



Study: Common Core Obstructs School Choice

Dr. Susan Berry

October 1, 2018

A study finds that school choice has been obstructed since most states implemented the Common Core State Standards.

The study, titled “Common Core, School Choice and Rethinking Standards-Based Reform,” and published by the Boston-based Pioneer Institute, observes that since Common Core was implemented in 45 states and Washington, DC, students have demonstrated sharp drops in academic performance. Additionally, those students who were already performing poorly— many of them minority students – declined even further.

Yet, in the name of accountability, when private school choice programs receive taxpayer-funded vouchers, they are forced to adopt the curriculum on which the standardized test is based in order to ensure their students’ success.

“When states mandate a particular curriculum standards-based test, private schools are essentially required to adopt the curriculum content and pedagogy on which the test is based if they want to increase the probability that that their students are successful,” said co-author Theodor Rebarber, CEO of AccountabilityWorks, an education nonprofit.

About two thirds of the nation’s. tuition grant (“voucher”) programs mandate that schools administer a single curriculum-based test, usually a Common Core-aligned test, in order to receive the public funds, Pioneer Institute notes in a press release.

“Tax credits, however, are not as likely to be linked to government mandates,” Pioneer states. “Under tax credit programs, parents paying tuition or others that donate money receive a tax credit. The authors find that in 95 percent of cases, these programs are not subject to curriculum-based testing mandates.”

“With its near-monopoly status distorting the textbook and other instructional materials markets,” said co-author Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, “Common Core blunts the innovation, dynamism and competition that is the heart of the school choice movement.”

Results of national and international assessments over the last several years have documented a dramatic decline in U.S. student achievement since Common Core was broadly implemented. Common Core was sold not only as a set of standards that were “rigorous” and designed to

encourage higher levels of achievement, but also as a program that would shrink the achievement gap between middle-class students and those from the lower socioeconomic levels.

In April of 2016, only about 37 percent of U.S. 12th graders were shown to be prepared for math and reading at the college level, according to the 2015 NAEP – also known as the Nation’s Report Card.

Additionally, results released by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) showed that, in 2016, the average score in the U.S. on the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) dropped to 549 out of 1,000 from the average score of 556 in 2011. The results translate into the nation’s decline from fifth in international ranking in 2011 to 13th in 2016 out of 58 international education systems.

The PIRLS revealed achievement for the top-performing 20 percent of students became flat over time, while the lowest 20 percent declined further.

“We seem to be declining as other education systems record larger gains on the assessment,” said Peggy G. Carr, acting commissioner for the federal NCES, according to the *Washington Post*. “This is a trend we’ve seen on other international assessments in which the U.S. participates.”

The 2017 NAEP scores also showed the reading and mathematics scores of higher-performing eighth-graders increased, but those gains were offset by lower-performing students in the same grade who slid further.

Similarly, higher performing fourth graders showed no significant change in reading or mathematics, but weaker students declined further.

The authors of the Pioneer study identify two possible avenues for reform of public schools:

The first is for states to emulate the pre-Common Core Massachusetts model, under which the state engaged a team of visionary curriculum standards drafters to develop clear and ambitious academic goals approximating the highest quality public and private schools. The reality, however, is that most states have not been successful in implementing this model and even Massachusetts in recent years has moved away from this approach in favor of the flawed Common Core.

“The second possibility is to re-conceptualize standards-based reform and accountability,” says co-author Rebarber. “We must shift standards-based reforms away from government central planners in order to disrupt the status quo and leverage innovative, ambitious curricula.”

The authors say states could allow local school districts, vocational-technical schools, and charter public schools to use the curriculum that best fits their needs as they also select an assessment from a variety of state-vetted tests that most closely aligns to the local curriculum.

“[I]t would mean the end of the current misguided model of the national or state testing tail wagging the local curriculum dog, which parents oppose,” states Rebarber. “The result would be a surge in investment at the national and local levels in far more diverse curricular and pedagogical models that do not conform to politically-established, lowest common denominator government curriculum standards.”

The authors recommend that, when the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is next reauthorized in two years, Congress “eliminate the mandate that every state impose a single statewide set of curriculum standards and allow states to experiment with diverse approaches to accountability.”