policymakers adopted Common Core curriculum standards and Common Core-based student assessments though, in some cases, they later exchanged one Common Core assessment for another in order to ameliorate political opposition. State policymakers re-focused preparation programs for teachers on Common Core, including teaching standards and licensing, professional development for teacher preparation faculty, teacher preparation program approval and accountability requirements, and state teacher licensure assessments.[16] In states with adoption processes for instructional materials, such as California, state policymakers have selected Common Core-focused textbooks and other materials.[17] State policymakers also organized extensive training and professional development for existing teachers on implementing Common Core. For example, through the Obama Administration's Race to the Top program, Maryland implemented Common Core training workshops for teams of educators from every public school in the small state.[18] Teachers across multiple states reported receiving four to five days of training on teaching the Common Core during both the 2013–14 and 2014–15 school years.[19]

As a result of such state policies and programs, most local public schools and individual teachers have worked diligently to bring their academic programs into "alignment" (i.e., compliance) with Common Core curriculum standards. A survey of educators for the publication *Education Week* similarly found that 80 percent expected their classroom instruction to change either somewhat or a great deal as a result of

most local public schools and individual teachers have worked diligently to bring their academic programs into "alignment" (i.e., compliance) with Common Core

Common Core.[20] A more intensive investigation of Common Core implementation in several states found that, while there may still be room to increase it, the great majority of teachers are implementing Common Core in their classrooms. About three quarters (76 percent) of classroom teachers reported that they have had to change at least half of their classroom instruction in order to align to Common Core, while approximately three quarters indicated they had changed a majority of their instructional materials. Eighty-five percent (85 percent) assessed their own knowledge of Common Core as "good" or "excellent" while more than four fifths (81 percent) believed that teachers were effectively implementing Common Core. A majority of teachers (57 percent) reported using sample items from the Common Core tests at least a few times each month to help students practice the test question formats and nearly a quarter of teachers (23 percent) reported using sample items with their students at least a few times each week. Nearly half of teachers (47 percent) received feedback on their Common Core implementation based on observations of their classroom teaching.[21] Another study that looked at Common Core implementation found that 71 percent of Common Core English language arts teachers and 68 percent of Common Core math teachers modified their teaching practices either somewhat or to a great extent as a result of the first year (2014–15) of Common Core national testing.[22]

Thus, curriculum standards-based reform has functioned as a centrally planned blueprint for teaching and learning. All relevant school operations and classroom teaching—the core of schooling—are brought into compliance with the detailed national or state curriculum standards. The operational reality for curriculum standards-based reform is far more consistent with Smith's vision of government officials' wielding various policy levers to proactively guide what takes place in schools and classrooms than with Finn's emphasis on standards-based reform as primarily after-the-fact accountability for results or informed parental choice.

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The Standards-Based Road to Common Core: How We Got Here

Before the advent of curriculum standards-based reform, most U.S. states left curriculum and pedagogical decisions to local public education authorities, private schools, and home-schooling parents. Yet several years of debate about the quality of American K–12 schools, launched in large part by the *A Nation At Risk* report in 1983, established a public perception that major reform was necessary. In a multi-year process that began with President George H. W. Bush and the nation's governors at a summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1989, policymakers gradually developed a consensus on broad national goals, curriculum standards-based reform as a core element of the strategy, and a significant federal role to ride herd on ("catalyze") state and local efforts. Congress first authorized federal funds to promote state-developed curriculum standards and assessments under the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (P.L. 103–227), signed into law on March 31, 1994, by President Bill Clinton. The Act also established in law the National Education Goals, including that U.S. students would become first in the world in math and science achievement by the year 2000. Later that same year, the federal Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (P.L. 103–382) effectively mandated centralized, state-wide curriculum standards and aligned assessments by requiring these as a condition for local schools to receive federal Title I categorical funding (upon which most local school districts have become dependent).

American students did not even come close to reaching the goal of becoming first in the world in science and mathematics achievement by 2000, nor were most of the other National Goals met. Nevertheless, in 2002 NCLB expanded and extended federal requirements for curriculum standards and testing as a condition for states receiving Title I funds, even as it quietly dropped the unachieved National Goals. Whereas states were previously required to define curriculum standards at only three grade spans—primary, middle, and high school—and test students once at each level, NCLB greatly expanded the federal mandates to grade-by-grade, state-wide curriculum standards and testing at grades 3 through 8 plus one grade in high school. Another provision introduced by NCLB was a highly prescriptive requirement for states to determine whether public schools and districts were making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) toward 100 percent of students—including students with disabilities and with Limited English Proficiency—achieving "proficiency" on state assessments in English language arts and mathematics by spring of 2014. Schools that failed to achieve the specified annual progress would be subject to public shaming and a cascade of other possible consequences.

NCLB allowed states to continue to exercise discretion in writing their own curriculum standards and tests, and in setting the "proficiency" passing standard on these tests. This latitude for states led to considerable consternation among education policy analysts regarding the discrepancy between the percent of students meeting standards on state assessments and the typically much lower percent attaining the proficient category on other assessments, particularly the NAEP. In Tennessee, for example, only 28 percent of 8th-graders scored proficient

in reading on the NAEP, while over 90 percent were deemed proficient on the state assessment.[23] Other state assessment results tracked more closely with the NAEP results, prompting some observers to view them as more "rigorous," and raising the concern that federal accountability requirements could encourage states with more challenging standards to lower them in order to achieve proficiency more easily.[24] Another widely cited analysis relied on the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) MAP assessment to compare passing scores on different state assessments; the authors were troubled by the wide variation in the apparent difficulty of passing standards in different states.[25] At the same time, reviews of state curriculum standards typically found only a handful of state standards to be high quality and rigorous, while most were judged either poor or mediocre.[26] Some analysts thus identified inconsistent state-level curriculum standards and test proficiency standards, coupled with NCLB's pressure to set low bars so that they could be easily cleared, as key obstacles to substantial academic improvement. The logical endpoint of these deliberations, which never questioned the underlying assumptions behind curriculum standards-based reform, was national standards and tests. For instance, in 2006 the Thomas B. Fordham Institute published the report "To Dream the Impossible Dream: Four Approaches to National Standards and Tests," which decried a "race to the bottom" on standards under NCLB, and endorsed the federal government's coercing states to adopt "national standards, tests, and accountability" in exchange for federal funding and "regulatory relief."[27]

Key elements of these policy assumptions have been subjected to empirical analysis and found wanting. Analyzing the quality ratings of state standards produced by the Fordham Institute, the rigor of the state assessment standards based on mapping their passing scores to NAEP, as well as the state-by-state achievement trends on NAEP, Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution found:

- No relationship between the perceived quality of state curriculum standards and improvement in student academic achievement[28] (confirming an earlier study by Grover "Russ" Whitehurst[29]);
- No relationship between the rigor of the passing scores on state assessments and improvement in student academic achievement;[30]
- Higher variation in student achievement within states, which are subject to the same curriculum and test standards, than between states, which are subject to different curriculum and test standards.[31]

Of course, these findings do not demonstrate that it is impossible for a particular state with quality curriculum standards and rigorous aligned assessments to improve student achievement. Massachusetts has been widely cited as an example of a state that managed to accomplish this feat, until its switch to Common Core and subsequent decline in student achievement. The results do indicate, however, that high, centrally defined curriculum standards alone are not sufficient, and may not be necessary, to achieve academic success.

One of the key arguments advocates offered for the creation and imposition of national curriculum standards, that such standards are common in countries that have outperformed the U.S. on international exams, is quickly dispelled by even modest scrutiny. Supporters have long pointed to the fact that most high-achieving countries have national academic standards, concluding that therefore we need them as well. As American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten wrote in 2009, "the countries that consistently outperform the United States on international assessments all have national standards."[32] But an analysis of the countries that rank *below* the United States reveals that they, too, often have national standards, while some countries that have outscored us on some tests have no national standards.[33] Meanwhile, the Common Core—which by 2009 was in development as draft curriculum standards being created under the auspices of the National Governors Association (NGA), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and Achieve, Inc.—had not even been completed, much less implemented or evaluated anywhere, before all states were pressured by the federal government to adopt it.

[There is] No relationship between the perceived quality of state curriculum standards and improvement in student academic achievement

Despite these significant reasons for concern about the Common Core standards, adoption was widespread. Forty-five states plus the District of Columbia adopted Common Core in both English and math.[34] A key reason was the role of the federal government promoting and coercing adoption of the standards. In 2009, the first year of the Obama Administration, while many state education budgets struggled as a result of the economic recession, the U.S. Department of Education announced that $4.35 billion of the economic stimulus funds appropriated by Congress would be made available to states through Race to the Top, a competitive grant program. Of the 70 points that grant applicants were eligible to obtain related to standards and assessments, 40 *de facto* required that the applicant adopt the Common Core standards, and 10 demanded that states adopt common tests aligned with the Core.[35]

Reinforcing Race to the Top, on September 23, 2011, then-U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan sent a letter to all chief state school officers inviting them to request a waiver from NCLB's increasingly unworkable provisions.[36] The first

requirement in the waiver application called for states to provide evidence that they had adopted "college- and career-ready standards." Under the first option for meeting this requirement, a state had to attach evidence that it had formally adopted the Common Core curriculum standards, which almost all states promised to adopt in pursuit of Race to the Top money; nearly all of the 41 states that successfully obtained waivers accepted this route. A few states, such as Alaska and Virginia, pursued the second option to satisfy this requirement: have state standards certified as "college- and career-ready" by "a State [sic] network of institutions of higher education." Even under this option, these states still provided the federal Department of Education extensive documentation for their approval demonstrating that the alternative college and career standards they adopted were well-aligned to the Common Core curriculum standards.[37]

Common Core is thus a policy designed to address the at best very limited effectiveness of NCLB, which was itself a policy to address the similarly weak results of the Improving America's Schools Act and Goals 2000 in the 1990s. At each stage, increased centralization and nationalization of decisions on curriculum and testing have been adopted as a cure for what ails the previous round of reform, which also relied on increased centralization and nationalization of decisions on curriculum and testing. There was no reason to believe that another round of centralization of curriculum, in the form of Common Core, would raise student achievement. Unfortunately, the evidence to date indicates that pessimism was realism.

There was no reason to believe that another round of centralization of curriculum, in the form of Common Core, would raise student achievement

The Sorry Results of Common Core

Contrary to the lofty initial promises and aspirations for Common Core, the national results after four years of full implementation have ranged from mediocre to outright poor, especially for lower-achieving students who are most in need of improvement. Far from moving American students toward internationally competitive student achievement, we have seen little improvement overall and some significant declines. Of course it is impossible to exclude other factors that could impact outcomes, but if the Core was so important that the federal government and many of its supporters believed it should form a single set of national curriculum standards, historic score declines are very disappointing.

In U.S. math,[38] there was no improvement at the 8th grade on the NAEP from 2009 to 2017, with *the first statistically significant decline* since the 1990 baseline occurring in the period between 2013 to 2017, the most intensive period of Common Core implementation. In that span scores dropped from 285 to 283.[39] Eighth grade results were uneven for different student populations. High-achieving students at the 90th percentile continued the long-term trend of small significant gains, increasing between 2013 and 2017 from 331 to 333. However, average and lower performing *students at the 50th, 25th, and 10th percentiles saw their first statistically significant declines* since the 1990 baseline, dropping between 2013 and 2017 from 286 to 283, from 261 to 256, and from 237 to 233 respectively. Black and Hispanic students also saw their first statistically significant declines since the 1990 baseline in the period between 2013 and 2017, dropping from 263 to 260 and from 272 to 269 respectively.

the national results after four years of full implementation have ranged from mediocre to outright poor

NAEP 4th grade math scores similarly showed no improvement from 2009 to 2017 and, during the most intensive period of implementation of Common Core from 2013 to 2017, we saw *the first statistically significant decline*, from 242 to 240, since the NAEP assessment baseline in 1990.[40] These results were uneven for different student subpopulations, with students at top end of the scale (75th and 90th percentiles) continuing the long-term trend of small significant gains from 2009 to 2017; however, low to average performing *students at 10th, 25th and 50th percentiles saw their first significant declines* since the 1990 baseline between 2013 and 2017, from 203 to 198, from 222 to 219, and from 243 to 241, respectively. There was no statistically significant change between 2013 and 2017 in the performance of Black and Hispanic students, but a small significant decline for White students from 250 to 248.[41]

NAEP 12th grade math scores are available only through 2015. Scores were unchanged between 2009 and 2013 at 153, but were statistically significantly lower at 152 in 2015. The change from 2013 to 2105 was uneven among student groups. There was no significant change for higher achieving students at the 90th and 75th percentiles, while *lower achieving students at the 50th, 25th, and 10th percentiles saw statistically significant declines* of 2, 3, and 4 percentile points respectively. White, Black, and Hispanic students were all reported to have dropped by 2 points between 2013 and 2015.[42]

In U.S. reading at grade 8 on NAEP, there was a small statistically significant improvement from 264 in 2009 to 267 in 2017, but no significant improvement since full implementation of Common Core in 2013. The impact was uneven for different student subgroups. There was no significant change between 2013 and 2017 for high and average performing student groups (90th, 75th, and 50th percentiles) but there were *statistically significant declines for students in lower performing groups at the 25th and 10th percentiles*, including a decline of

1 point for students at the 25th percentile and a decline of 4 points for students at the 10th percentile.[43] While there was a small statistically significant improvement between 2009 and 2017 for White, Black, and Hispanic students, there were no significant improvements between 2013 and 2017 for any of these student groups.[44]

NAEP reading at grade 4 reported no statistically significant change from 2009 to 2017 and also no significant change from 2013 to 2017. Over the period of full Common Core implementation from 2013 to 2017, there were no significant changes for students at the 90th and 50th percentiles and improvement in line with long-term trends for students at the 75th percentile (increase of 2 points), but there were *statistically significant declines for lower performing students* at the 25th and 10th percentiles of 1 and 3 points respectively.[45] There were no statistically significant changes between 2013 and 2017 for White, Black, or Hispanic students.[46]

NAEP reading results at grade 12 are available only through 2015. Unfortunately, there has been no statistically significant improvement since 2002, including no significant change between 2013 and 2015.[47] Similarly, there were no significant improvements for White, Black, or Hispanic students between 2013 and 2015.[48]

Attempting to zero in more precisely on the state-level impact of Common Core, one analysis of state declines on NAEP in 2015 found that states that moved to full implementation of Common Core experienced larger declines than states that had not yet done so, indicating the decline may be related to Common Core.[49]

On the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) reading assessment at grade 4, U.S. student performance declined significantly from 2011 to 2016 (from 556 to 549). By comparison, Russia recorded the top score in 2016 (581) and Singapore was in second place (576).[50] Similarly, on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reading assessment for 15-year-olds, U.S. student performance was flat from 2012 to 2015 (from 498 to 497). Singapore achieved the top score in 2015 (535).[51] On the international TIMSS math assessment, U.S. performance at grade 4 remained about the same from 2011 to 2015 (from 541 to 539)[52] and the U.S. increased at grade 8 (from 509 to 518),[53] while Singapore achieved the top score at grade 4 in 2015 (618) and the top score at grade 8 in the same year (621)[54]. On the PISA international math assessment for 15-year-olds, U.S. performance declined between 2012 and 2015 (from 481 to 470) while Singapore attained the top score (564).[55]

states that moved to full implementation of Common Core experienced larger declines than states that had not yet done so, indicating the decline may be related to Common Core

Common Core: International Benchmarking Devolves Into Progressive Instructional Ideology

International Benchmarking – Abandoned

Before considering school choice or other alternative education reforms, it is useful to examine in greater depth the Common Core curriculum standards, especially in mathematics; their design; how they have functioned in relation to student testing; and some critical flaws. An influential 2008 report entitled *Benchmarking for Success,*[56] developed jointly by the three D.C.-based organizations that created the Core—the corporate-backed Achieve, Inc., the NGA, and the CCSSO—effectively heralded the launch of what would come to be officially called the Common Core State Standards Initiative. The three organizations identified several critical action items, including "Action 1: Upgrade state standards by adopting a common core of internationally benchmarked standards in math and language arts for grades K–12 to ensure that students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to be globally competitive."[57] The report described "international benchmarking" not as simply ranking systems in different countries based on outcomes, but adopting lessons from the most successful systems on academic standards and other aspects of education and applying them to our own system. It defined benchmarking as follows: "Comparing outcomes to identify top performers or fast improvers, learning how they achieve great results, and applying those lessons to improve one's own performance."[58] The report cited research that the typical American mathematics curriculum in 8th grade is "…two full years behind the curriculum being studied by eighth-graders in high-performing countries," with students in other countries largely completing the content of Algebra I and Geometry by the end of that grade while most U.S. students do not begin to study it until grade 9.[59] In contrast, the report promised that the authors' proposed solution—the upcoming Common Core standards—would be "internationally benchmarked against leading nations."[60]

Despite these clearly stated goals and the description of the benchmarking procedure, the final Common Core standards did little to help close the multi-year gap in mathematics content by the end of 8th grade between U.S. students and those in top-performing nations. Having criticized the delay in introducing Algebra I and Geometry until grade 9, the Common Core authors issued curriculum standards that defined the main mathematics sequence for each grade from K through 8 so as to prepare students to begin the traditional high school

math curriculum, including Algebra I and Geometry, in… grade 9 as well![61] No explanation was offered for this puzzling decision.

When a public draft of the standards was released, the Common Core authors responded to the predictable criticism of the continued delay by largely leaving the elementary grades sequence as it was and adding a note near the end of the document stating that schools could simply skip the Common Core grade 8 curriculum content and begin Algebra I in grade 8![62] No doubt, it was easier to implement this limited modification—which would still not match the "benchmark" two-year acceleration of top-performing countries—than to revise the full elementary curriculum sequence in order to gradually accelerate students at a pace which all students could equitably achieve. But the authors provided no coherent answer as to why any but the most talented or socially advantaged students would be able to succeed in Algebra I without the benefit of the full year of instruction in the grade 8 curriculum.

Common Core standards did little to help close the multi-year gap in mathematics content… between U.S. students and those in top-performing nations

In reality, this modification bore all the hallmarks of a political rather than a curriculum response. It offered the appearance of an option to accelerate curriculum content as originally promised, while steering clear of any changes that could not be safely ignored by those who wished to stick with the unaccelerated path. In subsequent implementation, as any long-time education observer could have predicted, most states and districts paid little attention to the accelerated option and focused instead on the main curriculum sequence.

More broadly, the Common Core claims to establish rigorous end-of-high-school learning goals, the attainment of which ensures "college- and career-readiness." The meaning of this somewhat vague phrase has been questioned, but Common Core's inadequacy in preparing students for math-based STEM majors in college has been analyzed in detail by Stanford University mathematician Dr. R. James Milgram and nationally recognized standards expert Dr. Sandra Stotsky. Their criticisms include a lack of standards for pre-calculus, insufficient content for a full trigonometry course, and an Algebra II course weak on logarithms and the standard algebraic analysis of conic sections.[63] Jason Zimba, a lead author of the Core math standards, testified in 2010 to the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education that the concept of college-readiness embodied in the standards is minimal, is not for future STEM majors, and is not for selective colleges.[64] He confirmed that these are his views in a 2013 article (in which he also disputed other characterizations of his testimony).[65]

Common Core's New Old Progressive Curriculum

If the Common Core curriculum standards—sold as an initiative to make our students competitive with those in top-performing nations who are several years ahead—do not prescribe significantly more advanced academic material, it is fair to ask: *what does Common Core actually do?* To address that question, as well as to understand its implications for school choice policy, it is helpful to dig a bit deeper into the debate at the grassroots level over Common Core.

Our discussion of the Common Core curriculum standards will focus almost entirely on the debate over the mathematics standards, which are most relevant to one of the key rationales offered for this reform—that it would improve our international competitiveness in mathematics. It is beyond the scope of this paper to also address the Common Core English language arts standards in depth. Excellent, in-depth reviews of the English standards by Sandra Stotsky and others have addressed this issue, including the weakness of the literary content in the standards and the shift in emphasis for the reading material away from literature and toward informational text.[66] This direction has been reflected in classroom practice, with one study finding 28 percent of teachers admitting to reducing the amount of literature taught in classrooms as a result of Common Core.[67] It is worth remembering, however, that charged debates have occurred in the past over the role of literature in the curriculum as well as its relevance to all Americans.

In the early 20th century,

> Progressive education reformers wanted the public schools to make a significant contribution to the emerging industrial order… Progressive educators argued that the bookish curriculum blocked social progress and that it was unfitted to the hordes of immigrant children crowding urban schools. These children, the reformers said, needed training for jobs in the industrial economy, not… literature.[68]

Though Common Core curriculum standards were designed primarily for implementation in public schools, its use in private schools that accepted public funding ("vouchers") brought national attention to the battle over the Core. In Indiana, the first state to pass legislation to "pause" the implementation of the Common Core standards, the groundswell of opposition to Common Core began among parents in private schools. These parents had enrolled their children in Catholic schools that participated in the state school choice program, as well as in state athletic leagues. Under state law, this participation required the Catholic schools to administer the state-adopted, Common Core curriculum-based test—which meant the schools had to implement a Common Core-aligned curriculum:

> … the story starts with two Indianapolis moms, Heather Crossin and her friend Erin Tuttle.
>
> In September 2011, Heather suddenly noticed a sharp decline in the math homework her eight-year-old daughter was bringing home from Catholic school.
>
> "Instead of many arithmetic problems, the homework would contain only three or four questions, and two of those would be 'explain your answer,'" Heather told me. "Like, 'One bridge is 412 feet long and the other bridge is 206 feet long. Which bridge is longer? How do you know?'"
>
> She found she could not help her daughter answer the latter question: The "right" answer involved heavy quotation from Common Core language. A program designed to encourage thought had ended up encouraging rote memorization not of math but of scripts *about* math. [emphasis added]
>
> …
>
> "Eventually," Heather recalled, "our principal just threw his hands up in the air and said, 'I know parents don't like this type of math but we have to teach it that way, because the new state assessment tests are going to use these standards.'"
>
> That's the first time Heather had heard that Indiana had replaced its well-regarded state tests, ISTEP (Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress—Plus) in favor of a brand-new federally funded set of assessments keyed to Common Core.[69]

Independent research appears to support the Indiana parents' observation that the Core math standards emphasize increased communication *about* math (purportedly, to demonstrate understanding) while somewhat de-emphasizing the *performance* of mathematical procedures (such as performing computations, solving equations, or solving word problems). Dr. Andrew Porter and his colleagues systematically classified, analyzed, and compared the math curriculum standards of the Common Core to many state curriculum standards as well as to curricula in other countries.[70] They classified the standards using a hierarchical rubric based on the general level of intellectual abstraction or complexity of the activity, as implied by the wording of each standard:

Core math standards emphasize increased communication *about* math…while somewhat de-emphasizing the *performance* of mathematical procedures

- Memorize [lowest abstraction/complexity, such as recite math facts or definitions]
- Perform Procedures [such as solve routine word problems, solve equations, do computational procedures/algorithms]
- Demonstrate Understanding [such as communicate mathematical ideas, develop/explain relationships between concepts]
- Conjecture [such as write proofs, find mathematic rule to generate a pattern]
- Solve Nonroutine Problems [highest abstraction/complexity, such as adapt strategies to solve unusual problems, apply mathematics in contexts outside mathematics]

Such broad categorizations and ordering of student knowledge and skills from "simple" recall of knowledge to the more abstract or complex tasks are not unusual in education, with the most widely known being Bloom's Taxonomy for cognitive knowledge and skills.[71] Summarized in Figure 1 below are Porter's findings, achieved by applying his rubric to the Common Core curriculum standards in mathematics and prior state curriculum standards.

Figure 1. Math Curriculum Standards (rounded)[72]

	States (Pre-Common Core)	Common Core
Memorize	12 percent	10 percent
Perform Procedures	49 percent	44 percent
Demonstrate Understanding	29 percent	36 percent
Conjecture	8 percent	6 percent
Solve Nonroutine Problems	3 percent	5 percent

The changes in emphasis from the previous state public school curriculum standards to Common Core were not large, but there is one notable shift: a reduction in the emphasis previously placed on performing mathematical procedures (i.e., *doing* math) relative to demonstrating mathematical understanding (i.e., *talking about* or explaining math), from an advantage of approximately 20 percentage points (49 percent compared to 29 percent) to an advantage of only about 8 percentage points (44 percent compared to 36 percent). The nature and direction of this change fits well with the change in student math assignments observed by Crossin and Tuttle, the Indiana mothers who led a grass roots campaign against Common Core, though the magnitude of the change may have been greater for the Catholic schools than that experienced in the public schools. A common tendency in instructional reform movements is to emphasize what is being added and less often to highlight what is being reduced to make room. A study of Common Core implementation found that 81 percent of teachers report increased attention to "conceptual understanding"

(what Common Core advocates believe is being accomplished through increased student communication about math); at the same time, 26 percent of teachers confirmed reducing instructional time in math procedural skills.[73]

Porter refers to the more abstract end of his spectrum as "higher order cognitive demand" and seems to imply that it is broadly preferable in curriculum and instruction. This approach is consistent with instructional progressivist philosophy[74] (which its adherents often contrast with more "traditionalist" instructional methods). Instructional progressivism typically portrays itself as a forward-minded reform, but it has an antiquated pedigree. In her book, *The Academic Achievement Challenge: What Really Works In The Classroom*, the late renowned education researcher and scholar Jeanne S. Chall identified and categorized a number of assumptions and beliefs that distinguish educators who subscribe to instructional progressivism, as it has evolved from the early 20th century up to the present. One common progressivist belief is described by Chall as follows: "Emphasis is on process and on *how* to solve problems—*how* to think. The content [mastery] is less important than the process."[75] Common Core's increased emphasis on *how* students do math, evidenced by increased student explanation and procedural documentation and reduced emphasis on actually *doing* typical mathematical problem-solving and computation, is very much in the tradition of this progressivist belief.

It is useful to compare Common Core's approach with that of nations whose students lead the world in math achievement. Apart from the mathematical content covered, Porter and his colleagues found that Common Core does not align well with top-performing countries such as Singapore, Japan, and Finland, which place "… a much greater emphasis on 'performing procedures' than found in the U.S. Common Core standards. For each country, approximately 75 percent of the content involves 'performing procedures,' whereas in the Common Core standards, the percentage emphasis for procedure is just 38 percent," a vast difference. Porter found it "surprising [that]…High performing countries' emphasis on 'perform procedures' runs *counter* to the widespread call in the United States for a greater emphasis on higher order cognitive demand" [emphasis added].[76] While teachers in other leading nations may initially introduce a new skill through a discussion of the concept, afterward students devote extensive time to practicing.

Common Core does not align well with top-performing countries such as Singapore, Japan, and Finland

Porter and his colleagues performed a similar comparison between the widely respected, pre-Common Core Massachusetts math curriculum standards and the Common Core math curriculum standards. Before the state adopted Common Core, students in Massachusetts performed significantly better in mathematics than students in other U.S. states but not as well as those in top-scoring nations. Interestingly, the overall pattern held: Massachusetts math standards also placed a somewhat greater emphasis on mathematical procedures and lower emphasis on "demonstrating understanding" and "conjecture" when compared to Common Core, though the difference was not nearly as large as with other nations.[77] More generally, the evaluation research base is not especially supportive of instructional approaches that emphasize learning hierarchies (such as the type Porter employed in his analysis), reflexively preferring the ostensibly "higher order" types of activities for instruction; a recent review of 1,400 meta-analyses identified these approaches as one of the least effective intervention models while finding that more traditional forms of instruction performed much better.[78]

Common Core embodies other elements of instructional progressivist ideology as well. John Dewey, the early-20th-century guru of American instructional progressivism, wrote:

> To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, [is opposed] learning through experience; *to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill, is opposed acquisition of them by means of attaining ends which make direct appeal…*[79] [emphasis added].

At least since Dewey and others of his time, instructional progressivism has tended to see teaching practices it favors as inherently exciting and uplifting, "humane" in the words of education historian Diane Ravitch,[80] while more traditional practices are portrayed as dispiriting and demoralizing. The dichotomies contrasted in Dewey's quote are not viewed as different methods that each have their place and time. They are viewed more starkly as some activities that should simply be performed more often and other activities that should be performed less often—if ever. To a progressive like Dewey, the teaching of discrete or pre-requisite skills is framed as acquisition of "isolated skills" (which don't sound very useful!), while the practice of such skills is referred to as the unpleasant-sounding "drill," or "drill and kill" as it has been dramatically updated since then. The education historian Larry Cuban distinguished between progressivist and more traditional elementary schools in recent decades in part based on whether "drill and practice are *parts* of the lessons"[81] [emphasis added]. The question posed is not whether drill and practice are overwhelming or dominant elements in the curriculum, but whether such practices are significant "parts" of the totality

at all. Imagine a junior high basketball team whose coach believed free throw practice, layup practice, or dribbling practice were "drill and kill" that stifled the enthusiasm and creativity of his players and never—or very rarely—did them. His team would not win many championships!

Today, true instructional progressive purists are not designing important curriculum standards or publishing major instructional materials series. Nonetheless, instructional progressivist beliefs and perspectives, as these have evolved, remain highly influential and can manifest in surprising forms. We discussed above the almost reflexive tendency among many curriculum and instructional specialists to assume that student activities should emphasize more abstract levels on dubious "cognitive" hierarchies. Another significant influence seems to be a progressivist aversion to instruction in discrete skills along with the follow-on practice required to attain fluency.

Such biases likely contributed to the standard algorithms for arithmetic being de-emphasized in the Common Core curriculum, since they clearly involve teaching of discrete skills and require substantial practice to attain fluency. The nearby Figure 2, "Standard Algorithms in Addition and Subtraction," compares the treatment of these algorithms in Common Core and in a representative, top-performing country, Singapore. Common Core delays student mastery of these standard algorithms until 4th grade, years after students in other countries have mastered them. Instead, Common Core requires that students in grades 2 and 3 solve such problems using non-standard methods that typically involve small numbers or require tedious repetition but, their proponents argue, that encourage conceptual understanding. Whether or not that's true, the non-standard methods are inefficient with larger numbers.

Such instruction is consonant with instructional progressivist beliefs. Teachers spend years of additional time discussing with students a variety of alternative math methods at a conceptual level and how they work, necessarily using limited applications. In contrast, students in Singapore begin working with the standard algorithms in grade 1 with small numbers (2-digit), gradually developing both skills *and* understanding as they move on to larger numbers each year. In grade 4, the Common Core standards leave aside the non-standard approaches and require American students to become fluent with the standard algorithms with four-digit numbers in a single year, a tall and unlikely order. Singapore students already achieved this fluency and understanding a year earlier (grade 3), though they were arguably given *more* time to master it in incremental steps.

A similar pattern occurs with the standard algorithms in multiplication and long division, which the Common Core delays for years after students in Singapore and other high-performing countries have mastered them. To be clear, the fundamental *policy* problem is not so much that Common Core isn't promoting a more traditional instructional approach—it's that Common Core is promoting a particular instructional model at all and constraining those who believe in a different approach. But this is not an accident; it is

[Progressive]… biases likely contributed to the standard algorithms for arithmetic being de-emphasized in the Common Core curriculum

the fundamental *policy* problem is not so much that Common Core isn't promoting a more traditional instructional approach—it's that Common Core is promoting a particular instructional model at all

Figure 2. Standard Algorithms in Addition and Subtraction[82]

	Common Core	Singapore
Grade 1	- -	Addition and subtraction using formal algorithms Addition and subtraction within 100 involving… two 2-digit numbers
Grade 2	Fluently add and subtract within 100 *using strategies based on place value, properties of operations, and/or the relationship between addition and subtraction*	Addition and subtraction of numbers up to 3 digits
Grade 3	Fluently add and subtract within 1000 *using strategies and algorithms based on place value, properties of operations, and/or the relationship between addition and subtraction*	Addition and subtraction of numbers up to 4 digits
Grade 4	Fluently add and subtract multi-digit whole numbers using the standard algorithm	- -

inherent in the centrally planned, curriculum standards-based reform model. While Common Core advocates often claim to non-specialists that the standards only define outcomes and not curriculum and instruction, as we have seen, the detailed identification, wording, and sequencing of skills involve inherently *instructional* assumptions and beliefs about the best way to teach. The definition of outcomes and major instructional assumptions are especially inseparable at the elementary and middle school grades which, in mathematics for example, represent essentially instructional judgments about the best and most efficient way to prepare students for later material in Algebra, Geometry, and other courses in the American high school curriculum.

Common Core Assessment

Progressivist instructional beliefs are also embedded in the Common Core-aligned student assessments. These assessments are designed to drive instruction, including by modeling the types of activities that teachers are supposed to teach and assign as well as enforcing their implementation through the monitoring of results. As discussed earlier, most public schools and teachers in states that adopted the Core curriculum standards are making a serious effort to implement and teach the Common Core. Open response (non-multiple choice) Common Core test questions are typically designed to resemble the type of tasks that policymakers want teachers to use in the classroom, and publicly released versions of test questions are often studied by local educators in designing curriculum and instruction.

[Common Core] assessments are designed to drive instruction, including by modeling the types of activities that teachers are supposed to teach

A grade 4 test question released in 2016 by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Common Core national test consortium[83] illustrates progressivist instructional assumptions similar to those encountered in the Common Core national standards it is designed to assess (Figure 3). The released open response item includes scoring guidelines and a sample student response so anyone can evaluate what a student is expected to do in order to earn credit for answering it correctly. Of the three points available for this question, *two* points are based on the written explanation the student is expected to provide and only *one* point is based on answering the question correctly! Talking about the math in the manner expected by the curriculum developers and by the protocol-reliant scorer (referred to as "reasoning" by the item developers), is *more* valued than actually solving ("doing") the math problem and obtaining the correct answer.

Further, the PARCC problem specifies a Common Core-based non-standard *method* for multiplying fractions and whole numbers (counting on the number line, which is not scalable to large numbers or decimals) that the student is *required* to use to receive credit for this item. Note that using such a method might be a reasonable instructional decision when introducing this skill to a class and walking them through it from a conceptual standpoint (depending on the approach taken by a curriculum's designers), but incorporating it into the standards and aligned tests effectively requires all schools and teachers to have students practice this non-standard method until they reach fluency; students will eventually have to then "unlearn" this method and practice and develop fluency in the standard, scalable method (which allows efficient multiplication of a much wider range of whole numbers and fractions). Devoting the classroom time required to have students become fluent in two different methods to solve the same type of problem—only one of which is standard and efficient with a range of numbers—is inherently an *instructional decision* that is, at minimum, debatable. Yet the Common Core curriculum standards and aligned PARCC test effectively impose this instructional judgment on all schools and teachers subject to their requirements.

the PARCC problem specifies a Common Core-based non-standard *method* for multiplying fractions and whole numbers... that the student is *required* to use to receive credit for this item

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) national testing consortium, which is also aligned to the Common Core curriculum standards, similarly includes items that emphasize whether a student explained an answer in wording that satisfies the criteria and human scorer. Grade 4 Mathematics item 3[84] offers a good example (Figure 4). This item provides information about the number of pieces of chalk a student needs for Art Day (120), the number of boxes of chalk the teacher has (6), and the number of pieces of chalk in each box (18). The student is asked if this is enough chalk (a yes/no question) and to explain the steps used to figure it out.

There is potential for confusion in the scoring on what is considered a sufficient explanation. The first sample response provided — "Sample Response (3a)" — multiplies the number of boxes by the number of pieces of chalk in each box, then goes beyond answering the question with a simple "yes" or "no" and indicates the number of additional *individual pieces* of chalk that will be needed. This response earns two out two possible points. However, sample response 3c also multiplies the number of boxes by the number of pieces of chalk in each box, then goes beyond answering the question with a simple

Figure 3. PARCC Released Item

PARCC

General Scoring Decision: If an item specifies a method, the student must use this method to earn full credit.

Explain how to find $2 \times \frac{5}{12}$ using the number line.

Find the product.

M00778 Rubric	
Score	**Description**
3	Student response includes the following 3 elements. • **Reasoning component** = 2 points Valid explanation of how to find $\frac{5}{12}$ using the number line Valid explanation of how to find 2 x $\frac{5}{12}$ using the number line • **Computation component** = 1 point Correct product, $\frac{10}{12}$ or equivalent Sample Student Response: I know that each tick mark on this number line is equivalent to $\frac{1}{12}$, so to find $\frac{5}{12}$, I would count 5 of the tick marks. Then to find $2 \times \frac{5}{12}$, I would count $\frac{5}{12}$ two times starting at zero on the number line. I would land on $\frac{5}{6}$, which is the same as $\frac{10}{12}$. The product is $\frac{10}{12}$. (or equivalent) Note: Student responses must provide explanations to receive the reasoning component points. Simply identifying the locations of 5/12 and 10/12 is not sufficient for reasoning credit.
2	Student response includes 2 of the 3 elements.
1	Student response includes 1 of the 3 elements.
0	Student response is incorrect or irrelevant.

Section 3.0

Figure 4. SBAC Released Item

Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium

Grade 4 Mathematics

Art Day! Performance Task

3 You need 120 pieces of chalk for Art Day. Your teacher has 6 boxes of chalk. Each box has 18 pieces of chalk. Is this enough chalk for Art Day?

Explain the steps you used to figure this out.

4 Your next task is to help plan the schedule for Art Day using the information from **Task 2: Schedule.**

Create a schedule for your class to follow on Art Day. You must follow the order given in the table.

Art Day Schedule*

Activity	Start Time	End Time
Painting	9:00 a.m.	
Break		
Pottery		
Lunch		
Chalk Art		2:00 p.m.

*Times must be given using a 12-hour clock.

Claim 3, Target B: Tasks used to assess this target should ask students to develop a chain of reasoning to justify or refute a conjecture. Tasks for Target B might include the types of examples called for in Target A as part of this reasoning, but should do so with a lesser degree of scaffolding than tasks that assess Target A alone.

Rationale for DOK:
Since the student needs to retrieve information from the context and select a procedure (in this case, multiplication), it meets the requirement for DOK 2. From the *Depth of Thinking* chart:

APPLY (DOK 2):
-Select a procedure and perform it
-Solve a routine problem applying multiple concepts or decision points
-Retrieve information to solve a problem

Note that the descriptors for APPLY DOK 1 are follow simple procedures, calculate, measure, apply a rule (e.g., rounding), apply algorithm or formula. The key idea is that the procedure or rule or algorithm *is given or specified*. This question, although intended to be straightforward, *does not tell* the student what the solution method is. This question is also an example of routine, but there are multiple approaches. This separates DOK 1 from DOK 2.

What follows are sample responses and scoring annotations for Item 3.

Sample Response 3a

The answer is there is not enough chalk for the chalk station because 18 x 6 = 108. You need 12 more pieces of chalk.

SCORE POINT 2

The student correctly calculated the amount of chalk available (108) and determined that it was not enough for Art Day. He/she also explained that 12 more piece of chalk would be needed. The response contains evidence of the student's competence in reasoning to the full extent that these processes apply to this item.

Grade 4 Mathematics
Art Day! Performance Task

Sample Response 3b

120 / 6 = 20

If you divide 6 into 120 you will get 20, so 18 pieces of chalk in each box is not enough.

SCORE POINT 2

The student used division to determine how many pieces of chalk must be in each box in order to equal 120. He/she determined that 20 are needed and that 18 pieces in each box are not enough. The response contains evidence of the student's competence in reasoning to the full extent that these processes apply to this item.

Sample Response 3c

18 x 6 = 108 chalk

The teacher needs one more box of chalk for the class.

SCORE POINT 1

The student correctly calculated the amount of chalk that was available for Art Day (108) and determined the one more box was needed. However, the student did not justify nor explain why one more box would have been sufficient for the amount needed for the class. The student has demonstrated only a **partial** understanding of the mathematical content and practices essential to this item.

Figure 5. ACT Released G3 Item #2

ANSWER KEY

Question 2

After Cammy gets out of bed in the morning, she completes several activities to get ready for school. The list below shows the numbers of minutes she needs to complete each of these activities.

- 30 minutes: brush teeth, shower, and get dressed
- 10 minutes: eat breakfast
- 30 minutes: car ride to school

Cammy must be at school by 8:00 a.m. What is the **latest** time Cammy can get out of bed, complete all her activities, and still get to school on time? Explain why your answer is correct.

1000

Question type	CCSSM topic	Correct response
Justification and Explanation (Constructed Response)	3.MD.A, MP1, MP3	See explanation.

Appropriate grade level(s)	Integrating Essential Skills and Grade Level Progress reporting categories	JE level	Modeling	DOK level
3	Grade Level Progress	3	Yes	3
4–6	Integrating Essential Skills	3	No	3

This Justification and Explanation task asks students not just to find a solution, but to explain the procedure that leads to that solution. Successful students will explain how they solved the problem and give reasons why their solution is correct. Procedure, computation, and logical flow justification are a few of the justification skills this task elicits. The content here is addition and subtraction of time intervals (CCSSM.3.MD.A). This problem enables students to relate the mathematics they learn in the classroom to their everyday experience. A successful student will make sense of the problem and persevere in solving it (MP1). Students are doing modeling by simulating the events and connecting them to the time each takes. This level of modeling is a part of the Modeling reporting category for Grade 3 but not for higher grades.

For Grade 3 students, this task would be a part of the Grade Level Progress reporting category. This task would also be appropriate for the Grades 4, 5, or 6 tests. However, it would be a part of the Integrating Essential Skills reporting category for those tests. At these grade levels, this task requires JE level 3 reasoning and is part of the JE reporting category; the task also is a DOK level 3 task.

Response 1

The reasoning in the following sample response is within reach of a Grade 3 student and would receive full credit.

30 + 10 + 30 = 70 min

70 – 60 = 10

70 min = 1 hr 10 min

8 a.m. – 1 hr 10 min = 6:50 a.m.

8

> Cammy must wake up at 6:50 a.m. so she is not late for school. I know my answer is correct because Cammy has to be at school at 8 and you need to figure how much time it takes to get ready and get to school. I added the times for dressing, eating, and driving to school to get 70 minutes. Then, I subtracted the time needed from the school's start time to find when Cammy needs to get up.

Describing the computational procedure and its results can make an argument more clear, so ACT Aspire captures when students use those types of justification techniques. The main JE statements captured in this response are "Use a computation to Support a Statement or Conclusion," "Explain why a step in a procedure is necessary," and "Use two or more Specific Statements to draw a Conclusion and provide Specific Support for at least one of the Statements." The response also provides direct evidence of "Provide a computation," "State a relationship between two or more objects," and "State one or more steps in a procedure." A response of this type demonstrates direct evidence for all three levels of justification at Grade 3.

This response successfully completes the assigned task by finding the time that Cammy has to wake up and by thoroughly supporting that answer. The response demonstrates understanding of the given information and the goal. The student's calculations are evidence that the student understands a procedure required to complete the task successfully, and the explanation is presented clearly and is well organized. This response would be given a Progress score of 3.

With Level 3 justification and a Progress score of 3, this response would be given 4 points.

Response 2

> 8 a.m. – 30 min = 7:30 a.m.
>
> 7:30 a.m. – 30 min = 7 a.m.
>
> 7 a.m. – 10 min = 6:50 a.m.
>
> Cammy should get up at 6:50 a.m.

The main JE statements captured in this response are "Provide a computation" and "Use a computation to Support a Statement or Conclusion." While the computations are important to the student's approach, the argument could be strengthened by explaining why the computations are being done. A response of this type demonstrates evidence of the first two levels of justification at Grade 3.

This response arrives at the correct conclusion. The calculations are evidence that the student understands the procedure, that subtraction is required to complete the task successfully, and that the student approached the task correctly. However, the response fails to explain why the answer is correct or why the subtractions were done to arrive at the answer. The student demonstrates a successful approach to the problem, but some evidence is implicit. Because of the strong approach to the task, this response would be given a Progress score of 2.

Since this is a JE Level 3 task at Grade 3, Level 2 justification and a Progress score of 2 would give this response 2 out of the 4 points possible.

"yes" or "no" and indicates the number of additional *boxes* of chalk that will be needed. This response followed the same format except that it provided the additional amount of chalk needed in units of boxes of chalk rather than individual pieces. Evidently the item designers thought that the smaller units of individual chalk pieces provided sufficient information without textual explanation, while the larger units of chalk boxes required further textual explanation. Both are valid responses mathematically, but one received full credit and one received only partial credit. It's not at all clear that a student answering with response 3a would have a better grasp of the mathematical content than a student answering response 3c, or whether students would even see a meaningful difference between the two responses.

In addition to the two national Common Core testing consortia which received federal development grants, other companies have entered the field and are offering Common Core-aligned tests to states. Several states, including Alabama and Arkansas, have switched to the ACT Aspire tests to assess student mastery of the Common Core curriculum standards.

The ACT Aspire test has problems similar to those in PARCC and SBAC. Question 2 of the sample Grade 3 Mathematics Test Questions[85] describes several activities that a student must complete before getting to school and asks when the student must get out of bed to arrive at school on time (Figure 5).

Sample student response 1 provides each step of the mathematical calculation, includes a verbal description talking about the math, and is awarded a full four out of four possible points. Response 2 provides each step of the mathematical calculation, includes the answer in an English sentence, and is awarded only two out of four possible points. ACT's explanation of the scoring for item 2 states, "This response arrives at the correct conclusion. The calculations are evidence that the student understands the procedure… and that the student approached the task correctly."[86] So the student provided each step in the procedure, demonstrated that he knew what he was doing, and obtained the correct answer, yet was only awarded half of the possible points! It is not evident that additional English verbiage would have added anything meaningful to this student's response. But the Aspire assessment, despite not being one of the original "national Common Core tests" funded by the federal government, is still aligned to Common Core and therefore must include items that follow the Common Core approach.

The Common Core initiative began with commitments to benchmark the required outcomes against top-scoring nations but ultimately failed to do it. Other design elements of the Common Core curriculum standards, such as embedded instructional assumptions, were presumably to be benchmarked as well; but the developers preferred, instead, to double down on practices that were at odds with those used in top-performing nations. These questionable design elements appear to be driven by instructional progressivist assumptions and biases, a strain that has been influential in American education for nearly a century. These design elements are not based on solid research yet, to a significant degree, they and the overall uncompetitive pacing of the curriculum are effectively enforced through student assessments that are designed to guide classroom instruction.

Even those who are philosophically attracted to the progressivist elements of Common Core should consider the wisdom of imposing such a philosophy through national standards and assessments. They should realize that a future national or state-selected set of curriculum standards might happen to tilt in the opposite direction, constraining their own preferred curricular and instructional approach.

It is important to note that efforts to guide or drive local instruction through centralized curriculum standards and aligned tests are not unique to the Common Core curriculum standards; similar prescriptiveness also occurred with some state curriculum standards and tests before Common Core, and many were not effective in raising student achievement (with the apparent exception of the pre-Common Core Massachusetts standards). Using assessments to drive instruction constrains curricular and instructional innovation and differentiation and competition by local school systems and charter schools. Such efforts can increasingly affect private schools as well, if the state operates a choice program and imposes curriculum-based testing on participating schools.

Using assessments to drive instruction constrains curricular and instructional innovation

While the main attention in school reform in recent decades has focused on curriculum standards-based reform, another very different education reform model has slowly been gaining ground. This alternative model emphasizes markets, freedom to innovate, and parental choice among public and private schools. Rather than jumping straight into a discussion of arguments for choice generally, or of specific choice options, it is helpful to start with a discussion of private education, including a brief review of its history in America and consideration of its nature and goals. As we shall see, school choice is a reform moving in essentially the *opposite* direction of centralized curriculum standards-based reform.

A Brief History of Private Education

Education does not inherently call for a public/private dichotomy. Indeed, for much of American history no such division existed, though education was placed much more in what we would call "private" hands than public. In England education was handled primarily by families and religious

communities—civil society—and colonists coming to America were most likely happy to continue that arrangement. Indeed, in England government remained almost completely out of education well into the 19th century.[87]

That said, governing authorities in some American colonies, especially Massachusetts, assumed a degree of educational control not seen in England. In particular, they began to compel some level of education for the young, with both Massachusetts and Virginia passing laws in 1642 mandating that parents see to the education of their children. In 1647, Massachusetts further enacted the "Old Deluder Satan Act" compelling towns, depending on their size, to maintain either a person to instruct children, or both a teacher and a building—a grammar school—in which to teach.[88]

The primary motivation behind government intervention in colonial Massachusetts education—noting that government there was religious, not strictly civil—was a desire to maintain unity among people scattered across a wilderness who were leaving behind Old World living arrangements. The people of Massachusetts had gone from long-settled, close-knit village life in Europe to an expansive, pioneering wilderness in the New World. The Deluder Satan Act was an expression of understandable fear that colonists now often far distant from one another and colonial authorities might be losing their ability to read and understand the Bible, and in so doing falling prey to the Devil and "saint-seeming deceivers."[89] Much of the physical and social closeness of the Old World were no more, and the extensive social webs broken. That said, the Act was often flouted, with settlers appearing to prioritize basic needs, like defense, and acquiring food and shelter, over maintaining religiously oriented grammar schools. There was also growing emphasis on obtaining "useful" skills through home learning, apprenticeships, and even such instruction as double-entry bookkeeping taught at for-profit schools.[90]

After the American Revolution, and during the first several decades of independence, American education remained primarily private, though some major thinkers advocated for greater government—including federal—intervention. A desire to maintain or foster cultural and social cohesion among religiously, ethnically, and economically diverse people, and to tie people to the new nation, were the primary desires of these public-schooling advocates, though economic effects such as encouraging manufactures were also discussed.[91] But this sentiment seemed largely restricted to elites; no broad demand for government schools was evident, and even Thomas Jefferson's celebrated "Bill for More General Diffusion of Knowledge" never gained enough political support to be enacted.

Education remained a primarily private endeavor at the dawn of the Common School era in the 1830s. And at least for imparting literacy, this model of education appeared to be a success, with roughly 90 percent of white, adult Americans literate by 1840, more than a decade before the first compulsory education law.[92] Americans craved education— including not just literacy, but also practical skills—and Katz and Goldin report that by the mid-19th century, before compulsory enrollment or widespread free provision of schooling, the "enrollment rate among children and youth in the United States exceeded that of any other country in the world."[93]

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If Americans were consuming education in very large numbers by the 1830s and 1840s, what inspired the Common Schools movement led by Horace Mann, who served as the first Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education? It likely was not, primarily, a fear of illiterate or insufficiently skilled masses—though that was among the concerns— because the indicators suggest literacy and skills training were widespread. It was not, in other words, primarily a desire to create the "ladder" of opportunity that many have called public schools—institutions that have enabled the poor to attain the skills and knowledge they needed for upward mobility.[94] No, in keeping with earlier public schooling advocacy, the main goal was to foster shared identities and morals. As Mann put forth in his First Annual Report as secretary:

> It is on this common platform, that a general acquaintanceship should be formed between the children of the same neighborhood. It is here, that the affinities of common nature should unite them together so as to give the advantages of pre-occupancy and a stable possession of fraternal feelings, against the alienating competitions of subsequent life.
>
> After the state shall have secured to all its children, that basis of knowledge and morality, which is indispensable to its own security; after it shall have supplied them with the instruments of that individual prosperity, whose aggregate will constitute its own social prosperity; then they may be emancipated from its tutelage…[95]

During and after Mann's tenure as secretary, fears of disunity grew stronger as a result of massive immigration and growing industrialization that brought new Americans and the previously rural poor into more concentrated, urban areas. These phenomena motivated many assimilation-focused public-schooling champions from the late 1800s through the aftermath of the First World War, at which point fear of "the

other" reached its peak. The paramount assimilation mission was perhaps captured best by Ellwood Cubberly, a leading education theorist of the Progressive era. Wrote Cubberly on non-"Anglo-Teutonic" immigrants:

> Everywhere these people tend to settle in groups of settlements, and to set up their national manners, customs, and observances. Our task is to break up these groups of settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as a part of our American race, and to implant in their children, as far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and to awaken in them a reverence for our democratic institutions and for those things in our national life which we as a people hold to be of abiding worth.[96]

It was at the end of this period, with the famous *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* U.S. Supreme Court ruling, that the brakes were finally put on expanding government control of education. In *Pierce*, the Court declared unconstitutional an Oregon law mandating public schooling for all children. While noting that the state has a role overseeing the quality of private schooling, "the fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose excludes any general power of the state to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the state…."[97]

So what is the role of private education? As mentioned earlier, for much of American history this would have been a nonsensical question, because no meaningful public/private dichotomy existed. But with the rise of government-run schooling, private education took on specific functions, even if they were not always explicitly stated. While the immediate goal of private education may seem to be to provide quality academic instruction—and that is, of course, important—its unique and indispensable function is to furnish alternatives for parents and students who do not want what the public schools, and those who govern them, decide to provide. At its most basic level, private education is a backstop against homogenization by the state, allowing other conceptions of good education—and the "good life"—to survive.

private education is a backstop against homogenization by the state, allowing other conceptions of good education—and the "good life"—to survive

It does this in part by enabling unique communities—the foundations of pluralist society—to reproduce themselves.[98] This is perhaps most concrete in the case of religious communities that believe that education cannot be separated from God or their faith; that everything in their lives is directly connected to God and done for his glory. Protestant Christianity was a central component of American public schooling for much of its history, but that arrangement was problematic for many non-Protestant Christians and non-Christians. Even for many Protestants the lowest-common-denominator character of public school religion was unacceptable. As Calvinist minister Matthew Hale Smith objected to Mann, "Certain views that you entertain, you call religion, or 'piety.' These you allow to be taught in schools….Those which clash with your particular views, you reject as 'dogmatic theology' or 'sectarianism.' By what authority do you settle those grave and important questions for every town and school district in Massachusetts?"[99]

While religion has been the biggest driver of private schooling—first because Roman Catholics, especially, could not abide by Protestant public schools, then because all religion had been expelled from the public schools—many other characteristics, such as language and culture, make communities distinct. Reproducing them involves the handing down of traditions and histories—the norms, events, and activities that unify groups and make them distinctive.

Rationale for Publicly Funded School Choice

In our present, public school-dominated context, private schooling is marginalized and sometimes financially endangered; schools charging tuition are at a huge disadvantage against public institutions that are "free" thanks to substantial federal, state, and local taxation and funding. There is increasing interest in making private education a viable option not only for those families with students already participating, but especially for many families who might consider it if it were affordable. Numerous proposals have called for government to assist parents in accessing private education, leading to the creation of various government programs. Among these are tuition grants ("vouchers") and education savings accounts that tie public per-pupil funding to students rather than schools, as well as tax credits either for a family's direct tuition expenses or for donations made to organizations that provide private-schooling scholarships, usually to low-income children.

Perhaps the most widely offered argument on behalf of choice is that it is unjust that wealthier people can access good schools either by paying for private schools or buying houses in high-performing districts, while low-income children are stuck. As former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared at the 2012 Republican National Convention, "We need to give parents greater choice, particularly poor parents whose kids, very often minorities, are trapped in failing neighborhood schools. This is the civil rights issue of our day."[100] In this line of thought the purpose of school choice is to equalize access to quality. It does not necessarily define what quality

is, but it is frequently measured by test scores and to a lesser extent high school graduation rates.

Another common argument in support of publicly funded private-school choice is grounded in economic and political theory to make the case that such a system will improve academic outcomes for students. For example, Nobel laureate Milton Friedman, in his 1955 essay "The Role of Government in Education,"[101] essentially held that the key to creating a successful and ever-improving education system is to decouple government funding of education from the operation of schools. Friedman defined the primary benefits of doing this: (1) giving parents an immediate ability to punish unsatisfactory schools by taking their children and funding elsewhere; (2) catalyzing competition, resulting in greater efficiency and innovation; (3) reducing residence-driven income stratification in schools; and (4) making the compensation of teachers responsive to market forces.

The book that sparked the modern choice movement in the early 1990s was John Chubb and Terry Moe's *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, which rested its case largely on democratically controlled public schools being doomed to inefficiency. Basically, argued Chubb and Moe, top-down, government control of education limits the autonomy of schools from political decision-making and, hence, their ability to adjust as their students' needs change. Their ability to operate efficiently and effectively is hamstrung by rules and regulations.[102] The function of school choice is to infuse school autonomy into the system, and in so doing enable schools to have focused curricula, nimbly meet the needs of their students, and compete with one another.

The evidence suggests that publicly funded school choice tends to improve student outcomes, but is heavily constrained by small program sizes, regulations, and lurking threats to eliminate programs through either legislative or judicial attacks. Choice programs' academic success is revealed in the body of "gold standard," random-assignment studies which in most cases have found that on standardized tests at least some subset of students who received a public subsidy outperformed students who applied for it but were unsuccessful in the lottery, and that no subset performed worse.[103] A few recent studies have bucked that trend, but their findings may well have reflected the effects of barriers to choice such as heavy regulations, or the existence of greatly enlarged choice in public schooling that improved results.[104] Research suggests that the benefits of choice go beyond test scores, such as an increase of 21 percentage points in the graduation rate of minority students in a large city.[105]

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Significantly, those generally superior results are typically achieved at a fraction of the per-pupil spending in government schools, a finding demonstrating superior efficiency. In addition, 14 of 21 random-assignment studies of public school districts that directly compete with private schools via choice programs show solid evidence of improvement, six studies show neutral to positive results, and one study is neutral, bolstering the argument that the benefits of publicly funded, private school choice extend to those students who remain in the regular public schools.[106]

Another, more fundamental argument for school choice is based on the rationale put forth by the Supreme Court in *Pierce*: the United States is founded on "a fundamental theory of liberty," to which forced standardization is repugnant. Publicly funded choice is justified on the grounds that parents and students must be able to choose education that comports with their values, especially if those values are not shared by a majority, or by whatever sized faction is able to exert political control over the public schools. As Stephen Arons has written, publicly funded choice is needed to enable "freedom of conscience in education—the individual liberty to follow an internal moral compass in setting a course for a meaningful and fulfilling life."[107]

Equality under the law—protected by the 14th Amendment to the Constitution—may *require* such choice.[108] A less powerful minority is unfairly disadvantaged if it must sacrifice funds to the political majority, or the most powerful political minority, so that those with power may use it to decide how they want to shape the minds of children. The inequality is especially stark for Americans desiring a religious education for their children. The public schools may well meet the desires of atheists and agnostics—though for the many decades when public schools were de facto Protestant they too were disadvantaged—but they certainly cannot meet the needs of those who believe their religion is central to all that they do, such as some conservative Christians and Orthodox Jews. But a similar perception of inequality may accrue to families with other interests, such as families who believe that the public schools teach history that excludes or downplays their ethnic or racial group, or who believe students do not read the greatest literature or hear stories that represent our common culture.

Private schooling, perhaps counterintuitively, also appears to do a better job of unifying diverse people, both in terms of fostering amicable inter-group relations and instilling civics knowledge and obligations. Research by William Jeynes, and by Jay Greene and Nicole Mellow, suggests that private schools experience greater racial harmony than public schools. It seems likely that students sharing the values or educational

focus of their school—e.g., a Lutheran or arts-based school—more effectively overcomes racial divisions than attending assigned public schools with no similar unifying agent.[109]

Private schooling, perhaps counterintuitively, also appears to do a better job of unifying diverse people

When people are free to choose, conflict is likely also reduced because what the schools teach and how they teach it is not a zero-sum game: people with different values and desires do not have to compete to determine who will control controversial parts of a curriculum all must use. Evidence that choice defuses such conflict can be seen historically in many countries, including the Netherlands and Belgium, that provide public funding for religious schools.[110]

Studies also reveal that, controlling for myriad factors including socio-economic status, students in private and other chosen schools, such as charters, more successfully obtain knowledge of how American government works, as well as desirable civic behaviors such as volunteering in one's community and tolerating speech one finds objectionable.[111] The evidence is not as conclusive—David Campbell finds that non-Catholic religious schools may have negative effects on political tolerance relative to public schools[112]—but the preponderance of evidence favors private or other chosen schools. There are similar results for social tolerance: after controlling for background, a recent national study found that students who attended private schools—especially religious, predominantly Christian schools—are more likely to disagree with anti-Semitic attitudes than students who attended public schools.[113]

Perhaps most important for a free, diverse society, choice lets people enter groups of their choosing—group identities that may bring deep meaning to people's lives—and perpetuate their sub-cultures and communities. Publicly subsidized choice—as long as there is any public funding for education—therefore, is important to maximizing social capital, both by furnishing schools that, by offering unique characteristics, may bridge group differences, but also by allowing people to maintain the crucial bonds of their communities. Where the public is required to pay for schooling, publicly subsidized choice may be crucial for achieving social harmony.

All these rationales together have a common goal, one that is fundamentally at odds with centralized curriculum standards-making. The goal is enabling people to access education that is *different*: different in approach to, and effectiveness in, achieving outcomes on particular standardized tests; different in the academic outcomes they believe are important; and different in the content and values that they teach. Publicly funded private schools may choose to administer a standardized test that aligns with their curricular vision, but they must be free to align that test to their curriculum, not have it drive their curriculum.

International Lessons in Regulation of Publicly Funded Private Schools

As we consider expanding school choice as part of a new reform agenda that is fundamentally different from Common Core, we must ensure that we do not harm the existing private school world in the rush to extend its benefits to more students. Important lessons can be learned internationally, where choice of religious or other schools is often much greater than in the United States, but heavy regulation of chosen schools is the norm, and private schools have gradually been obligated to teach the same academic curriculum as in the public schools in order to receive public funding. The result has been more choice of delivery models, but severely constrained choice of end product because few schools have been willing to turn down government funding that is highly beneficial for competing against "free" public schools. As Stephen Macedo and Patrick J. Wolf write in the introduction to *Educating Citizens: International Perspectives on Civic Values and School Choice*, other nations "do not provide public funds to nonpublic schools with just a few strings attached; rather, they include a host of requirements regarding curriculum, testing, teacher qualifications, and admissions."[114]

There is good international evidence that regulations tend to increase over time for publicly aided private schools

There is good international evidence that regulations tend to increase over time for publicly aided private schools. In the early 1990s, for instance, Sweden enacted legislation allowing any non-government school that met certain, very basic requirements to receive government funding. The law sparked considerable growth in both enrollment in independent schools and the number of such schools. By the mid-2000s, however, there were additional regulations added, and real threats of many more.[115] Independent schools must now hire government credentialed teachers where previously they had control over hiring. Similarly, independent schools were forbidden from assigning letter grades before eighth grade, which was long prohibited in public schools.

England and the Netherlands have also seen rising regulation of independent schools coincide with government aid, in particular aided schools being subjected to state inspection regimes, and required publication of schools' academic outcomes, primarily test scores.[116] But, observes Walford, in practice, once state funding becomes commonplace it becomes very hard to resist:

In the Netherlands it is now almost unthinkable to try

> to start a school without state funding. Because the state has supported a variety of schools for so long, those who wish to start a new school automatically assume that their school should be state funded. There is a strong reluctance among parents to pay school fees, so that the option of fee-paying is rarely considered.[117]

A similar reality is observed by Harro Van Brummelen, who notes that aided Christian schools in British Columbia, Canada, accepted increasing government regulation of their operations with the arrival of aid in 1977, including inspections every four years. And "private schools implicitly commit themselves to future government regulations, since ongoing dependence on funding…severely limits—if not blocks—continued operations without government grants."[118] In such cases, private schools accept government funds in order to expand, or even just preserve, their distinctive offerings, but gradually must become like the public schools to continue to receive the money after they have become dependent on it. Survey research from the U.S. reinforces the idea that, for many private school leaders, their greatest fear is that participation in a private school choice program will bring with it onerous government regulations in the future, if not in the present.[119]

Curriculum Standards-Based Testing Mandates and School Choice

Ostensibly to ensure public "accountability" and to offer independent information to parents, private school choice programs in the United States sometimes require participating schools to administer standardized tests and provide the results to parents and the state. The extent of government-required testing varies but typically falls into one of the following three broad categories:

- a mandate that schools administer the state-adopted, curriculum standards-based test
- a mandate that schools administer a test of their choice, such as a traditional national norm-referenced test (NRT)
- no mandate to administer a test

Any assessment used for accountability, including the public reporting of results associated with a school choice program, will affect instruction to some degree because schools wish to be perceived as performing well; indeed, their continued receipt of funds may be conditioned on it. This impact is more substantial in the case of curriculum standards-based assessments, such as ones based on Common Core, because these tests are intended to drive (and supposedly improve) instruction. In contrast, most NRTs have historically been designed to be used across multiple jurisdictions with varying curricula; this adaptability was accomplished by only focusing on the core of content that was common across curricula and by designing test questions so that students taught in different ways would have an equal opportunity to answer them correctly. The effect of curriculum standards-based testing on the curricular autonomy of private schools—the extent to which it allows them the freedom to offer a meaningful curricular alternative to the public schools—is a fundamental concern. As most states with school choice programs have shifted toward assessments based on the national Common Core curriculum standards, the unfortunate homogenizing effects of such requirements have only been magnified.

Figure 6. Testing Requirements for School Choice

"Voucher" Tuition Grant & Education Savings Account Programs for General Education Students[120]

(Percentages may not total to 100 percent due to rounding.)

State	Program Name/Description	CC/State Test	Choice of Tests/NRT	No Testing Requirement
AZ	Empowerment Scholarship Accounts			✖
DC	Opportunity Scholarship Program		✖	
IN	Choice Scholarship	✖		
LA	Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence	✖		
ME	Town Tuition Program [see table endnote]	✖		✖
MD	Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST)	✖		
NC	Opportunity Scholarship Act		✖	
NV	Education Savings Accounts		✖	
OH	Educational Choice Scholarship	✖		
OH	Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program	✖		
OH	Income-Based Scholarship Program	✖		
VT	Town Tuition Program			✖
WI	Milwaukee Parental Choice Program	✖		
WI	Racine Parental Choice Program	✖		
WI	Statewide Parent Choice Program	✖		
TOTAL	**--**	**10 (63%)**	**3 (19%)**	**3 (19%)**

Among school choice programs for general education students at grades K through 12, there is also a clear difference regarding testing mandates between the 16 voucher/education savings account programs reliant on public funding and the 21 tax credit programs which subsidize private expenditure. As recorded in Figure 6, approximately 63 percent of the publicly funded programs require participating private schools to administer a particular curriculum standards-based test (usually Common Core) while only about 37 percent either permit schools to select a test that fits their curriculum or have no testing mandate.

63 percent of the publicly funded programs require participating private schools to administer a particular curriculum standards-based test (usually Common Core)

Figure 7. Testing Requirements for School Choice Tax Credit Programs for General Education Students (Individual or Donations to Scholarship Organizations)[121]

(Percentages may not total to 100 percent due to rounding.)

State	Program Name/Description	State/CC Test	Choice of Tests (NRT)	No Testing (Optional)
AL	Scholarship Tax Credit		✖	
AL	Alabama Accountability Act of 2013 Parent-Taxpayer Refundable Tax Credits		✖	
AZ	Corporate School Tuition Organizations Tax Credit			✖
AZ	Personal School Tuition Organizations Tax Credit			✖
FL	Tax Credit Scholarship		✖	
GA	Student Scholarship Organizations Tax Credit			✖
IL	Tax Credits for Educational Expenses			✖
IN	School Scholarship Tax Credit		✖	
IA	School Tuition Organization Tax Credit			✖
IA	Education Expense Tax credit			✖
KS	Tax Credit for Low Income Students Scholarship Program			✖
LA	Tuition Donation Tax Credit Program	✖		
MT	Tax Credits for Contributions to Student Scholarship Organizations		✖	
NH	School Choice Scholarship Program			✖
NV	Educational Choice Scholarship Program			✖
OK	Equal Opportunity Education Scholarships			✖
PA	Corporate Educational Improvement Tax Credit			✖
PA	Educational Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit			✖
RI	Corporate Scholarship Organizations Tax Credit			✖
SD	Partners in Education Tax Credit Program		✖	
VA	Education Improvement Scholarships Tax Credits		✖	
TOTAL	**--**	**1 (5%)**	**8 (38%)**	**12 (57%)**

In sharp contrast, as displayed in Figure 7, only 5 percent of the tax credit programs require a particular curriculum standards-based test while 95 percent allow a choice of tests or do not mandate an assessment (though most private schools are likely to choose to administer one regardless because they and parents like to have information about how their students match up nationally). Tax credit programs, including those providing tax credits for contributions to scholarship-granting organizations, have thus proven far more effective in protecting the curricular autonomy of participating private schools. This condition appears to be linked to tax credits not being viewed as public funding, resulting in less political pressure for so-called "public accountability," with all the regulatory entanglement that typically entails. This consideration is consistent with the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *ACSTO v. Winn* (2011), in which the Court held that pre-tax donations do not constitute public funds,[122] and with reality: in all programs parents or donors choose whether to spend or give and, in the case of scholarships, donors typically choose among various scholarship-granting organizations.

only 5 percent of the tax credit programs require a particular curriculum standards-based test

Some have suggested that curriculum uniformity across schools may facilitate school choice by minimizing educational disruption for students when transitioning between schools.[123] If we create education policies that allow students to switch between schools easily and regularly, the argument goes, we need their new school to be teaching a curriculum that aligns with their old school or the transfer will be too educationally disruptive to be beneficial.In fact, even between two schools with relatively similar academic approaches, student transition may be disruptive for social, among other, reasons. Parents and students will seek to keep transitions to a minimum, only when absolutely necessary or if a student is just not succeeding in a particular school. Even with such limited use of transitions, school choice is invaluable to students and their families because it is available when needed and because it enables school differentiation and thus allows them to select schools that are most likely to align with their needs, interests, and values. But when a parent determines that a student should be transferred for curricular reasons, it would be counter-productive to limit the curricular choices in order to ease transitions.

Similarly, others—often, businesspeople—have suggested that expecting all schools to align to the same curriculum standards is comparable to interoperability standards in industry or technology domains. For example, Bill Gates once noted that "If you have 50 different plug types, appliances wouldn't be available and would be very expensive."[124] But curriculum standards are not primarily about technical interoperability in education. They are used to specify in detail the core service that schools provide—*what* and *how* to teach. A better analogy would be if a state or federal entity specified in great detail, and updated every seven to ten years, every feature and function of computer operating systems or word processing programs. This would certainly limit the design, functionality, and pacing of Mr. Gates's software development.

Every effort should be made to modify the school choice programs that require private schools to administer a particular curriculum standards-based test, so that the schools may choose a test that aligns with their curriculum. Further, in designing new choice programs, advocates should consider that because tax credit programs have been more successful in protecting school autonomy, they should be favored where possible over programs that send public dollars directly into private schools. In the case of tax credits for donations to scholarship organizations, it is preferable to allow donors to choose to contribute to savings accounts managed by numerous possible organizations, such as religious, arts-based, classical, etc. This approach maximizes freedom for donors and for families, who can use the funds not just to pay for private school tuition, but also for tutoring, purchasing educational equipment, and more.[125]

[Choice] advocates should consider that because tax credit programs have been more successful in protecting school autonomy, they should be favored

"Crowding Out" Threat of Common Core to Private Schools and School Choice

Even if curriculum standards and testing mandates on private and home schools can be avoided, advocates for private education have strong reason to oppose the imposition of national curriculum standards even on public schools. There is a powerful indirect threat to all private and homeschoolers from national curriculum standardization that is inherent to any government-dominated industry: crowding out.

When government controls so much of the education curriculum, establishing a Common Core curriculum near-monopoly, there is little economic space for anything substantially different. Publishers of a wide range of instructional materials and textbooks often feel compelled to "align" with the dominant Common Core approach to reach the bulk of the market. Developers of the SAT and ACT college entrance exams have taken steps to tailor their exams to the Common Core. Similarly, popular nationally normed tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and the Stanford Achievement Test, which are administered in many private schools, have released Common Core-oriented versions and made these their main versions. Some older, pre-Common Core versions are still available, but it isn't clear how long these will last. Further, any private school that wishes to easily demonstrate its effectiveness versus the public schools with which it competes is under pressure to give Common Core-aligned tests and report those scores. Many private schools have felt compelled to align their academic approach with Common Core in order to avoid seeming out of date and out of step. One vivid example has been the Common Core Catholic Identity Initiative, a joint effort of "Catholic universities, corporations and sponsors invested in Catholic education, and the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA)" that is working:

1. to empower Catholic schools and dioceses to design and direct the implementation of the Common Core standards within the culture and context of a Catholic school curriculum
2. to infuse the Common Core standards with the faith/principles/values/social justice themes inherent in the mission and Catholic identity of the school.[126]

Given the long history of American Catholic schools offering an invaluable private education option for so many students,[127] it would be an incalculable loss for this storied system to abandon its distinctive academic features in a misguided rush to embrace public school curricular norms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Given the recent national political battle over the Obama Administration's efforts to promote the Common Core curriculum standards and national testing, there is no appetite at present for any new federal effort to promote national curriculum standards. Though the Core no longer commands headlines as it did before the 2016 election, it remains in place in most states, either intact or with relatively minor tweaks.

The Common Core's near-monopolistic market dominance continues to warp much of educational publishing in its direction, challenging private schools committed to their curricular independence even when they don't participate in publicly funded choice programs. While niche curricular materials remain that are not aligned to the Core, increasing private school participation in curriculum-regulated choice programs risks pressuring even this subset of the publishing market into the Core orbit. As a result, all private schools have at least an indirect interest in the direction of curriculum standards policy for public schools and in increasing public appreciation of the importance of protecting the curricular autonomy of their schools. Indeed, crowding out gives all private and homeschoolers a direct interest in seeing even public schools get out from under national standards so that the market for curricular materials will follow.

Alas, centrally planned, government-mandated curriculum standards and aligned tests have been the dominant public education reform strategy in the U.S. for close to 30 years. The effort to establish national curriculum standards and tests through Common Core has simply been the logical culmination of this approach predicated on curriculum centralization, with all academic operations organized around a fulcrum of "standards"—effectively, a compliance model—in the pursuit of classroom excellence in teaching and learning. Unfortunately, after several decades of curricular "standards-based reform," the U.S. remains no closer to attaining internationally competitive academic achievement, while overall improvement within the US has been relatively meager or even negative (especially for the Common Core).

after several decades of curricular "standards-based reform," the U.S. remains no closer to attaining internationally competitive academic achievement

The Common Core initiative, though initially announced as a "benchmarking" endeavor that would adopt the most rigorous expectations and the most effective approaches from top-achieving nations, rejected any lessons of that benchmarking which clashed with the established elite political and reform consensus. Common Core's development, based on consensus among existing state political stakeholders and establishment curriculum reformers, calcified in place a mathematics curriculum several years behind high-performing countries' and uncritically boosted various progressivist instructional "reform" impulses already favored by curricular elites.[128]

While curriculum-based standards and tests are sometimes promoted as instructionally neutral measures of academic outcomes, the reality is that educators do not respond to them as such. Local schools and teachers make extensive efforts to organize their academic operations, testing, professional development, and instruction to "align" (i.e., comply) with the content and instructional assumptions in the standards and tests. Yet, these specifications and even the assessments designed to guide instruction are not always perceived as overly restrictive from within the bureaucratic system. Such constraints may even be perceived as reassuring, a "safe" path to follow or one simply reinforcing previously held instructional beliefs. Nor are the restrictive aspects of such policies or the group think they represent always appreciated by policy reformers without a background in curriculum matters, such as experts in "accountability" or market-based "school choice" policies.

A similar effect can be seen among many charter schools and charter networks, especially some models that focus heavily on test performance and do not wish to be perceived as making excuses or dodging accountability. Chartering, a reform strategy that was originally envisioned as creating opportunities for academic innovation and break-the-mold thinking, has become increasingly constrained by heavy regulation in a range of areas, most harmfully in curriculum and academic programming.[129]

For policymakers focused on improving the international competitiveness of American education, moving beyond the flawed national Common Core curriculum does not have to mean returning to the previous, largely failed policy iteration of state centrally planned curricula based on mediocrity and consensus. There are two, very different, possible directions.

One option is to try to build on the pre-Common Core Massachusetts reform model. Of the small number of states with quality curriculum standards before Common Core, Massachusetts was the most successful at raising student academic achievement. The state demonstrated sustained improvement on the independent NAEP assessment and ranked first among the U.S. states. While the initial state reform act created several charter schools, the overwhelming number of students remained in the traditional public schools, and most of the improvement was attained through the curriculum standards-based reform model in the public schools.

While the Massachusetts math curriculum standards were not as advanced as those of some top-performing nations, they were strong standards. After new state political leadership replaced the state's earlier curriculum standards and fully implemented Common Core in 2013[130], the state saw its first significant declines in 4th and 8th grade math on the NAEP in 2015 and 2017.[131] More recently, further turnover in state education leadership resulted in yet another set of curriculum standards, though a recent review found these too were still not up to the quality of the state's pre-Common Core curriculum standards.[132] The task for policymakers seeking to emulate this state's era of success would be to develop curriculum standards that avoid the typical, lowest-common-denominator consensus product—most likely by engaging a core team of visionary curriculum standards drafters with a clear goal—*as well as* developing a plan for preservation during future state education leadership turnover. For most states, this has proven to be a tall order.

An alternative, burgeoning model would seek to break the stale "consensus" mold by replacing top-down, test-driven curricular compliance with curricular innovation and disruption through local variation and schools of choice. School choice offers an avenue for creating curricular and instructional options that represents a fundamental break with the established consensus—among elite reformers as well as powerful stakeholders in the existing system—based on differentiation in response to the interests of parents and students. This type of variation can only meaningfully occur if choice policies do not impose on participating providers existing government central-planning in curriculum and instruction through a homogenized, uniform set of curriculum standards and aligned assessment. Yet, a majority of state school choice programs that involve public funds do mandate the administration of a particular Common Core or other curriculum-based test in participating private schools. Fortunately, the imposition of particular curriculum standards and tests has not generally been extended to tax credit and scholarship programs.

School choice offers an avenue for creating curricular and instructional options that represents a fundamental break with the established consensus

While the debate over school reform is often a discussion of the best way to achieve improved student outcomes—which usually devolves into test score improvements—we must never lose sight of the fact that full, private school choice is also intrinsically worthwhile. This is because it fundamentally empowers parents to direct the education of their children according to their values and educational preferences rather than those of government bureaucrats. Mandated curriculum-based testing, especially when results are wielded by state officials in pursuit of narrow "accountability" formulas and policies, reduce participation by private schools as well as limit the range of academic differentiation and meaningful choice. This focus on constraint and uniformity is particularly problematic given recent research indicating student test score gains are not necessarily strongly associated with other important student outcomes that are not as easily measured, such as high school completion, participation in post-secondary education, and post-secondary degree completion. For example, schools that achieve only moderate results on academic achievement measures may exceed expectations for high school completion and postsecondary educational success.[133] The ability of families to select schools that inculcate their values as well as other, difficult-to-measure educational preferences similarly advance an invaluable and worthwhile purpose.

curricular innovation and disruption can also be attempted within the public system by fundamentally rethinking standards-based reform

A similar model of curricular innovation and disruption can also be attempted within the public system by fundamentally rethinking standards-based reform. Instead of attempting to create excellence top-down by expecting every local school system and charter school to "align" (conform) its curriculum with a single state-adopted, curriculum standards-based test, states should consider allowing local systems and charters to select from a list of vetted, standards-based tests an assessment that aligns to their preferred curriculum. A charter applicant, for example, could adopt Singapore's advanced mathematics curriculum and then select from a state-vetted list the assessment that best aligns with that approach (Common Core does not).

The Trump 2016 presidential campaign ran on two primary K–12 education promises: one was to "get rid of Common Core and return education back to the local level," and the

second was to promote private "school choice." Both of these are important goals, though returning education to the local level can *only* be accomplished at the federal level by increasing statutory and regulatory flexibility to states and schools in key areas. It is not the Constitutional role of the federal government to determine the curriculum nor the degree of autonomy that states should devolve to local school systems and charter schools. Removing existing federal intrusions into these areas would allow the citizens of each state to make such decisions.

Recommendations: School Choice

1. State school voucher and education savings accounts should refrain from mandating a particular curriculum standards-based assessment as a condition of school participation. If some testing requirement is deemed essential, an acceptable alternative would be to permit schools to select from a wide range of credible, valid test instruments and administer whichever assessment best aligns with their curriculum.
2. Tax credit and tax deduction proposals, which do not involve public funds, should not impose either particular curriculum standards or any testing mandates (though most private schools will still choose to administer some type of standardized test). If a testing requirement is absolutely necessary, the school should be permitted to choose the particular assessment (as described in recommendation #1).
3. When designing new choice programs, policymakers should generally favor tax credits over programs that involve the transfer of public funds. The former appear to be much less susceptible to regulatory creep that compromises school autonomy over time. In addressing the subset of low-income families, tax credit scholarship foundations (rather than personal tax credits) can be useful in ensuring that such parents can afford to make substantial, up-front tuition payments. Middle class families are better served through personal tax credits and deductions, which minimize bureaucracy as well as the risk of creeping over-regulation.

A few examples highlight the type of private school choice policies that should be preferred as well as those to be avoided. Pennsylvania has long embraced choice, and its two tax credit programs are among the largest based on enrollment, combining for 41,886 students in 2016. Schools can qualify as long as they meet required attendance and civil rights provisions. Other tax credit programs worth examining include Arizona and Iowa, and New Hampshire's state tax credit program is an interesting model that education reformers should examine closely[134]. On the other hand, an amendment considered—and rejected—in 2015 in the U.S. House of Representatives during the reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), intended to make Title I funds for low income students portable to private schools,[135] was fundamentally flawed. This amendment would simply have added private schools to the list of entities eligible to participate in the Title I program, which meant that the funds could *not* be used to pay for private school tuition, so not a single additional student would have been enabled to attend private school; at the same time, all of the numerous federal and state Title I statutory and regulatory requirements that currently constrain public schools would have been imposed on participating private schools, including regarding government-approved curriculum standards and tests for all students, use of funds, school improvement plans, and much else.

Policymakers should take greater care to guard against the enormous risk of compromising the fundamental autonomy of the private school sector with poorly designed "school choice" policies, including with respect to testing mandates. At the same time, private schools and school choice advocates should be more willing to take a pass on "compromise" proposals that endanger that autonomy. The first rule of designing or extending school choice policies should be "do no harm" to private school autonomy, including the academic program.

Policymakers should take greater care to guard against the enormous risk of compromising the fundamental autonomy of the private school sector with poorly designed "school choice" policies

Recommendations: Rethinking Standards-Based Reform Within Public Education

1. States should apply to the U.S. Department of Education for a waiver[136] from the Title I, Part A mandate in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which requires a single set of curriculum standards and aligned assessments to be imposed on every school state-wide. Instead, states may wish to review and approve a diverse list of curriculum standards and aligned assessments from which LEAs and independent charters would be free to select the ones that best fit their needs. Since some of the same standards and tests would likely be approved in multiple states, this would encourage private investment in innovative materials through economies of scale across multiple state markets. This approach would largely eliminate the current, not very successful, situation where the central government testing "tail" seeks to wag (direct) the local curriculum "dog." Unfortunately, statutory changes made during the last reauthorization of ESEA, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which were

intended to increase state testing flexibility, do not appear to provide the flexibility necessary for such curriculum innovation because they continue to require that states to impose a single homogenous set of curriculum standards on every LEA within their jurisdiction, thus necessitating a waiver.[137]

2. At the next federal reauthorization of the ESEA statute, Congress should eliminate the provision in Title I mandating that every state impose a single set of curriculum standards on all local school systems and charter schools in its jurisdiction. States should be able to experiment with a range of accountability systems that allow local schools systems and charter schools to use diverse curricula that do not all align with the same government curriculum standards.
3. Congress should eliminate or reduce ESEA mandates that require grade-by-grade curriculum standards and testing to maximize flexibility at grades K through 8. There are multiple curricular paths at the early grades for preparing students to succeed in the typical high school curriculum. States should be permitted to make different decisions on whether they wish to have grade-by-grade state-wide curriculum standards or if they wish to allow greater local flexibility. Even states that wish to be prescriptive regarding outcomes at the end of high school can still greatly expand flexibility at the elementary and middle grades.

Congress should eliminate the provision in Title I mandating that every state impose a single set of curriculum standards on all local school systems and charter schools in its jurisdiction

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2 Patrick J. Wolf, "Academic Improvement through Regular Assessment," *Peabody Journal of Education,* 82, no. 4 (2007): 690–702.

3 Caroline Minter Hoxby, "Rising Tide: Critics of School Choice have Grossly Underestimated the Public School System's Ability to Respond to Competition," *Education Next,* 1, no. 4 (2001): 68–74.

4 Author's calculations based on the information in *The ABCs of School Choice*, EdChoice, Indianapolis, IN, 2018. The percentages do not sum to 100 percent because the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program, Utah Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarship Program, and Wisconsin Special Needs Scholarship Program have atypical testing requirements that do not fit the other three categories.

5 Doug J. McRae, "Consortium 2017 State-by-State Comparisons," September 27, 2017, **https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4062127-consortia2017-Pdf-statebystateresultsSept27.html.**

6 Charles Leslie Glenn, Jr., *The Myth of the Common School* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

7 Collin Hitt, Michael Q. McShane, and Patrick J. Wolf, "Do Impacts on Test Scores Even Matter? Lessons from Long-Run Outcomes in School Choice Research," American Enterprise Institute, March 2018, **http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Do-Impacts-on-Test-Scores-Even-Matter.pdf**.

8 We characterize this descriptor as somewhat misleading because the terms "standards" and "high standards" have traditionally been understood by parents and other non-specialists quite differently than their current usage by education policymakers. Parents typically understood high standards in K–12 education as referring to high expectations by schools and teachers for their students, embodied in such things as challenging or advanced class assignments, tough grading and strict rules for good behavior. The "standards-based reform" advocates have re-positioned these terms to refer to minutely detailed, grade-by-grade requirements for curriculum content and pedagogy that are developed and enforced—through student testing—by government officials not responsible for the operation of the schools they are regulating and usually located a good distance away from them. This confusion over terms is sometimes used by standards-based reform advocates to suggest that parents or others who question such curricular centralization are "against high standards."

9 Prior to the Wisconsin school choice program, an earlier type of school choice program had been established as far back as the 19th century by individual towns in Vermont and Maine that lacked public schools, referred to as Town Tuitioning programs.

10 For a recent meta-analysis that reviewed multiple high-quality studies, see: M. Danish Shakeel, Kaitlin P. Anderson and Patrick J. Wolf, "The Participant Effects of Private School Vouchers Across the Globe: A Meta-Analytic and Systematic Review," working paper no. 2016–07, Department of Education Reform, University of Arkansas, May 2016, **http://www.uaedreform.org/downloads/2016/05/the-participant-effects-of-private-school-vouchers-across-the-globe-a-meta-analytic-and-systematic-review-2.pdf.**

For a non-technical discussion of the range of evaluation results on private school choice, including a discussion of test score outcomes versus longer-term life outcomes, see:

Jay P. Greene. "If you Mostly Care About Test Scores, Private School Choice is Not for You," *Education Next*, April 28, 2017, **http://educationnext.org/mostly-care-test-scores-private-school-choice-not/.**

Several recent studies have cast doubt on the efficacy of choice, but for reasons discussed in footnote 104 we do not believe they change our overall positive conclusions based on the full body of research.

11 Co-editors Jeanne Allen, Cara Candal, and Max Eden. "Charting a New Course: The Case for Freedom, Flexibility & Opportunity Through Charter Schools." Center for Education Reform. June 2017. **https://www.edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Charting-a-New-Course.pdf**

12 Marshall S Smith and Jennifer A. O'Day. "Systemic School Reform," *Journal of Education Policy* 5, no. 5 (1990): 233–267.

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Finn's speech at Heritage was just one of many times he presented this ostensibly synchronistic vision of school choice and curriculum standards-based reform in various articles, books and speeches, during that period and on various occasions since. For a more recent version, one with a limited but grudging concession that private schools should perhaps be allowed to select different curriculum standards-based tests, see: Michael Petrilli and Chester E. Finn, Jr. "Standards-based testing and school choice go together," *National Review Online*, April 1, 2014, **http://www.nationalreview.com/article/374663/two-tracks-school-reform-michael-j-petrilli-chester-e-finn-jr.**

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15 For several examples see Neal P. McCluskey, *Feds in the Classroom: How Big Government Corrupts, Cripples, and Compromises American Education* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), and pp. 93–94.

Jay P. Greene, Jonathan Butcher, Laura I. Jensen, Catherine Shock, "You Can't Choose If You Don't Know: The Failure to Properly Inform Parents about NCLB School Choice," *Georgetown Journal of Law & Public Policy* 7 (2008): 7-25.

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Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to improve the quality of life in Massachusetts through civic discourse and intellectually rigorous, data-driven public policy solutions based on free market principles, individual liberty and responsibility, and the ideal of effective, limited and accountable government.

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