Fables of the Common Core: The True Standards and Their Role in Utah

By Dalton Edwards

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is a nationwide initiative to further regulate the education system—beyond No Child Left Behind—by implementing benchmarks that demand competency across a range of disciplines. CCSS intends to regulate what and how information is taught to U.S. children in order to level their overall competency with children from other nations who tend to statistically outperform them. However, CCSS is a major source of confusion for parents and educators who are unsure which organizations—governmental or nonprofit—control the development and implementation of the standards. This confusion has led to several misconceptions that continue to frustrate the public. This essay examines the foundation and principles of CCSS, ultimately bringing to light and responding to those misconceptions that still exist today. This paper discusses CCSS as a national movement and concludes by examining the economic and social ramifications in relation to Utah and its adoption of CCSS.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), as they are broadly understood, are a code of benchmarks that, if fully implemented across the nation, will revolutionize the idea of comprehensive education reform. There are inarguably large misconceptions surrounding the CCSS; specifically, which governing body aims to impose them and what existing measures exist in the U.S. education system that the standards intend to reform. The aim of this essay is to clear up those misconceptions as well as to provide a straightforward look at the effect the implementation of the CCSS will have on the Utah education system and its participants. With this end in mind, my analysis relies upon the objective analysis of the potential effectiveness of the policy (its intent), as well as the likelihood that it will be enacted as successfully as the developers have estimated. First, this essay will discuss the origins and development of the CCSS over the past decade. Next, I will explore the myths and facts concerning CCSS. The myriad details of the English language, arts, and mathematics standards will briefly be drawn out, as well as a few benefits and drawbacks that stem from the standards’ implementation. Finally, this essay will examine the greater implications behind this growing national debate over the new U.S. education policy.

Proponents of CCSS believe that enacting the standards will have various social and economic benefits to the United States—including higher test scores and higher competence among students entering the workforce. The hope is that this reform will lead educators to their ultimate goal: providing the most effective system for educating children on the various concepts they will need to succeed in life, both through personal enlightenment and economic stability. This paper will not validate arguments for or against CCSS, though it should be noted that there are many points to be considered on each side. Rather, it intends to edify the conversation surrounding this divisive issue.

As was stated before—and it bears repeating—there are countless misconceptions of what precisely the CCSS are, and this is to be expected of a nation-wide state-based initiative with a complex set of guidelines. What everyone seems to know about the CCSS is that it is a nationwide initiative to regulate the education system by imposing more demanding standards on students in grades K-12. What many people fail to understand, however, is who exactly is imposing the standards and why the reformation of the education system is so crucial. Herein lies the grand debate: while some speculate that this is another federal program intended to increase the influence of the federal government, others rest assured that CCSS is the solution to a very prescient problem—poor education standards in the United States.

For one thing, this is not a federal program, and it is by no means being enforced on any state for implementation. Each state’s education system has the inherent right to choose whether they implement the standards. Each state’s education system has the inherent right to choose whether they implement the standards—partially, completely, or not at all. To better explain the Core, however, it is helpful to understand the recent history of education regulation and why
this has sparked the need for further reform. To do so, we begin with the eventual implications of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB).

**Education Reformation and the ‘Failure’ of No Child Left Behind**

Educational reform had been discussed in the decades preceding NCLB; several studies had undertaken the task of reviewing the education system in light of the public debate on political, social, and economic issues. A report done by Peters and Waterman (1982) emphasized the importance of quality education in the workforce. This led to a series of national studies on excellence in education that were critical of the poor quality of public education. Within two decades following the report, NCLB was put in place to address the many criticisms of the then-current system.

The No Child Left Behind Act was essentially the reenactment of one of the most far-reaching (and only) pieces of federal legislation to ever address education standards: the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson. According to the provisions of NCLB, a school was required to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) in order to continue to qualify for federal funding (GreatSchools, n.d.). AYP was the standard by which the federal government could track a school’s quantifiable progress via scores on required end-of-year tests. The policy states that a school whose fifth grade class scores higher on end-of-level tests than they did the year before would be considered to have made AYP (GreatSchools, n.d.). However, the schools that could not prove AYP consistently were considered to be “in need of improvement” and were threatened with a loss of federal funding (GreatSchools, n.d.).

The eventual effect of this accountability system could hardly be called surprising. A study done by Michael Watt (2011) examines the effectiveness of NCLB in light of CCSS and found that under the regulations of the NCLB, “permitting states to set levels of student achievement increased the variation in what states demanded of students. Contending that [NCLB] created incentives for states to manipulate the law by lowering standards, both conservative and progressive policy makers advocated development of national standards and assessments” (Watt, 2011, p. 7). Needless to say, the policy had not achieved its intended effect—to have all students score proficient on state standardized tests by 2014. The policy was inadvertently contributing to poor student performances and achievement gaps among ethnic groups. Frequent manipulation by states under the law’s guidelines outlined the problem of regulating a federal education system while continuing to recognize state sovereignty.

Though the program did not meet the level of success that congressional supporters had hoped for, one of the greatest benefits of NCLB was to open the conversation concerning education standards in America. According to the results of a 2003 study of international test scores across math, reading, and science skills among 15-year-olds, the United States ranked 25th in mathematics, 12th in reading, and 20th in science (“International Comparison of Math,” 2003). It should be noted that these results were gathered two years after NCLB had been initiated and enforced. A study conducted in 2009 found similar results, positing that U.S. students ranked significantly lower than nations like China, Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Finland—citing former DC schools chancellor Michelle Rhee who called for reforms to “our education system [that] can’t compete with the rest of the world” (“U.S. Students Still Lag Behind,” 2012).

It seems obvious, several years after the program has ended, that NCLB was not the great triumph of American education reform. It has to its merit, however, the distinction of introducing the tricky question worth pondering: how should the system be reformed to best establish the standards of a quality education in America? And the much more essential question that will be discussed later in this essay: why should there be standards at all? Valerie Strauss of The Washington Post will readily tell you that “NCLB has failed badly both in terms of its own goals and more broadly” (Strauss, 2012). However, I postulate that the program was not quite as large a failure as they seem to imagine.

In order to formulate a complete picture of CCSS, it is vital to understand that first there was NCLB. The telling effects of NCLB helped to illustrate how education is not equal across districts, cities, and states. Children of different demographics are not held to the same standards and expectations. Teachers instruct their students differently in one state than their counterparts do in neighboring regions. Prior to the CCSS, there were no programs that advocated a common set of rigorous standards. Similarly, shortcomings of the U.S. education system were thrown under strict scrutiny as comparisons were made between international standards and our less effective version of them.

NCLB’s failure also highlighted the ineffectiveness of a federal program largely based on fiscal incentives and penalties. According to Rick Hess, the director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, “the problem with [NCLB] is if you had hard tests or hard standards, you made your schools look bad. So there was a real, kind of perverse incentive baked into NCLB.….The desire to correct that mistake led to the creation of what became the Common Core” (Bidwell, 2014). Essentially, without NCLB, there is a good chance that the CCSS would not have received such rigorous support by those who saw an opportunity to move away from such a poorly designed program.

A crucial concept to understand in terms of comprehensive change is that of ‘exponentially benefitting equity’: an inherently equal expectation that’s purpose is to rise in benefit in accordance to a similar rise in equity. Essentially, the more equal the standards are, the greater the benefit will be across the country, and to an exponential degree. The concept is inconceivable under a system that does not place the absolute highest value on ambitious uniform standards. At the heels of NCLB came the attempt to finally answer the nation’s rising need for comprehensive, all-inclusive, and equitable education reform.

**Birth and Adoption of the Standards**

The National Governors Association (NGA) is a collective bipartisan body of American governors formed to “identify priority issues and deal collectively with matters of public policy and governance at the state and national levels” (About the National Governors, n.d.). Essentially, they are a body of state officials who set priorities for their respective states through a collective effort of policy proposals and initiatives. Under the guidance of Janet Napolitano, the Chair of the NGA in 2006, an effort was made to promote Innovation America—an initiative with a significant focus on improving math and science education to consequently improve the nation’s workforce. Specifically, it was an effort to focus the states’ efforts “on strengthening our nation’s competitive position in the global economy by improving our capacity to innovate…and better align post-secondary education systems with state economies” (“2006-07 NGA Chair Gov.,” 2006).

With the intention of promoting the success of Innovation America, Napolitano put together a task force composed of education commissioners, governors, corporate CEOs, and recognized experts in education. In 2008, the task force released a report stating that in order to “meet the realities of the 21st century global economy and maintain America’s competitive
edge into the future, we need students who are prepared to compete not only with their American peers, but with students from all across the globe for the jobs of tomorrow” (NGA, 2008). This report would become the building blocks for what is now known as the Common Core State Standards.

The developers of CCSS were well aware that stigmas behind previous federal government education reforms (e.g., the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and NCLB) would threaten their chances of getting support from opponents of common standards. Proponents of the CCSS had to ensure that all effort put into the development of the program came primarily from the states—consequently fueling the idea that the standards were a state-based initiative only. With the push for differentiation between a private and federal initiative, the NGA recruited several independent groups to collaborate on the development of the standards—among them, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the nonprofit education reform group Achieve. Under the auspices of the CCSSO and NGA, 48 states’ education policy leaders joined together to develop common standards and support common assessments of them.

Aside from the looming possibility of having the standards universally rejected, the developers had to determine the standards they wished to implement. To this end, an overarching theme was applied to the program. The developers defined the purpose of the Common Core as being to “ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live” (About the Standards, n.d.). The roots of Innovation America are present in this mantra, which invariably suggests the importance of strengthening the workforce of the United States through a standards-based initiative aimed at increasing students’ overall abilities and knowledge.

In 2009, around the time that the CCSSO and NGA were coming together to develop the standards, it was agreed upon that the foundation of the Common Core would focus primarily on English Language Arts and Mathematics—reforming the two areas that American students did statistically poorest in. The developers had to determine what should be known at each level—each benchmark of a student’s education—in order to prepare them best for entry-level college courses. It was an arduous process trying to determine a common set of standards that could potentially be adopted by 50+ education systems. This was especially relevant since each state already had individualized standards adapted to the needs of their respective school systems.

The broad challenge facing the developers was to create a goal-oriented program modeled from the most effective standards already in place, whilst acknowledging the critics of uniform standards and trying to assuage their concerns. This monumental challenge was faced head-on by the gathered experts. Aside from the efforts of the NGA, CCSSO, and Achieve, they enlisted the aid from several national organizations that came together to spearhead the project. Along with expert opinion and advice in developing the standards, each draft of the standards was posted online for public comments and input. As described on the CCSS website, “Because their design and content have been refined through successive drafts and numerous rounds of state feedback, the standards represent a synthesis of the best elements of standards-related work in all states and other countries to date” (“Read the Standards,” n.d.). It will soon be shown that this synthesis did much to address the concerns of many opponents to the initiative, although criticisms still exist to this day.

The standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts were released on June 2, 2010, and a majority of states adopted the standards in the subsequent months. Prior to the release of the standards, President Barack Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). According to a report released by the Department of Education, the ARRA, “lays the foundation for education reform by supporting investments in innovative strategies that are most likely to lead to improved results for students, long-term gains in school and school system capacity, and increased productivity and effectiveness” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Essentially, and this is where some controversy regarding federal involvement comes into play, the ARRA provides the funding for the Race to the Top Fund, a “competitive grant program designed to encourage and reward States that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform” (“Race to the Top Program,” 2009). The language that lays out the contingencies for funding through Race to the Top is very similar to the language used in the CCSS. The press release detailing the announcement of Race to the Top relayed the President’s words on the subject: “States leading the way on school reform will be eligible to compete for $4.35 billion in Race to the Top competitive grants to support education reform and innovation in classrooms…[by] adopting internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace” (Hamilton, 2009). The natural conclusion is that the federal government was once again providing a fiscal incentive to the state governments. This time, however, the states would have no chance to manipulate the numbers in order to receive the federal grants. Instead, they would have to literally outsmart all of their competitors.

As stated before, a majority of the states signed up in the subsequent months following the publication of the standards. In light of new information, it can be presumed that the Race to the Top incentive had some influence in the scramble for adoption.

In this essay, we have hitherto discussed the history of the CCSS, including the reasoning behind them and the current status of their implementation across the nation. Now, we move to discuss the standards and their status in Utah schools. Here, the aim is to understand the ‘mission’ of the program, the myths surrounding CCSS, how the standards are composed, and how CCSS is being implemented by the Utah State Office of Education.

Several sources outline the mission of the CCSS, but two are worth noting. The first is derived from the Utah State Board of Education’s description (n.d.) of what the standards are and how their application should be perceived by Utahns. Describing the process of development for Utah, the “Common Core’ is limited to only the state level standards for mathematics and English language arts,” and are nothing more than “standard benchmarks used to help students gauge progress towards fulfilling their individual aspirations” (Utah State Board of Education, n.d., para. 1). The second offers the aim of the program and comes from the web page of the Council of Chief State School Officers and its outline of the standards. On the website, it defines CCSS as “a set of high quality academic expectations in English-language arts and mathematics that define the knowledge and skills all students should master by the end of each grade level in order to be on track for success in college and career” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2014, para. 3). No matter the source, it is acknowledged that the standards

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To this day, 44 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the CCSS, with five states choosing not to adopt (Texas, Alaska, Nebraska, Indiana, and Virginia), and Minnesota only adopting the English Language Arts portion of the standards (Curl & O’Hara, 2013).

CCSS in Utah

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are intended to prepare students for the rigors and demands of college classes, and, consequently, life after college when graduates will supposedly enter the workforce.

Perhaps a radio broadcast by Utah Public Radio (UPR) said it best when explaining the consequences of the mass adoption of Common Core Standards: “When the vast majority of U.S. states adopt a single set of educational standards all at roughly the same time, a little confusion is inevitable” (NPR Staff, 2014, p. 1). This may perhaps be the understatement of the century (thus far). Misconceptions of the standards have spread far and wide, revealing the prevalent paranoia and telling mistrust of anything that could possibly associate education reform and the federal government. In fact, the prevalent conservatism in Utah and the supposed connection between the term ‘Common Core State Standards’ and the federal government led the Utah State Office of Education to make it very clear on their website that Utah Core Standards came before the CCSS and not the other way around. Furthermore, Utah Core Standards adopted the CCSS standards for math and English language arts, but there is no movement, desire, or intention on the part of the State Board to adopt more standards common to other states in additional subject areas.

One of the most common misconceptions of CCSS’s implementation in Utah is addressed on the Utah State Board of Education’s website (Utah State Board of Education, n.d.):

- **Fiction:** Utah adopted nationalized education standards that come with federal strings attached.
- **Fact:** The Utah Core Standards in language arts and mathematics are benchmarked, competing on the same level and intensity as the highest-achieving nations around the globe. Both ELA and mathematics.

The standards do not tie Utah to any federal programs, grants or assessment systems, and the Utah State Board of Education is free to change the Utah Core Standards at any time. Utah’s state website generally answers questions concerning federal government encroachment on land use, policy imposing, and, more recently, health care; that is, these FAQ sections tend to address areas that most immediately concern the ‘traditional Utahn.’ However, the issue of CCSS, though not a federal one, is discussed extensively—with the apparent aim to ameliorate concern that CCSS is a federal initiative. Judging by its responses to public inquiries about CCSS, the State Board of Education is an adamanent supporter of the standards.

**English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects**

The English Language Arts (ELA) standards span across a variety of subjects from kindergarten through grade 12. The standards are internationally benchmarked, competing on the same level and intensity as the highest-achieving nations around the globe. Both ELA and mathematics revolve around the meticulous Standard 10, which “defines a grade-by-grade ‘staircase’ of increasing text complexity that rises from beginning reading to the college and career readiness level” (Common Core State Standards, 2010). Students in grades K-12 are each expected to maintain proficiency in the rigorous standards year by year, building upon the previous year’s standards and applying their skills across disciplines. The standards students are expected to master get progressively challenging as they advance through the education system.

For the ELA-specific standards, there are several primary objectives that remain oriented within the focus of educators across all 13 years. Among these are text complexity and the growth of comprehension from year-to-year as the sophistication of what students are required to read increases, a proficiency in writing with an emphasis in responding to reading and research (having the ability to draw upon and write about informational texts), speaking and listening, and a mastery of the conventions of language and vocabulary. These standards carry across all grades and form the basic foundation of ELA Common Core Standards.

**Mathematics Standards**

As was mentioned earlier in this essay, the U.S. struggles in mathematics compared to our international competitors. One of the main goals of the math standards is to help the U.S. become more overtly focused and coherent in order to improve mathematics achievement. The development of the standards is “built on the best of high-quality math standards from states across the country. They also draw on the most important international models for mathematical practice” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, para. 2). The intent of the math standards is essentially to close the achievement gap between American students and the rest of the world. Raising the overall expectations of students will supposedly increase their competency in the subject, presuming the idea that student knowledge comes more from expectations than any kind of inherent knowledge or resources. The founders of CCSS obviously believed in this principle, and thus conceived the challenging expectations.

The standards do not only focus on what kids should know; they also help students understand how to know math. By providing specificity rather than relying on more general traditional statements, students are learning mathematical abstractions with a new, technical focus. Developed by the nation’s top education experts, these teaching concepts prove primed and ready to revolutionize the field. With a common focus across states, the skills and concepts outlined in the standards encourage students to solve real-world problems. The trite math class complaint was always, “When will we ever use this outside of the classroom?” This poignant inquiry faces the imminent threat of extinction under the standards’ new goal: to provide useful knowledge while maintaining international comparability in mathematics.

Under the Common Core, math is no longer taught under segregated individualized principles in classes like Geometry, Algebra, or Calculus; classes are instead taught by combining the common principles of geometry and algebra and calculus within the same curriculum. Similar to the ELA standards, there are a handful of objectives that remain central throughout K-12 mathematics education in the CCSS.

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These objectives are:

- making sense of problems and persevering in solving them;
- reasoning abstractly and quantitatively;
- constructing viable arguments and critiquing the reasoning of others;
- modeling with mathematics;
- using appropriate tools strategically;
- attending to precision;
- looking for and making use of structure;
- and looking for and expressing regularity in repeated reasoning (Common Core State Standards, 2010).

### Potential Benefits and Drawbacks

James Milgram, a mathematician at Stanford who sat on the CCSS validation committee, has said the standards “are better than 85 or 90% of the state standards they replace. Not a little better. A lot better” (The Hechinger Report, 2014, para. 6). This would seemingly be the most beneficial component that the standards contribute, supposing that the higher, internationally benchmarked standards will help students in the classroom learn more effectively and efficiently. The CCSS’s codified mission has always been to provide a common baseline for academic knowledge and college readiness skills. Though the cliché still rings true—college may not be for every student—the standards provide an option for students to make that distinction themselves.

Specific to Utah, the adoption of the CCSS may benefit the state in ways other than the notion that its students are becoming more capable of handling college. The CRTs, or Criterion Referenced Tests, used to be the sole testing system for the state of Utah in the annual end-of-year testing sequence. Traditionally known as “core tests,” the CRTs were replaced in 2014 by SAGE testing—the new testing system based on recently implemented Common Core standards. Utah’s implementation of the standardized tests has been recognized across the nation as one of the cleanest transitions yet. An article written by *The Salt Lake Tribune* in April 2014 details the unexpected benefits engendered by the transcendent cooperation and innovation by the Utah Office of Education. Referring to the new SAGE tests, “Florida agreed last month to pay rental fees that could amount to $5.4 million for test questions that Utah Office of Education wrote and which Florida desperately needs” (Moulton, 2014, para. 2). In the same article, Martell Menlove, the Utah Superintendent of Public Instruction, anticipates that there will be more opportunities like this in the future, and posits that they will be as significant as Florida’s bid for test questions or greater. The money from the deal will supposedly go to Utah teachers who continue to help enhance test questions for Utah children.

These benefits for the Utah education system and its participants are largely contested, however. The drawback of such a deal with Florida lies in the expected reaction of those who have condemned the CCSS as being operationalized by tests. Groups that began calling them “Common Corporate Standards” claim that “CCSS began as a political process driven by business interests—not as an education process designed by classroom teachers or education researchers” (Thomas, 2013, para. 10). There has been too much collaboration, opponents of CCSS say, between large testing companies and the development of these standards whose so-called mission is to solely benefit the students. Is this ‘partnership’ between developers of the Core and testing companies suspicious enough to turn a wary eye to the future? Only time will tell. Right now, however, many believe that the CCSS is nothing more than a glorified test prep program meant to line the pockets of test-product developers while getting kids higher SAT scores.

### Conclusion

Education reform is drenched in controversy, and CCSS has brought that controversy to a centralized public arena. The public has cried out in support and opposition. With all of the discourse on the CCSS, however, there is an alarming amount of misinformation and confusion. Many are still firm in their belief that the CCSS is nothing more than the federal government grasping at power, trying to reign the states in like cattle, intent on milking them for all their worth, and consequently sending them to the slaughterhouse. And while this may seem like an exaggeration, some have gone so far as to say that corporations have taken over the public school system, taken away the value of an education, and monetized the entire process. What should be most shocking, however, is that no one seems to be able to prove these incessant voices wrong. This rings true for the other argument as well—that CCSS is the godsend American public schools have been waiting for since Johnson’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The constant discourse surrounding the standards varies widely and, as far as I can tell, will not stop until, like No Child Left Behind, we have definitive proof of whether or not it is actually helping students become more college or career ready.

What should be understood now is that the CCSS initiative is not a federal program, though the claim of federal influence by the Race to the Top Fund is seemingly valid. It began as a state-based initiative developed under the guidance of Janet Napolitano and the National Governors Association. They were, under all pretenses, genuinely interested in revolutionizing the American education system for the sake of the students and their potential effectiveness in the workforce. The misconceptions surrounding this singular fact are incredible, though the trepidation for federal education initiatives is certainly not unfounded. Utah, at the center of the pack, has ensured repeatedly that it will not be influenced by the federal government, nor participate in any grander scale of uniform common standards than are present in CCSS.

There are arguments that can be made for both sides of this debate. The true test will come when we start to look at the deeper implications of uniform standards. Are we willing to sacrifice our individuality so that we can grow together as a nation? Should we be willing to make that sacrifice? As far as the debate goes, in politics and otherwise, I would argue that America might have a greater problem than education reform on its hands. The divisiveness of this issue does well to reflect the conflicting nature of the society harboring the argument.

### References


