

Book Review

Common Core Dilemma

Review of: Mercedes Schneider (2015). *Common Core Dilemma – Who Owns Our Schools?*
Teachers College Press.

Mercedes Schneider’s *Common Core Dilemma – Who Owns Our Schools?* (2015) is a fascinating and alarming book. The book disabused me of my own naïveté, not only with regard to the common core but also more generally about how things are done nationally. The book includes a great deal of history.

Before the Soviet Union launched their spaceship Sputnik in October 1957, mathematics in American schools was primarily “the third R” in the commonly described “three Rs” of “reading, [w]riting, and [a]rithmetic.” For advanced students, mathematics included some algebra, geometry, and trigonometry. More generally, US K-12 education was fundamentally the same as before World War 2. America’s pathetic initial attempts in the late 1950s to match the Soviets led eventually to a broad effort to strengthen the US military, the science and technology to support it, and the education system, especially in science and mathematics, which was seen as the foundation for it all. The stage was set for addressing education, once strictly a state and local matter, as a national issue.

The Conant Report, issued in 1959, urged the consolidation of small high schools into larger ones that could offer three years of science, mathematics, and foreign languages. Mathematicians such as Patrick Suppes, Max Beberman, Robert Davis, W. W. Sawyer, and Ed Moise got directly involved in K-12 education. The National Science Foundation supported efforts through the School Math Study Group (SMSG) and summer institutes for mathematics teachers.

These efforts had uneven results. Shifting the emphasis from paper and pencil arithmetic, the SMSG text books sparked a major change, even as they were widely criticized for their heavy use of set notation and emphasis on non-decimal numeration. The “New Math” upset many parents who did not understand what their children were being taught. The chorus of Tom Lehrer’s song, *New Math*, captured their frustration:

Hooray for new math... new math
It won’t do any good for you to review math.
It’s so simple, so very simple,
That only a child can do it!

The call to go “Back to Basics” arose in reaction to New Math. It emphasized memorization, rote, and skill and drill. It appealed to conservatives who feared a liberal agenda that emphasized

questioning and imagination. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and others opposed Back to Basics by emphasizing higher order thinking skills (HOTS) and relying on calculators to obviate the need for facility with arithmetic. Patricia Ann Wagner, in her doctoral dissertation of 2014, shows that these “math wars” about mathematics education continued in much the same way through the ensuing decades.

Schneider documents the growing federal involvement in education clearly:

In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) allocated federal dollars for education, for school libraries, for education research, and more. Later, the ESEA was amended to fund bilingual education (1968) and it was reauthorized in 1972, 1978, 1983, 1989, and 1994. The 1994 reauthorization introduced the idea of “a core of challenging state standards” for all students and included the expectation of curricular “alignment” –and associated, state-determined assessments. (p. 9)

Schneider documents further developments, in which state governors began to collaborate on education, and big business got into the act and seized the initiative. A 1995 keynote talk to the National Governor’s Association by Louis Gerstner, head of IBM, cited the then ten-year-old report *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and demanded “a fundamental, bone-jarring, full-fledged 100% revolution that discards the old and replaces it with a totally new performance-driven system.” Gerstner added,

Without standards and accountability, we have nothing– If we don’t face up to the fact that we are the only major country in the world without an articulated set of education standards–and without a means of measuring how successfully we are reaching them, we’re lost before we get started.

He said IBM would get the ball rolling with a National Educational Summit with the aim of new standards being in place by the 1996-97 school year. Implicit in Gerstner’s remarks was the idea that schools should be run like businesses, with rewards and punishments. This required alternatives for students in failing schools, which in turn led to a claim about the need for market competition in the shape of charter schools and privatization of education.

The National Education Summit of March 1996, held at an IBM conference center in New Jersey, obtained commitments from 40 governors and 49 corporate executives to create a non-governmental organization (NGO) to “serve as a clearinghouse for standards information and benchmarks and public reporting.” The resulting NGO was Achieve, and its agenda reflected its corporate financing. Achieve soon began to advise standards writers and evaluate standards developed by states.

The ground was shifting. The 1995 IASA (the reauthorization of the ESEA) called for:

Alignment of all educational components–curriculum and instruction, professional development, school leadership, accountability, and school improvement, so that every aspect of the education system works together to ensure that all children can attain challenging standards.

It continued:

Title 1 will ensure greater accountability through the use of state assessments that measure students' progress toward new state standards. The same standards and assessments developed by a state for all children will apply to children participating in Title 1.

The IASA required states to implement standards and tests. However, it had no enforcement mechanism, so many states did not comply. Those pushing toward what later became the Common Core created and worked through a network of NGOs. These included Achieve, the American Diploma Project, Student Achievement Partners, The Education Trust, and the Fordham Foundation (more recently called the Fordham Institute), all mainly funded, sometimes indirectly, by grants from interested businesses. A list of some of that funding, provided by Schneider, is included near the end of this review.

In 1998, Achieve evaluated the educational standards and assessments of Michigan and North Carolina as a pilot study. It judged standards exclusively on the basis of the US Government's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) program and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMSS) scores, noting "Tests are the critical link between setting standards and holding education systems accountable for achievement."

Achieve sponsored a National Education Summit in 1999, co-sponsored by the Business Roundtable, the Council of the Great City Schools, the Learning First Alliance, the National Alliance of Business, the National Education Goals Panel, and the National Governors Association. The Summit was chaired by Governors Tommy Thompson (Wisconsin) and James Hunt (N. Carolina), Louis Gerstner (CEO of IBM) and John Pepper (CEO of Proctor and Gamble). The conference endorsed the use of tests to measure achievement and the setting of high performance goals on those tests. Achieve held another summit in 2001, at which it reported glowingly on the American Diploma Project (ADP). This was essentially self-praise, because Achieve was a major player in the ADP. The report stated that the ADP would yield

a common core of English and mathematics academic knowledge and skills, or "benchmarks," that American high school graduates need for success in college and the workforce (Achieve, Inc., *Our History*, retrieved from the web and cited in Schneider, p 35)

ADP aimed to make high school diplomas reflect knowledge and skills of value in the workplace or in college. They assumed the diplomas were otherwise worthless. ADP wanted, in effect, diplomas to be high school exit exams in mathematics and English. Its July, 2008 report, *Out of Many, One: Toward Rigorous Common Core Standards from the Ground Up* stated,

A critical mass of states has arrived at a common core of standards in English and Mathematics as a byproduct of their deliberate, voluntary efforts to align their high school standards with the demands of college and careers. (quoted in Schneider, p 42)

This report, in effect, lobbied for what became the Common Core State Standards. It avoided calling for national standards, but it suggested that states were, independently, converging on something very much like that in English and mathematics. The "critical mass of states" was never defined but clearly intended to convey the impression of a done deal, even though that was certainly not the case when the report was written.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was the 2001 reauthorization of the ESEA. The US Department of Education executive summary stated:

The new law reflects a remarkable consensus—first articulated in the President’s No Child Left Behind framework—on how to improve the performance of America’s elementary and secondary schools while at the same time ensuring that no child is trapped in a failing school.

The NCLB Act, which reauthorizes the ESEA, incorporates the principles and strategies proposed by President Bush. These include increased accountability for States, school districts, and schools; greater choice for parents and students, particularly those attending low-performing school; more flexibility for States and local educational agencies (LEAs). (Schneider, page 15)

NCLB required standardized tests to measure adequate yearly progress (AYP) and consequences (“improvement, corrective actions, and restructuring measures”) for districts that do not meet AYP targets. The executive summary continued:

LEAs [local education agencies] must give students attending schools identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring the opportunity to attend a better public school, which may include a public charter school, within the district. The district must provide transportation to the new school and must use at least 5 percent of its Title 1 funds for this purpose, if needed.

For students attending persistently failing schools (those that have failed to meet State standards for at least 3 of the 4 preceding years), LEAs must permit low income students to use Title 1 funds to obtain supplemental educational services from the public- or private-sector provider selected by the students and their parents. Providers must meet State standards and offer services tailored to help participating students meet challenging State academic standards.

To help ensure that LEAs offer meaningful choices, the new law requires school districts to spend up to 20 percent of their Title 1 allocations to provide school choice and supplemental educational services to eligible students. (Schneider, pages 15, 16)

Broadly speaking, NCLB was a colossal flop. Untold hours and dollars went to assess AYP and “help” schools that did not measure up. Educational goals, such as those relating to the arts, social studies and civics, that were not measured on standardized tests were downplayed, and some states gamed the assessment system by setting low bars. NCLB was not reauthorized on schedule in 2007-or even by 2012.

Those who saw education tax dollars as business opportunities were already moving. These included opportunities to run charter schools with public funds but no accountability to taxpayers — all while supposedly making schools more accountable! The result was corporate-run chains of charter schools, enthusiastically backed by Jeb Bush and John Kasich, among others. The stage was set for the Common Core.

In its 2007 annual meeting, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) recognized the non-uniformity of state standards and turned to Achieve and other organizations with similar points of view to draft what would, in effect, be national standards without any overt appearance of federal involvement.

In summer, 2008 Gene Wilhoit, Counsel of the Chief State School Officers (CSSO) and David Coleman, founder and CEO of Student Achievement Partners (SAP), a national standards-writing company set up as a non-profit, approached Bill and Melinda Gates about funding the of K-12 “common standards.” They got the money.

Then in December, 2008, the National Governor’s Association (NGA) and the CCSSO issued a report, *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education*, funded by the Gates Foundation. Based on this report, chief schools officers of 51 states and territories signed a three-page Memorandum of Understanding in spring, 2009, titled: *The Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices Common Core Standards Memorandum of Agreement*. This MOU states that the CSSO and the NGA own the Common Core State Standards and have the right to modify them as they choose. A state can opt into the Common Core State Standards by the signature of its Chief Education Officer. State legislatures and voters were generally not asked about this.

At last, large companies furnishing educational content and assessments could market nationally. Companies with an inside track, such as Pearson and McGraw-Hill stood to profit beyond imagination. Business supported the Common Core State Standards! To bring about the Common Core State Standards, however, great care was taken in the beginning to avoid any appearance of federal involvement and especially financial control. Voluntary contributions, notably from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, filled the gap. See the appendix (next page) for a sampling of such contributions, as reported by Schneider.

Mindy Kornhaber, Associate Professor in the Department of Education Policy Studies at Penn State, has noted that only 2% of the hundreds of millions that private foundations, including Gates, poured into the Common Core went directly to school districts and 12% of the over one billion dollars spent by the federal government did (these direct funds supported just 1% of all US districts). Most of the money went to non-profits, universities, and non-school entities to build support for the Common Core, in much the spirit of the grants listed above. Readers can only wonder what could have been done with all that money, had it been directed to schools, teachers, and children.

In America today, public schools are struggling, even as many chains of for-profit charter schools, often using public funds, are leading a race to the bottom. Few education professionals know the story of how this situation came about, though one can only wish they knew more of it. *Common Core Dilemma* tells an important part of that story and supplies convincing evidence to back it up. Mercedes Schneider has written an important book, which every education professional and informed citizen should read.

Contributed by: Bob Stein.

Appendix

Examples of Contributions to Dissemination of the *Common Core State Standards* (CCSS)*

Date	Amount	Organization	Purpose
Sept 2009	\$2,039,526	The Education Trust	Develop courses aligned w CCSS
Feb 2011	\$3,024,695	ASCD	Support to implement CCSS
Aug 2011	\$1,400,000	Stanford U	Help teachers implement math CCSS
Nov 2011	\$4,463,541	Scholastic, Inc	Help teachers implement math CCSS
June 2012	\$4,042,920	SAP	Help teachers understand and implement CCSS
Nov 2012	\$1,815,810	Fund for Public Schools	Support NYC Department of Ed integration of CCSS implementation strategies with new forms of teacher professional development to align with emerging functionalities and capacity of Shared Learning Infrastructure
Jan 2013	\$3,615,655	Aspen Institute	Support AI's Urban Superintendent's Network, develop resources to integrate CCSS and educator effectiveness practices, use lessons from the field to inform national policy
June 2013	\$800,000	National Assn of State Boards of Ed	Support development of a plan for organization and its efforts to provide training and information to implement CCSS
July 2013	\$557,168	Harvard U	Support Education Next's work in: Common Core standards and assessments, digital learning teacher effectiveness, and charter schools
Oct 2013	\$1,749,070	James B Hunt, Jr Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy Foundation	Support for states to implement CCSS
Nov 2013	\$1,383,041	US Chamber of Commerce Foundation	Engage and educate state and local Chambers to support CCSS

*Excerpted from Schneider (2015).