



Common Core Confusion: Blame Supporters

Neal McCluskey

February 26, 2015

As students across the country head into Common Core testing, a **new poll** reveals that Americans are confused about what, exactly, the Core is. But don't blame them. Blame Core advocates, whose rush to install nationwide curriculum standards has left Americans befuddled and angry.

What is the Core? Supposedly, just reading and math standards -- basic guidelines about what students should be able to do -- voluntarily adopted by states. But that is not how the public perceives it. According to a new Fairleigh Dickinson University poll, only 17 percent of Americans hold favorable opinions of the seemingly innocuous Core, and two-thirds think it covers specific content: at least one topic out of sex education, evolution, global warming, and the American Revolution.

Some of the public is misinformed. Unfortunately, that is in part because what Core advocates tell us is often quite misleading.

Start by looking at what the pollsters -- whose press release was very pro-Core -- assert. While it is true the Core does not explicitly tackle the four hot-button subjects mentioned above, it touches all of them, in one case forcefully. The **English portion** has sections on "literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects," and more explicitly says that students in grades 11 and 12 will "analyze ... U.S. documents of historical and literary significance ... including the Declaration of Independence ... for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features." Inextricably connected to the "themes" and "purposes" of the Declaration is, of course, the American Revolution. Yet the pollsters suggest it is flat wrong to think the Core includes this topic.

Then there are those national **Common Core-aligned tests** millions of students are facing. If they ask about global warming or sex education, those topics essentially become Core content.

The Core is not simply guidelines, but content, and that is without even mentioning the math standards, which are much more specific when it comes to dictating material than the reading standards.

Of course, the average person -- with a job, family, and countless political issues vying for his or her attention -- has little time to research any given topic, so some confusion is to be expected. But the way the Core became policy -- rushed through the back door -- made public understanding essentially impossible.

The key was the 2009 federal "stimulus," which allocated \$4.35 billion for what became the Race to the Top (RTTT) program. While all eyes were on the Great Recession, RTTT made states compete to win federal dough, and among several things, they had to promise to adopt standards common to a "**majority**" of states -- a parameter only the Core met -- to truly compete. And applications were due before the final version of the Core was even published.

After RTTT came No Child Left Behind waivers, cementing adoption by giving states only two standards options: Either adopt the Core, which most states had already promised under RTTT, or have their own standards certified by a state university system as "college- and career-ready."

Core supporters **almost certainly lobbied** to include the Core in RTTT, and both RTTT and waivers were in line with what the National Governors Association and the Chief State School Officers had called for in their 2008 report "**Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education.**" This was not truly a voluntary adoption of common standards, but was pushed by federal "incentives," including funding and regulatory relief.

Finally, much blame for confusion lies at the feet of advocates who, in trying to quell a revolt that erupted when the Core hit districts and the public finally became aware of it, have tried to sell the Core as both content-heavy and content-bereft. All things to all people.

A good example is E.D. Hirsch, author of the famous book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. In 2013 **Hirsch endorsed** the standards, writing that "they break the fearful silence about the critical importance of specific content." Then what did he write? The Core actually contains no "specific historical, scientific, and other knowledge that is required for mature literacy." It just embraces the idea of content.

Or consider former Secretary of Education William Bennett, who in 2014 wrote that he once polled hundreds of people about what all students should know, and "almost every person agreed on ... the Bible, Shakespeare, America's founding documents ... 'Huckleberry Finn' and classical works of mythology and poetry." He then asked, "Why ... is Common Core drawing such heavy fire?" Answer: "A myth persists that [it] involves a required reading list."

See why the public is confused?

*Neal McCluskey is the associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and author of **Behind the Curtain: Assessing the Case for National Curriculum Standards.***