

ISSUE BRIEF

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Common Core Standards' Devastating Impact on Literary Study and Analytical Thinking

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Since coming to office, the Obama Administration has been intent on standardizing what is taught at each grade level in all of the nation's schools. It has used its flagship "Race to the Top" competitive grant program to entice states to adopt the K–12 standards developed by a joint project of the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). It has also suggested, in its 2009 Blueprint for Education Reform, that adoption of these common standards could one day be a qualification for states wanting future Title I dollars for low-income schools.

Parents, teachers, and education leaders along the political spectrum are increasingly raising questions about the constitutionality and transparency of this joint project,

called the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). They are also expressing concern about the high cost of implementing the standards and the national tests that will be based on them, as well as the potential loss of local control of curriculum and instruction.

Common Core: A Step Backwards for English Standards. Little attention has been paid to the academic quality of the mathematics, literature, and writing standards that NGA and CCSSO developed, despite the fact that they were not internationally benchmarked or research-based. The fatal flaws in the Common Core English Language Arts (ELA) standards went unnoticed because over 45 state boards of education and/or their governors hastily adopted the standards in 2010, in some cases long before they were written or finalized.

Most states agreeing to adopt the Common Core English Language Arts standards may well have thought they were strengthening high school English coursework. However, the architects of Common Core's ELA standards never claimed that their standards would do so. Rather, they claimed that these standards would make

all students "college-ready."

This extravagant promise was and remains undergirded by a belief that a heavy dose of informational or nonfiction reading (50 percent of reading instructional time in the English class at every grade level) will result in greater college readiness than a concentrated study of complex literature in the secondary English class will.

Loss of Classic Literature. Why do Common Core's architects believe that reading more nonfiction and "informational" texts in English classes (and in other high school classes) will improve students' college readiness?

Their belief seems to be based on what they see as the logical implication of the fact that college students read more informational than literary texts. However, there is absolutely no empirical research to suggest that college readiness is promoted by informational or nonfiction reading in high school English classes (or in mathematics and science classes).

In fact, the history of the secondary English curriculum in 20th-century America suggests that the decline in readiness for college reading stems in large part from an increasingly incoherent,

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less challenging literature curriculum from the 1960s onward. This decline has been propelled by the fragmentation of the year-long English course into semester electives, the conversion of junior high schools into middle schools, and the assignment of easier, shorter, and contemporary texts—often in the name of multiculturalism.

From about the 1900s—the beginning of uniform college entrance requirements via the college boards—until the 1960s, a challenging, literature-heavy English curriculum was understood to be precisely what pre-college students needed. Nonetheless, undeterred by the lack of evidence to support their sales pitch, Common Core’s architects divided all of the ELA reading standards into two groups: 10 standards for informational reading and nine for literary reading at every grade level.

This misplaced stress on informational texts (no matter how much is literary nonfiction) reflects the limited expertise of Common Core’s architects and sponsoring organizations in curriculum and in teachers’ training. This division of reading standards was clearly not developed or approved by English teachers and humanities scholars, because it makes English teachers responsible for something they have not been trained to teach and will not be trained to teach unless the entire undergraduate English major and preparatory programs in English education are changed.

Common Core’s damage to the English curriculum is already taking shape. Anecdotal reports from high school English teachers indicate that the amount of informational or nonfiction reading they

are being told to do in their classroom is 50 percent or more of their reading instructional time—and that they will have time only for excerpts from novels, plays, or epic poems if they want students to read more than very short stories and poems.

Long-Term Consequences. A diminished emphasis on literature in the secondary grades makes it unlikely that American students will study a meaningful range of culturally and historically significant literary works before graduation. It also prevents students from acquiring a rich understanding and use of the English language. Perhaps of greatest concern, it may lead to a decreased capacity for analytical thinking.

Indeed, it is more than likely that college readiness will decrease when secondary English teachers begin to reduce the study of complex literary texts and literary traditions in order to prioritize informational or nonfiction texts. This is because, as ACT (a college entrance exam) found, complexity is laden with literary features: It involves characters, literary devices, tone, ambiguity, elaboration, structure, intricate language, and unclear intentions. By reducing literary study, Common Core decreases students’ opportunity to develop the analytical thinking once developed in just an elite group by the vocabulary, structure, style, ambiguity, point of view, figurative language, and irony in classic literary texts.

It will be hard to find informational texts with similar textual challenges (whether or not literary nonfiction). A volume published in 2011 by the National Council of Teachers of English on how

English teachers might implement Common Core’s standards helps us to understand why. Among other things, it offers as examples of informational or nonfiction texts selections on computer geeks, fast food, teenage marketing, and the working poor. This is hardly the kind of material to exhibit ambiguity, subtlety, and irony.

Common Core Is Not the Answer

An English curriculum overloaded with advocacy journalism or with “informational” articles chosen for their topical and/or political nature should raise serious concerns among parents, school leaders, and policymakers.

Common Core’s standards not only present a serious threat to state and local education authority, but also put academic quality at risk. Pushing fatally flawed education standards into America’s schools is not the way to improve education for America’s students.

—*Sandra Stotsky, Professor of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, was formerly Senior Associate Commissioner at the Massachusetts Department of Education and in charge of the development of the state’s widely praised English Language Arts standards. Their heavy emphasis on literary study is considered a major reason for the Bay State’s first-place scores on NAEP’s reading tests. For further details, see the recent report by Mark Bauerlein and Sandra Stotsky, “How Common Core’s ELA Standards Place College Readiness at Risk,” http://pioneerinstitute.org/pdf/120917_CommonCoreELASStandards.pdf.*