



# Hell yes we want instructional change. Don't you?

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It's silly season for the Common Core debate, and I'm not referring to the latest [outlandish claims](#) from folks on the far right. It appears that Common Core Dystopia Disorder has infected some of our usually rational and levelheaded friends in the think-tank community, too.

Jay Greene, I'm talking first and foremost about you. Jay [thinks he's found a smoking gun](#), proof that we supporters of the Common Core, especially those of us at Fordham, have been dishonest when we've claimed that the standards don't "prescribe" a particular curriculum, because of a [recent report](#) in which we fret that educators aren't embracing the "instructional shifts" promoted by the Common Core:

*Common Core doesn't dictate curriculum or pedagogy Checker assured us, it only requires that "everybody's schools use the same academic targets and metrics to track their academic performance" and "then those schools can and should be freed up to 'run themselves' in the ways that matter most: budget, staffing, curriculum, schedule, and more."*

Also,

*These were the promises the Fordham folks made when they were courting us on adopting Common Core, but now that we're married, they've changed their tune. No longer do they bring us flowers, write love-poems, or assure us that Common Core in no way dictates how schools should teach or what they should teach — their pedagogy and curriculum. Instead, Fordham and their friends are now judging schools on whether they are properly implementing "instructional shifts—ways in which the Common Core standards expect practice to differ significantly from what's been the norm in most American classrooms."*

(Or, as Jason Bedrick—cleverly, I must admit—accused us of implying, “[If you like your curriculum, you can keep your curriculum.](#)”)

Rick Hess tweeted that he found Jay’s critique “devastating” to our case. Later, when [Kathleen Porter-Magee](#) rightfully (and respectfully) responded that there’s a world of difference between “prescribing a curriculum” and encouraging “instructional shifts,” Rick called it “a pol’s answer,” and Jay [gleefully agreed](#), with a cheeky reference to Bill Clinton’s deceitful disassembling for good measure.

To which I say: Dude, guys, get a grip.

Are we hoping that Common Core will lead to instructional change in the classroom? Hell yes! If “instructional change” isn’t what we’re all working toward, through any of our reform efforts, what’s the point? *How else do we expect to see improved student achievement?*

This isn’t just true for standards-based reform. I assume Jay still supports school choice because he thinks it will lead to improved student outcomes—more learning. And how is that supposed to happen? Kids don’t learn how to write better via the invisible hand of the market, though I certainly agree that market forces could push public schools to make changes they otherwise would resist—changes that would result in stronger teaching (i.e., instruction) in the classroom. And THAT would lead to improved student results. No?

Rick likes to pretend that he’s above making policy pronouncements, though in recent years he’s promoted, among other things, cage-busting leadership, principals as learning engineers, and gold-star teachers. Toward the end of his theory of action for any of these reforms, I assume, are better interactions between kids, teachers, and content. In other words, improved instruction.

And let’s not just pick on Jay and Rick. Russ Whitehurst and Tom Loveless have been coy about the Common Core too, fairly pointing out that there’s never been a relationship between the quality of states’ content standards (as measured by Fordham’s reviews) and improved student achievement. We know; we’ve looked for such a relationship for years. It’s not hard to understand why it doesn’t exist: Few states did the hard work of driving instructional change from the standards to the classroom. They bought assessments that measured just a fraction of their standards, set their cut scores too low, or skimped on teacher training.

So standards—words on paper—don’t matter, at least in isolation. But Russ and Tom have also been big advocates for the importance of curriculum and instruction. Russ, for instance, has eloquently written that “[leaving curriculum reform off the table or giving it a very small place makes no sense.](#)”

I agree wholeheartedly. Here’s the conundrum for state policymakers: How do you encourage local school districts to make smart curricular decisions? Standards-based reform is one possibility. Set clear standards, align assessments to those standards, hold educators accountable, and help them find solid curricular materials that sync with the standards. If there are better ways, I’m open to them. Russ? Tom?

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As this point I can hear Jay saying, “See, this isn’t tight-loose, this is tight-tight. Sucka!”

But let me ask you, Jay: Is anyone proposing that states hire Common Core Cops who go to school districts and inspect their curricular choices? To check on their alignment with the standards and penalize them if they don’t? Nope. Under Common Core, states will continue to hold schools accountable for student results—and that’s as it should be. If some schools teach yoga all day and the kids do well on the tests, it won’t matter a lick to the states.

A different question—a good *think-tank question*—is how social scientists can determine, in the initial stages of a major reform like the Common Core, whether the “theory of action” is playing out as expected. (I believe you fancy pants call this “formative evaluation.”) That’s where our [recent reading study](#) comes in. We wanted to know, in these early years of implementation, whether schools are making changes as a result of adopting the Common Core—changes that might result in improved student achievement. For English language arts, we thought a good indicator would be the rigor of the books teachers are assigning to their students. (We’d love to do a similar study for math, perhaps looking at whether elementary school teachers are teaching traditional arithmetic again, as the standards expect.)

Is this renegeing on our tight-loose promise? Our courtship love songs? Hardly. Nobody is going to be sanctioned as a result of our study. We believe that schools will do better on the Common Core-aligned assessments if they ask students to read challenging texts, rather than books that are relatively easy for them. (We’d also love to see schools adopt a content-rich curriculum like Core Knowledge.) But guess what? If schools continue to assign kids “just right” texts at their current reading levels and those kids still pass the Common Core assessments—great! From the perspective of the public, that’s what counts.

But if we see a lot of failure on the Common Core assessments in 2015 and 2016 and little movement on NAEP, we’ll now have a reasonable hypothesis to explain it: Schools didn’t change their instructional practices, at least as they relate to assigning students more challenging texts. That’s a worthy piece of information. One might even call it valuable social science.

Our hope, of course, is that this finding—that educators think they are faithfully implementing the Common Core standards for English language arts even though they aren’t making the instructional shifts encouraged by the standards themselves—will motivate action now, rather than later. We hope states and districts will redouble their efforts to familiarize teachers with the standards and with good practice (which, in our view, includes assigning grade-level texts).

But in the end, we’re just a think tank. States, districts, and schools are free to ignore us—and most will. And in the end, they will be judged by their student results. As they should be.

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The main reason there’s been so little achievement gain over the past few decades arising from the reforms that so many of us have been pressing is precisely because neither curriculum nor

instruction much changed—hence the student's actual classroom experience didn't much change, and hence the students didn't learn much more. Is that what Jay and his fellow Common Core vigilantes hope will happen again?