

COMMON CORE: AN OBITUARY

Stephen Fink, Ed.D.

When the scathing opinion pieces started rolling in, and the angry protest signs went up, Common Core, at first, couldn't understand the fuss. Why should kids not achieve at higher levels? And who could deny the fact that the previous system of 50 different standards for what students should learn in school left many kids behind and put the United States on rank 35 (out of 57) in mathematics in the 2006 PISA tests?

Used to being an applause line in speeches, Common Core now found itself at the end of angry complaints and partisan sniping. Something had changed — and the life of Common Core was never going to be the same again.

THE GOLDEN CHILD

It had been a blessed life until then. Born out of the National Governors Association (NGA), the “Common Core State Standards Initiative” — its full name before it had to fit on a placard — had a sheltered early childhood in task force meetings, work group draft reports, and policy papers. Advocacy groups and think tanks with enough acronyms to learn the ABC's early led its growth into full-blown literacy and math standards. Elected officials promoted its potential. The public was generally supportive and teachers, students, and parents were ready for something new.

All this attention came with high expectations. Common Core should do nothing less than “ensuring U.S. students receive a world-class education.”¹ Comparisons with other nations had shown that America's children were not doing too well in math and reading and that future prosperity was at stake.

The promising child also soon realized that many expected it to close the glaring achievement gaps highlighted by No Child Left Behind

¹ National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, Inc., *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education*, 2008, <http://www.edweek.org/media/benchmarking%20for%20success%20dec%202008%20final.pdf>.

(NCLB), a distant relative. Yearly testing under NCLB allowed for comparisons between school districts within a state but because of the vastly different learning standards in each state, the new data said little about how students in Arkansas compared to those in California.

GROWING PROMISE, GROWING PAINS

Growing up with such high expectations was not easy but — unlike the millions of children it was supposed to propel towards higher achievement — Common Core received a world-class education. Cutting-edge research, constant input from a concerned public and attention from some of the brightest minds in the country — few stones were left unturned to clear a path to greatness.

Sure, there was some muted muttering behind the eager child's back. It was only doing so well because of the millions of dollars worth of support from (unelected) corporate and philanthropic backers. Some thought it didn't have what it takes to survive in the real world.

But for the many people who felt that kids didn't get the education they should be getting, Common Core's new ideas were inspiring. No longer should students just memorize facts, the focus shifted to problem-solving skills. And instead of just showing some general proficiency, students now had to demonstrate a deeper understanding of a text or a math problem.

Soon — and a little bit against the odds — the wonky youngster became the most popular kid in town. State legislatures lapped up the new ideas, large training and implementation programs were started, testing consortia got off the ground. It felt great to be Common Core and it felt great to be for Common Core.

WHEN THINGS STARTED TO GO WRONG

Later in life, when leafing through a new batch of angry opinion pieces, Common Core often wondered when exactly things started going wrong. It was complicated and hard to tell, but in the end one thought kept coming back: of all the friends it had, the one that really changed things, was the one with the best intentions — the federal government. It seemed like a great idea: offer \$4.35 billion to states in exchange for adopting a host of educational policies — including “common standards” — designed to transform America's K-12 education. No doubt, it was flattering to be part of the “Race to the

Top” (though “common standards” didn’t necessarily mean Common Core), but it also meant stepping out of the warm embrace of state education committees to the hyper partisan atmosphere of national politics.

It started with some familiar complaints. Common Core threatens our freedom. Another sign of an out-of-control government. An assault on American values. But soon Common Core couldn’t leave the house without getting an earful from angry pundits, educators and parents.

Pundits criticized that the standards had not been field-tested, and declining test scores would particularly hurt the most disadvantaged students. Educators complained that they had to teach to new standards but for the most part didn’t get the time or training to do this right. Parents looked at their kids and saw more stress and lower scores. But above all, many people hated how incessant testing seemed to have driven out the joy of learning, teaching and raising a student.

At first, Common Core would try to reason. Incessant testing? The emphasis on holding educators responsible for results and the dreaded teaching-to-the-test-culture had been in place long before districts added one more Common Core-related assessment. Not enough training for teachers? Yes, true, but the fault of poor planning and insufficient funding for professional development by the same lawmakers that so eagerly had embraced the idea of Common Core. Lower scores? Most likely, but that was to be expected with higher standards and uneven teacher training. One the plus side: for the first time true comparability across states, shining a spotlight on the students that needed the most help.

RIP, CONSISTENT, HIGH QUALITY EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS ACROSS ALL STATES

When thoughtful reasoning didn’t help, Common Core sometimes got emotional. Why wouldn’t we want higher standards for our kids? What’s so bad about comparing performance? But many people had made up their mind, didn’t like what they saw and let their representatives know about it.

The friends started leaving quickly. States that were once strong supporters changed course and no longer had interest in Common

Core. Backing out of the Common Core-aligned test consortia PARCC and Smarter Balanced became a new trend. PARCC started with 24 participating states, five years later just 10 states and the District of Columbia were still using the test. Smarter Balanced went down from 31 states to 18. In the end of 2015, even the biggest supporter cut the ties and stopped returning phone calls. In the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, Congress for the first time in decades rolled back federal involvement in K-12 education and specifically ruled out any incentives or punishments for adopting or getting out of Common Core.

Common Core's health went from bad to worse. When even Massachusetts, the poster child of high academic standards, decided to drop the PARCC exam, one half of Common Core was essentially gone. With no meaningful measurement in place and lingering public resentment, many states soon reverted to the time-honored tradition of watering down standards.

Common Core, the idea of establishing consistent, high quality educational standards across the states, had seen its time.

A LIFE WORTH LIVING — AND A LEGACY TO BUILD ON

A curious thing happened after Common Core as it was originally envisioned had passed away. Many suddenly noticed how it was — in one form or another — still around. For roughly 40 million students,² math and English standards designed to develop critical thinking had become a reality. Textbooks, workbooks, software and tests — all those critical components of teaching had new standards built into them. Even the states who formally renounced Common Core Standards aspired to replace them with something similar. That said, the ability to compare student achievement on a single set of national standards appears to be gone forever.

But even more important was how the standards initiative put a spotlight on the professional standards of educators. Higher standards for students required significant instructional shifts in the classroom and it became clear that teachers were unprepared to make those shifts.

² Kimberly Hefling, Politico, *How Common Core Quietly Won the War*, Updated Oct. 12, 2015 at 4:20 PM EDT, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/10/common-core-education-schools-214632#ixzz3tCori0mn>.

School and district leaders, it turned out, were also ill-equipped to support the necessary teacher learning.

The challenge ahead is how to redesign professional learning so that teachers and leaders, at scale, have the necessary expertise to ensure that all students can meet higher academic standards. At the end of the day, student learning cannot improve without developing teacher and leader practice. Maybe, just maybe, Common Core could be alive and well today if the focus would have been on helping educators grow rather than just holding them accountable for results.

Some will miss Common Core, some will say good riddance and some will continue the good work of enacting the intended standards. Like it or not, in its short, tumultuous life, Common Core gave us a deeper look at how teaching practice must improve to enable all students to succeed at high levels — and that’s something we should all appreciate.

Stephen Fink, Ed.D., is an Affiliate Professor at the University of Washington College of Education and Executive Director of the Center for Educational Leadership. Additional articles are available at <http://blog.k-12leadership.org/instructional-leadership-in-action>.