

What is the Common Core US education initiative?

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Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Math and English Language Arts are being implemented in kindergarten through 12th grade classrooms across the United States this year. The federal initiative moves towards the establishment of national, rather than state-by-state curriculum standards. It has been promoted by the Obama administration and bankrolled by various corporate interests such as the Gates Foundation. It is being rolled out with little or no discussion among teachers, parents and students.

Common Core emerged out of the *21st Century Skills* framework developed by Bernie Trilling and Charles Fadel—two education “experts” closely associated with technology firms Oracle and Cisco Systems. It purports to be relevant to the real world, focusing on the knowledge and skills that college graduates and workers need to compete in a global economy.

Under the scheme, all children, starting as young as five years old, will be tested to see if they are “college or career ready.” Those deemed unworthy of advancement to college will be channeled into a trade skill track.

Educators are committed to finding the best and most scientific methods to teach students. However, CCSS is nothing of the sort. Instead it is part of the various schemes promoting “accountability” in public education, a code word for an intensified testing regime to evaluate the performance of students and teachers.

CCSS will be used, like Bush’s No Child Left Behind and Obama’s Race to the Top, to scapegoat educators for classroom problems, which have their roots in decades of cutbacks and the staggering levels of poverty among public school students. The new standards will be used to accelerate the closure of public schools, expand the number of for-profit charter schools and create even greater social inequality.

The Obama administration is seeking to tailor public and higher education entirely to the needs of corporate America. Increasingly, education curricula are focused on so-called STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) while a liberal arts education is presented as more a

less an unaffordable luxury, with no return on investment.

The drive reaches an absurd level in the Common Core language arts standards for kindergarten and elementary school students, which stress the need for more non-fiction and “informational” texts, instead of fictional stories. Currently only 15 percent of the texts in elementary schools are supposedly informational. The new standards will shift the informational/narrative percentages to 50/50 at the elementary level, 60/40 in middle school, and 75/25 in high school. (See, “The Common Core curriculum: A California kindergarten teacher’s experience”)

At a February hearing on Kansas’ adoption of Common Core, Sandra Stotsky, a professor of in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, declared, “Critical thinking doesn’t come from reading informational texts about fast food.”

Teachers have greeted the new standards with deep suspicion and, increasingly, outright hostility. On April 6 the *Washington Post* reprinted a resignation letter from Gerald J. Conti, a teacher with 27 years teaching in Syracuse, New York, who articulates the disgust of a broad layer of teachers.

Citing John Dewey’s statement, “Education is not preparation for life, education is life itself,” Conti writes, “This type of total immersion is what I have always referred to as teaching ‘heavy,’ working hard, spending time, researching, attending to details and never feeling satisfied that I knew enough on any topic. I now find that this approach to my profession is not only devalued, but denigrated and perhaps, in some quarters, despised. STEM rules the day and ‘data driven’ education seeks only conformity, standardization, testing and a zombie-like adherence to the shallow and generic Common Core, along with a lockstep of oversimplified so-called Essential Learnings. Creativity, academic freedom, teacher autonomy, experimentation and innovation are being stifled...” Expressing the disillusionment of broader sections of teachers with the Democratic Party and the unions, Conti adds, “A long train of failures has brought us to this

unfortunate pass. In their pursuit of Federal tax dollars, our legislators have failed us by selling children out to private industries such as Pearson Education. The New York State United Teachers union has let down its membership by failing to mount a much more effective and vigorous campaign against this same costly and dangerous debacle...”

The movement towards tracking even very young students, either for college or the workplace after high school, is part of the promotion of a “new normal” of mass unemployment and low-paying jobs. For decades, a college education was presented as the only means to lift working class youth out of life of unskilled labor. The percentage of high school graduates who entered two- or four-year colleges rose from 49 to 69 percent from 1980 to 2008.

Now ever-larger sections of the political and corporate establishment are insisting that college education should not be seen as necessary. This corresponds with the estimates by employers that 25 percent of the new jobs created over the next years will not even require a *high school* education.

The promotion of a national curriculum and testing program will mean immense profits for private companies. Joanne Weiss, chief of staff to US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, lauded Common Core, saying, “The development of common standards and shared assessments radically alters the market for innovation in curriculum development, professional development, and formative assessments. Previously, these markets operated on a state-by-state basis, and often on a district-by-district basis. But the adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets where the best products can be taken to scale.”

Testing and educational materials supply companies—such as Pearson and McGraw Hill—stand to make a fortune off of the implementation of Common Core.

Major American think tanks such as Fordham Institute and The Pioneer Institute estimate Common Core could cost taxpayers between \$12 and \$30 billion to implement nationwide. The widely varying estimates reflect the lack of agreement about how much each state will need to invest in implementation and testing materials such as computers, software and training materials for teachers. To be sure, none of the projected funding will be spent on teachers’ salaries, smaller class sizes or increasing resources for art, music and gym courses.

Predictably, this retrograde policy has won the enthusiastic support of the teachers’ unions. The unions have abandoned the defense of teachers and public education, jumping on Obama’s reactionary “education reform” and “accountability” agenda. In a June 3, 2010 press release on the Common Core Standards, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten gushed, “These

standards should affect teaching and learning in classrooms across the country. They are essential building blocks for a better education system—not a new educational fad—and they can help prepare all children, regardless of where they live, for success in college, careers and life.”

Injecting American-first nationalism, she continued, “We need to use these standards as the foundation for better schools, but we must do more—as the countries we compete with do. With common standards as the foundation, these countries provide kids a robust curriculum taught by well-prepared, well-supported teachers. Implementing these standards will require 360-degree accountability—with parents, elected officials, community leaders, teachers and students all sharing the responsibility for students success.”

The Common Core initiative is only the latest in a long line of policies adopted by Democratic and Republican politicians alike that repudiate the basic democratic principle that all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, have the right to a free, quality education. With the assistance of the unions, Obama has launched an even more ruthless attack on public education than his Republican predecessors, spearheading the transformation of education into a privatized system, with government subsidies provided to charter schools designed to educate only a fraction of working class youth. The rest are condemned to schools that are more like holding pens than centers of learning.

The defense of public education is a political struggle—one that must be directed against the entire economic system. The provision of high quality public education is incompatible with the continued existence of capitalism, whose most essential feature is social inequality.



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