

Common Core Curriculum

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

School reform is, arguably, as old as public schools. But for the past three decades—since *A Nation at Risk* urged dramatic action—it has been nonstop, and not very successful. Innovations come and go; progress is made and lost; schools succeed and fail. Teachers are local heroes and national scapegoats.

Why?

Why have we, as a nation, been unable to move forward even as other nations, like Finland, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, have come from behind and eclipsed our achievements? Reasons abound—our scandalously high rate of child poverty and its associated ills, our unfocused and inadequate teacher and principal training, and our superintendents' and policymakers' insatiable desire for new initiatives are just a few that come to mind. But of all the barriers to genuine, sustained improvement, one stands out. As a nation, we have neither asked nor answered questions of paramount importance: What is an education? What is fundamental to it? What is peripheral?

When we consider each question thoughtfully, clear answers emerge. An education is an enlightening and enriching experience that results in a body of knowledge and skill—both academic and social—that enables one to be a responsible and productive citizen. What is fundamental to an education is the specific body of knowledge and skill, and the best means of acquiring it; what is peripheral is everything else.

The reason we have fallen behind so many of our international peers is that we have been pursuing the peripheral while they have been pursuing the fundamental. While we have been dabbling

in pedagogical, management, and accountability fads, they have written common core curricula—and that has made all the difference. A common core curriculum is not just a piece of paper that guides the teacher; it is a living document that guides and brings coherence to the *whole educational endeavor*.

A *curriculum* sets forth that body of knowledge and skill our children need to grow into economically productive and socially responsible citizens. A *common* curriculum—meaning one that is shared by all schools—is what binds all the different actors together; instead of going off in radically different directions and inadvertently undermining each other, teachers, administrators, parents, textbook writers, assessment developers, professors of education, and policymakers all work in concert. A *common core* curriculum—meaning one that fills roughly two-thirds of instructional time—leaves teachers ample room to build on students' interests and address local priorities.

In countries with a common core curriculum, the benefits are many:

- Teachers need not guess what will be on assessments; if they teach the curriculum, their students will be prepared.
- Students who change schools are not lost, so time is not wasted on review and remediation. Their new teachers may have different lesson plans and projects, but the core content and skills to be mastered in each grade are the same.
- Textbooks are slim, containing just the material to be learned in a given year (not hundreds of incoherent pages trying to “align” to different states' vague

standards and different notions of proficiency).

- Teacher preparation programs ensure that candidates have mastered the curriculum, and ways to teach it, before they become teachers.
- Teachers across the hall, across town, and (thanks to the Internet) across the country are able to collaborate on developing and refining lesson plans and other instructional materials.

These are far from all the benefits of a common core curriculum. Many more are discussed throughout this issue, but one stands out: equity. Without a common core curriculum, there can be no educational equity. True equality of opportunity may not be possible, but striving for it is, and no goal is more worthy.

This special issue of *American Educator* comes at a special time. After decades of debate, America is on the cusp of having common academic standards. Over the past 18 months, the Common Core State Standards Initiative—a state-led, highly collaborative, voluntary effort—developed, publicly vetted, and revised English language arts and mathematics standards designed to help teachers prepare all students, regardless of where they live, for higher education and workforce training. Although not perfect (no such thing ever is), the standards are of high quality, and the vast majority of states rapidly adopted them. This is an exciting new movement (which we encourage you to learn more about by visiting www.corestandards.org), but standards are just a beginning. They set forth the goals of an education, not the education itself. The essential knowledge and skills—the key to a rich life—must be set forth in a common core curriculum. It's an idea whose time has come.

—EDITORS