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Testing, Revisions, and Teacher Explanations: The Common Core State Standards in the United States Education System

Samantha Lindquist
slindquist@my.uri.edu

Samantha Lindquist
Honors Project – Common Core
Professor de Groot

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In 2010, the United States government released the new state standards that changed the way we teach our children. Whether it dealt with the ideas of English Language Arts or Mathematics, from Kindergarten to 12th grade students would be exposed to these new standards. The English Language Arts standards cover ideas in Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, Use of Language. Along with that there are even standards that cover Social Studies in reading and writing, Science in reading and writing and other technical subjects the same way. While with the Mathematics standards are built a little differently, they are based on the ideas being taught to different grade levels while adding ideas upon each other. At the time, the majority of states, forty-two of them decided to work with these new standards and ideas, while seven states including, Texas, Oklahoma, Virginia, Alaska, Nebraska, Indiana and South Carolina, did not. The eighth state missing was Minnesota, who decided to use the English Language Arts standards while not using the standards in Mathematics.

But that was how it was in the early 2010s, it is now 2018 and things have been changing with these standards since they were first installed. As the years have gone by, many different states have begun to change the original standards in their states in order to make them more lax on the students. Focusing on how students are meant to learn, especially when compared to how they used to under the last set of governmental standards. They also may choose to change the standards to make them to be more applicable to how teachers are meant to give students

instruction and ready the students for their own futures past high school. Each state that has changed things does it for their own reasons rather than just sticking with a plan that may not be giving them the best results they want. At this time the number of states doing somethings like this, twenty-one (DeNisco, 2017). These twenty-one states that are currently changing the standards that were given to them less than a decade ago.

The Common Core state standards were written largely by governors and state education chiefs/commissioners from forty-eight states, two territories and the District of Columbia (DeNisco, 2017). These standards may have used some ideas from the teachers, who had been teaching the last set of standards but there was no real section of teachers, who were actively a part of the sessions held in order to create the Common Core standards (Stotsky, 2014). The results of these sessions could have been way different had the sessions included the ideas from teachers, who have been in the field and could possibly tell whether something would be more or less difficult to teach students at various levels in education. It could have also led to less need for revisions or large scale changes to the document within its first decade of adoption.

As a way to understand the Common Core State Standards this discussion will focus on seeing where the standards really have changed the value of Education with in the United States. One of the research questions revolves around the idea of seeing the major differences between both, the Common Core State Standards and the standards that were created under the ideas of No Child Left Behind. A second idea discussed would be based around what states are changing in the Common Core standards, things like revision and how different each state's revisions can be. A third idea that will be discussed focuses on differences in test scores in states that use Common Core in trying to understand how the states who are changing things may fair over

time. Lastly I will be looking at teacher testimonies on the ideas found in the Common Core, to see how those who are in the field teaching these methods feel about the standards as a whole.

Firstly let us begin with a discussion of what No Child Left Behind Standards were. These standards show the biggest differences in the ways education has been controlled from the beginning of the 2000s compared to when the Common Core standards were implemented. No Child Left Behind was created in 2001 and it was an overhaul of how students were taught, how accountable the schools were over their students test scores and to change the distance between how poor or minority students and their more advantaged peers were able to complete the necessary schoolwork (Klein, 2010). These ideas came from the government, in order to change the fact that other countries were pulling ahead of the United States with their test scores.

Historically the government has had a hand in trying to advance the United States' education policies. The first, most prominent policy came from 1965 under the Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson. This policy was featured in Johnson's Great Society. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, created the United States government's overarching role in K-12 education policy (Klein, 2010). This act allowed for $1 billion to be used as aid for schools with disadvantaged students. But as time has gone on the act has been changed over half a dozen times at least. The last two iterations of it were NCLB and the Common Core standards.

No Child Left Behind was used as a way to combat the possible problem areas within the United States, of which most were inner city schools. These are schools, where the populations where the majority of people are minorities and are often poor (Klein, 2010). Many of these students also tend to be English Language Learners who may not understand as much English as their peers, which leads to their scores being lower than average. Along with English Language Learners and minority or poor students, NCLB also focused on Special Education students

(Klein, 2010). These were also students who tended to have lower scores than their peers. In all, the ideas of NCLB were to raise test scores in student populations that tended to either lack resources to help or tended to have harder times understanding the materials they were given. Many of these students may not have been able to achieve higher scores due to not having the resources that they needed, most of these types of student need more help and scaffolding compared to how students who have less disadvantages.

Under this law there were many different regulations that the school would have to keep up with in order to continue receiving good funding from the Federal government. There were large amounts of testing throughout the grades from third to eighth and then a single time during a student's high school years (Klein, 2010). This testing occurred in only two subjects, mathematics and reading or English Language Arts. Schools had to report the scores of their students, both as the entire student body by grade, but also in subgroup categories. These subgroups consisted of special education students, English Language Learners, racial minorities and students from low-income families. The goal was to get all students to a level of proficiency in these two subject areas. A problem though was that each state was able to decide what tests to use and individually decide what proficiency looked like in their own eyes rather than using a countrywide state test or understanding of what a student's proficiency in a subject looked like (Klein, 2010). These levels of proficiency also needed to be seen in all the students by the 2013-2014, which was something that did not happen. No state by the full deadline in early 2015 was truly able to say that they had all their students as their supposed proficiency level.

The proficiency aspect of this law allowed different states to determine in what ways students needed to learn to perform for a better future in our society. Also under this law, were guidelines that showed how schools were meant to keep track of their proficiency goals and each

student's own proficiency. These guidelines emphasized the idea of 'AYP' meaning 'adequate yearly progress (Klein, 2010). Schools were checking each year, through all of their students to make sure that the goal was being up kept and that the students were making progress towards being completely proficient in certain areas. In this system there were also consequences should for a school who does not have their AYP increasing each year. After two years of having no progress in the student's proficiency, students would be able to transfer to a different school in their area that does have their student's AYPs increasing. The punishment for schools gets worse as time goes on, after three years the students, while still having the first option, are also allowed to get free tutoring courtesy of the school. From there, should the school continue to be slipping and having awful AYP, the state is supposed to intervene (Klein, 2010). When that happens there were a few options, one was to shut down the school completely, a second was to change the school in question to a charter school which would give the school an entirely different atmosphere and student body, the last option was to use any other possible solution meaning an idea they hadn't already thought of.

By 2010 though, there were little changes really occurring in the test scores, option law and policy makers to question NCLB and look for a new solution that could again try and change that. As for NCLB, critics cited that the ideas were much too harsh in some of its methods. One of the largest criticisms being that the law itself placed way more emphasis on things like standardized testing and stringent teacher qualifications rather than just focusing on how to better teach the student. The emphasis on standardized testing lead to one of the most well know education conundrums, "teaching to the test," a quote that would cause many people to realize that teaching students should be for the students own knowledge rather than a singular test they would be taking. Another major problem with NCLB was that while there were options to help

students like transferring schools or free tutoring, they were not taken advantage of enough for them to really be seen as a good thing for these schools.

Once it was announce and put in place Common Core had some pretty significant changes from what NCLB did. A first major difference between the two sets of standards is based on who has the responsibility over the student's scores and how much more proficiency progress they have made. In NCLB it was the schools responsibility when students weren't making the best grades on their standardized tests, but in Common Core the responsibility falls to the teacher (Stotsky, 2014). Teachers are responsible due to the fact that they were the ones giving the students the material and knowledge would be able to help them by the time they got to their tests.

A second major difference between the two systems comes from how each of the standards sets were created. Common Core was created as a very private dealing, with no real review of the standards as a whole and no real comments available for the public to read about the standards when they came out. For NCLB, they were created in a very public dealing between state education departments, teachers unions, teachers themselves and higher education experts (Stotsky, 2014). These two being created like this allowed for NCLB to seem much more personal and teacher oriented while having an outside power create the Common Core standards allowed for there to be virtually no bias towards certain ideas and understandings, and seeming more student oriented as it keeps the teachers as accountable as the students are when working on their own grades.

The third major difference with NCLB and Common Core comes from the same type of ideas as the second difference. Overall this difference is on what is used as testing content and how it is determined or was determined. Under NCLB the idea was to have state tests created by

state education officials, while being reviewed by teachers, consultants and public agencies. This would have given the tests and understanding base on the state it was created in. For Common Core though, it was created private organizations and unknown individuals with minimal public reviews of the standards (Stotsky, 2014). There had also been no public release of all or even most of the test items after they were used.

The way in which passing scores were dealt with is the fourth major difference between the two different standard sets. The differences are based around the same idea as the last two, where under NCLB the passing scores were controlled by the state education departments and had parents and state legislators able to give their own views through open votes. While under Common Core there is a much less transparent process in determining passing scores (Stotsky, 2014). The process is controlled by both the state education departments and the test consortia, meaning the place that creates the test, and along with there is oversight from the USED or United States Department of Education. Also in the Common Core process of creating the passing test scores there is no real way for parents and state legislators to give their own opinions during votes, because there are no votes towards the different ideas put forward.

One of the more interesting differences between the two systems showcases the changing time and overall differences ten years made in the United States. NCLB was created in 2001, which at the time made its main purpose as having students passing and graduating from high school. Creating workers for our society that may not be able to continue on past 12th grade on to college. Common Core was created in 2010, which makes its main focus on getting students to college and able to go on to higher paying jobs in the future (Stotsky, 2014). This idea also extends to adding to the work force and creating new innovations rather than just taking a job. Seeing this change showcases just how different the society became, where students just needed

to pass high school in order to find a job to needing to graduate from higher education to find a job that would possibly create new ideas and understandings.

The last major difference between Common Core and NCLB comes in the form of teacher expertise. Teacher expertise under NCLB was understood as the teacher's credentials to be able to teach their subject, meaning was this their undergraduate major/did they have a teaching license. With Common Core though the teacher's expertise is based on how effective a teacher is for their students (Stotsky, 2014). When a teacher is effective, means that their students are understanding the material and meeting expectations with test scores. Based on this some teachers could possibly be redistributed to areas of low-income to try and heighten the students abilities should teachers not be effective in these areas.

In showcasing the differences between the NCLB and Common Core allows someone to see just how effective a certain set could be over the other, but it also shows where problems can occur. In the majority of these differences you see the government taking how the standards were set, by using state officials and giving the people a say to taking it out of the government and the people's hands entirely. That may have been something that came out of having no state, when they all created their own standards, be able to truly say that all of their students are 100% proficient in what they wanted them to be. The government also may have wanted to change things due to the fact that every single state had their own unique or semi-unique ideas in their standards making it much harder to judge them in a uniform manner, something that could actually be possible when looking at how the Common Core standards were created.

By understanding the major differences between the two systems, it can also be seen just how different things changed in just ten years. It also gives some ideas as to why states have begun to change certain items in the Common Core and creating their own versions. The

aforementioned 21 states that have been working on changing the Common Core state standards have their own reasons. Looking at those reasons allows us to see just how the standards have been received since they were put out less than a decade ago.

There were some states who have chosen to make more minor changes to the original Common Core Standards. There are nine states who chose this route for their versions of the Common Core. The nine states are Alabama, Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, New Jersey, Ohio and Utah (Norton et al, 2017). The changes they have made are along the lines of formatting changes or reworking the words describing a single standards. Other changes include adding new skills to one standard or changing the grade levels of a certain skill if they were thought to be more difficult in one spot compared to another (Norton et al, 2017). These states may have added a new standard entirely or just deleted something entirely, especially if they were reworded versions of something else that had already been taught at a different age. Two ideas they did that are quite interesting consist of the state either splitting a standard and making said standard into multiple rather than keeping it as is, or they would take multiple standards with the same or similar meanings and combine them into a single standard (Norton et al, 2017). Overall these states changed both ELA standards and Math ones, with 27% being changed in Mathematics and 23% in the ELA standards. With that the majority of what was done in both of the categories was just to clarify what was being said by the standard in order to make things easier to understand (Norton et al, 2017). The rest of what was done were much smaller changes than doing really big things to the Common Core standards.

Unlike the states who are just making small changes there are others who are completely changing and reworking the original Common Core Standards. A first state who is doing something like that is New York, who for a variety of reason has been working towards making

larger changes to the standards and even completely changing the name to Next Generation

Learning Standards for English Language Arts and Math (Brody, Sept2017). A lot of this came

about after the first real round of tests happened in 2013 were students were taking the tests that

would because mandatory under the Common Core. Many teachers in New York stated that they

felt that they were rushed in trying to change their teaching and to make students understand all

the material in different ways than they had before. Another thing these teachers said was that

the tests were rushed out, that the schools needed more time and resources to be able to work

with their students under these standards without actual testing yet (Brody, May2017). Many of

the teachers also felt that these standards were being pushed on them especially when you

remember that they had no say in them, teachers wanted to have open conversation about them

rather than just being told to do something without truly understanding it themselves (Brody,

May2017). These feelings are being backed up by students and parents as well, when 20% of the

students in grades three-eight are opting out of taking the exams administered by the Common

Core, and this happened just two years after in the 2014-2015 school year (Hupfl, 2016).

   Another state like New York, who decided in a full overhaul of these standards is North

Carolina. They decided to completely overhaul the Common Core math standards in elementary

and middle school grades in order to make them easier to understand. Their original problem

came from having teachers and parents who were not able to understand the standards as well as

they would like, especially when they would need to teach them to their students (Bonner, 2017).

In changing the standards though, they didn't want to change the difficulty as that was the true

purpose of the original standards. Those changing the standards didn't want to make them easier

and to have their students fall behind, they just wanted a lot of better clarification especially in

some of the more vague areas in the Common Core.

Having states either creating their own clarifications or completely overhauling different parts of the Common Core can tell us a few things about how it was implemented and how it was reacted to overall. The Common Core had been such a drastic change from what had occurred previously in state standards and when things like that occur often enough, people are not going to be ready to agree with those ideas quickly. That can definitely be seen when teachers talk about how they felt they didn't have enough time to really get used to the standards before they were using them with their students and testing said students on them (Brody, May2017). Maybe if the teachers were given more time to really understand the standards themselves before they had to teach using them it would have been a better situation and there may be less states changing various things. Another thing that could have occurred to make the standard implementation better would be if states had a longer time before students were going to be tested using these standards. Without having a longer amount of time it can be seen that it was harder for both students and teachers to figure out exactly what needed to be done in order for their students to test well.

For years now test score have been ruling how education works, whether it was during NCLB or now with the Common Core. Standardized tests have basically lead to teachers having to really focus on the tests that their students will be taking at the end of the year rather than teaching them the actual material they should be covering. Thankfully most of the time the material they should be covering is on the tests but often enough they change things and confuse more students while they are trying to get a good grade on these high stakes tests.

Many of the states that have decided to change the standards use the data of test scores to showcase the problems they see in what is going on with student's educations. To understand this idea better, one should look at both the test scores in both states that would end up changing

their standards and ones that haven't changed things yet. By looking at this comparison you can see if other states may end up either changing things or see if the states that did change already may have jumped the gun.

New York was one of the first states to use the testing ideas of the Common Core. Though they are now changing the standards and the tests, they have records of student's proficiency, especially in New York City, from 2013 to 2017. When looking at the data it's interesting to see how in grades three-eight there actually was gradual improvement and higher rates of proficiency over time. Though when you look at the first two years scores and proficiency percent it can be seen as to why parents and others were calling for a change in the standards as fast as they had gotten the Common Core standards in the first place. In third grade the proficiency levels were abysmal with 38.8% at level 1 meaning they did not meet expectations at all in 2013, while only 3.6% met expectations at level 4 that year (NYCDE, 2017). By the time it was 2017 though there were 28.8% of students who did not meet expectations and 8.6% of students actually met expectations. The same types of ideas were seen in eighth grade, with 37.7% of students not meeting expectations at all, and 7.0% actually meeting expectations, and this was just in 2013 (NYCDE, 2017). Like with third grade though by 2017 there were only 18.8% of students who did not meet expectations with 17% meeting expectations (NYCDE, 2017). Seeing these numbers, especially the ones from 2013 you can see why the state would want to change things for the better but it is also possible to see that should they have stuck with the Common Core things would have changed over time.

In a state like Rhode Island though it's different, they had the testing, PARCC, come a little later than New York did. Rhode Island has scores from only the last three years and they are a state that hasn't really been doing much in order to change things when it comes to the

Common Core. It is easy to see why they aren't really doing anything though, when you look at any of the grades scores in 2015, for level 1 they are more or less under 20% except for in high school grades (RIDE, 2017). They also in every grade had a percentage of students who would exceed expectations rather than just meeting the expectations, they are relatively low percentages but they are seen as a category for understanding Rhode Island scores on these state tests. These same kinds of trends can be reflected in 2016 and 2017 scores (RIDE, 2017). Something else that can also be seen is that like New York there is a gradual change occurring in these sets of percentages

A third state to discuss is California, a state that has been making changes to the Common Core, but the more subtle changes compared to the much larger ones happening in New York. California like New York has been using their own tests that have the same basis as to what a Common Core state test would be, California uses the CAASPP (CADE, 2017). They have also gotten similar types of results as the other states, especially in the idea of how things changed over time, there has been a gradual increase in students who meet expectations since 2015 when the tests were fully integrated into the California school system. In 2015 there was 33% of students who met the expectations who met the standards in Mathematics and it jumped to 37.56% by 2017, making a whole 4% difference in students who met the expectations in all grades (CADE, 2017). Something different in California's numbers though is seeing both a high amount of students who pass with met or exceeds expectations, but also in did not meet expectations. In 2017, 20.12% of students met or exceeded expectations for the ELA tests but there were also 28.35% who did not meet expectations at all (CADE, 2017). In other states the met or exceeds expectations has been consistently lower but in California they have a higher amount of students fulfilling the requirements of the Common Core standards in their state tests.

By looking at all three of these sets of data there a few things that can be said about the Common Core and especially the state testing. The first was that tests were definitely rolled out a little too fast, this something that can be seen quite obviously in the New York City test scores. They didn't seem to have had enough time to truly prepare their students and the teachers themselves on how to really deal with these new ideas. New York may have not been calling for a change as quickly as it did if they were given a longer amount of time to work with students using the ideas in the Common Core. It may just end up being more of the same happening now that they are creating new standards of their own. Looking at Rhode Island comparatively, it can be seen that if they had taken a little more time to give out the tests, seeing as Rhode Island didn't get them until 2015, there wouldn't have been as many problems overall.

A second thing that can be seen in this data is that the results are going to be gradual. Every year after the first in all three states the percentages of students meeting standards has been getting higher, and there have been less students who did not meet expectations at all. Seeing those gradual changes show that the standards have been working for the last few years and will more than likely continue in California and Rhode Island.

Lastly a third thing that can be seen in this data is a possibility. That possibility being that while New York seemed to be doing what was right in changing the Common Core after the test results they saw but they may have jumped the gun on the idea. Overall looking at their scores you can see that they were gradually making progress and students were understanding the standards better and better as time went on. Maybe New York should have waited a few more years to have more data to look at in order to make a decision that would truly be beneficial to their school system in general rather than just seeing the not so good results and trying to change things rather quickly. Their new standards and testing will begin in fall of 2018, just 5 years after

the last new set of test through the Common Core. Maybe it would have been better for them to take the route of California, who is changing things but not in a major fashion. They are just adding, clarifying and moving different standards around to make them flow easier. That may have been a better strategy for New York.

After looking at these more political and scientific ideas regarding the whole subject, there needs to be a human aspect as well. That human aspect comes from trying to understand how teachers see the Common Core standards. These are the people who are on the front lines when it comes to teaching the children of the United States what they need to learn and how to do it. All over the country there have been teachers with mixed reactions to these standards but after the last 7 years of it being in place, they have also seen some interesting results.

Teachers had mixed reactions at first, especially when it came to just some of the big differences that would end up being a large part of the new curriculums. One teacher in New York City, Mrs. Lake who teaches English and Literacy in the eighth grade, at first was angry because she felt that the students were being pushed way too hard, but with the actual application of the standards and the changes she realized that her students could do way more than she had ever thought. She has seen her own students to now be able to read much more complex works, especially nonfiction works rather than just having them stuck reading fiction books over and over (Hall, 2015). She also believes that the methods used in the standards are allowing students to have better understandings of what is actually written.

Another teacher, this time from Hawaii stated that she was delighted by some of the changes that were occurring. She has seen elementary students be able to go back and look at their texts in order for them to find evidence to support their own ideas. She also had a very interesting thought about the political side of the Common Core debates, she said that we need to

be ready to realize that all the changes we want and the government want are not going to happen overnight, it's just not possible, but many of the things we want will change over time (Hall, 2015).

From looking at the Common Core with a teacher's perspective you can see what really matters. What matters is how students are learning and understanding things for their own future and the future of our country rather than exactly how good they did on a single tests at the end of each school year.

In showcasing the Common Core through these four different lens there a few different ideas as to why it was created and what good it has done. NCLB was a much different system that had students not really learning to their fullest. They were not really allowing students to challenge their own potential, something that is prevalent in the Common Core State Standards. Though when looking at all the states who are changing or leaving the Common Core there is always a wonder if they allowed the students a long enough time to really be able to work with the standards. Each time a state is leaving completely or overhauling the standards, they are giving the students even newer ideas that they need to be able to understand rather than moving on quickly when there are just some bad scores. Scores that have been gradually changing and increasing as students have better understanding of what they need to do. Teachers are vocalizing the same ideas as well, that the standards take time and work to really get used to them. The idea that makes a lot of sense though is changing the wording or reshuffling ideas because it comes out of trial and error, where students and teachers are seeing things that need slight changes rather than massive overhauls. It gives the states their own ability to work with the ideas they had been given and make them work for the types of students in their states rather than them just being blanket statements.

Overall understanding the Common Core give light to what is being done about student's education in the United States. It allows you to look behind the curtain and see how each state is trying to deal with the fast moving changes that occurred in the early 2010s. By seeing this though it allows you to see that these standards can work and have been working as time has gone on, and that sometimes they may need a little tweaking but they are there to challenge students rather than just letting them learning things at face value.

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