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The Common Core Debate

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ARKANSAS EDUCATION REPORT
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THE COMMON CORE DEBATE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have ignited a passionate national debate about the standards that guide the education of our nation's and state's students. The purpose of this Arkansas Education Report is to add some clarity to the Common Core debate as well as offer a perspective that is specific to the Natural State.

Since the 1980s, there have been several unsuccessful attempts by a variety of education stakeholders to encourage the adoption of national educational standards; this movement has again recently gained momentum in the form of the voluntary but "national" Common Core State Standards. In order to be eligible for the Obama administration's Race to the Top (RTTT) contest and waivers from certain provisions of No Child Left Behind, states were required to adopt standards that prepare students to be "college-and career-ready." States had the choice to adopt the Common Core State Standards, which were recognized as meeting these criteria, or to develop their own "college-and career-ready" standards.

Initially, forty-six out of fifty states adopted (at least portions of) the CCSS. However, there has been a great deal of state-level resistance to the Common Core. Most significantly, Indiana, Oklahoma, and South Carolina passed laws that voided their adoption of the Common Core State Standards, bringing the total number of states using CCSS down to forty-three.¹ Some of the greatest pushback has been prompted by changes in standardized testing. For example, in New York, Common Core-aligned testing has drawn recent protests from students, teachers and principals.²

Meanwhile, in Arkansas, there has been both resistance to and support for the standards. Two resolutions to consider bills to defund the CCSS were proposed and voted down in the February 2014 legislative session.³ So far, it does not appear that Arkansans are taking any extraordinary measures to withdraw from the CCSS.

In this report, we identify and evaluate the key arguments for and against the CCSS, as well as list the critiques of the CCSS that we believe are not credible.

The arguments *for* the Common Core are that the CCSS:

- 1) are more rigorous than many states' existing standards
- 2) will lead to a new (and possibly improved) testing regime
- 3) will lead to greater access to instructional resources for educators

¹ Ujifusa, A. (2014, June 6). Days Apart, Two States Opt to Replace Common Core. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/06/06/35commonore.h33.html>

² Strauss, V. (2014, April 8). Principals slam 2014 NY Common Core tests as badly designed. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/04/08/principals-slam-2014-ny-common-core-tests-as-badly-designed/>

³ Fiscal session update-private option funding approved; education bills stall. *Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families*. Retrieved from <https://www.z2systems.com/np/clients/aradvocates/viewOnlineEmail.jsp?emailId=d05fd6458146ef2c61e2b43cd0dfa34fdm497423d05>

- 4) will improve national curricular coherence, making the transition easier for students who move from one state to another

The arguments *against* the Common Core are that:

- 1) CCSS are not rigorous
- 2) centralized control of standards is harmful
- 3) higher standards do not affect achievement
- 4) there are many implementation challenges associated with CCSS

The arguments that we believe are *not credible* are that CCSS:

- 1) represent an overreach of the federal government
- 2) have no proven track record of success
- 3) promote “fuzzy” math and lack of literature
- 4) will lead to breaches in student data privacy
- 5) will lead to lots of harmful testing

After evaluating these arguments, we conclude that Arkansas education policymakers should continue on the current track to implement the Common Core standards for three primary reasons:

- 1) Many of the complaints lodged against the Common Core revolve around issues that are actually not connected to these new standards.
- 2) The consensus is that the Common Core standards are generally stronger than the Arkansas Curricular Frameworks that preceded the CCSS and thus improve the level of rigor in Arkansas schools.
- 3) The assessments that are currently employed in Arkansas have less usefulness today than they did ten years ago, and a new and improved assessment system will be beneficial for students in Arkansas.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

We hope to add clarity to the current debate surrounding the Common Core State Standards by framing the debate in the context of the decades-long national standards movement and by summarizing the main arguments for and against national standards.

A. Voluntary National Standards

In the early 1980s, a landmark report, *A Nation at Risk*, prompted much debate in K-12 education. It was the first of its kind to boldly state that American K-12 students were academically lagging behind their peers in other countries. While many observers and researchers were critical of the report and its findings, *A Nation at Risk* has most certainly influenced the dialogue surrounding the achievement of U.S. students. As a part of this conversation, the idea of national standards surfaced, as many of the highest-achieving countries had national educational standards in place. In the early 1990s, many influential policymakers proposed the idea of national standards but were not successful in getting them adopted.⁴ Because mandatory national standards were not politically viable at the time, several organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and the U.S. Department of Education, created voluntary national standards that states, districts, or schools could, but were not required to, adopt.

The Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which many consider to be the predecessor to the No Child Left Behind Act, was passed and signed into law by President Clinton in 1994. Goals 2000 set broad goals for improvement in the U.S. education system by the year 2000 in various areas, including school readiness, completion, achievement, and safety. Among its goals, Goals 2000 was intended to establish a framework to “identify world-class academic standards, to measure student progress, and to provide the support that students may need to meet the standards.” Goals 2000 specifically supported the standards movement by establishing the National Education Standards and Improvement Council, which was created to “examine and certify national and state content, student performance, opportunity-to-learn standards, and assessment systems voluntarily submitted by states.”⁵

B. State Standards

Given the strength of the opposition to mandatory national standards, proponents of centralized academic standards lowered their expectations and set their sights on state standards. During the Clinton administration, the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 (IASA), a reauthorization of the ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act), encouraged each state to establish performance and content standards and aligned assessments. Policymakers in states, including Arkansas, began to develop accountability plans and state standards. During this reauthorization,

⁴ Common Core State Standards in Arkansas [policy brief]. (2012, August) Office for Education Policy, 9(6). Retrieved from http://www.officeforeducationpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/9_6_Common_Core_in_AR.pdf

⁵ Paris, K. (1994). *A leadership model for planning and implementing change for school-to-work transition*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Center on Education and Work. Retrieved from <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/stw/sw0goals.htm>

the call for national standards grew more robust. Nevertheless, the opposition to national standards focused to a great extent on local control, and in the end, state control of standards won out.

In 2002, under George W. Bush, Congress reauthorized the ESEA as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In this reauthorization, standards-based initiatives and accountability measures, through assessments, were even further emphasized. Again, however, states were in charge of implementing their own standards and assessments, and national standards were not under consideration.

During this time, as state policymakers set their own standards, assessments, and levels for proficient performance, proponents for national standards argued that comparisons of “proficiency” were not meaningful because the “proficiency cutoffs” varied state by state. These advocates of national standards claimed that state standards could also lead to states lowering the bar for proficiency so that more students would pass and the state would meet the requirements of the federal laws (unofficially referred to as the “Race to the Bottom”).

C. Renewed Push for National Standards

In 2009, the federally-funded “Race to the Top” grant program was employed by the Obama Administration to spur education reform. In order to be competitive for the grants, states could voluntarily adopt a set of national standards. In conjunction with Race to the Top, in 2009, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) was established. The National Governors Association Center (NGA) for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) coordinated the initiative; however, a broad spectrum of educators and other experts participated. The goal was to create high-quality, rigorous learning standards for all grade levels so that students would be “college and career ready.” The end result was the creation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), K-12 English language arts (ELA) standards, and K-12 mathematics standards, which were released in June 2010.⁶

D. Support for National Standards

According to proponents of national standards, there are three main problems within our current educational system that national standards will address.

First, national standards will bring needed uniformity of goals and clarity of expectations to a system that is currently fragmented. Some believe that this lack of uniformity has led to poor U.S. student performance on international exams as well as the low achievement and attainment of disadvantaged students across the nation. In addition, the existence of standards would inform parents and taxpayers about what to expect and teachers about what to teach. Such supporters point to nations outperforming the U.S. that have national standards.

⁶ Common Core State Standards in Arkansas [policy brief]. (2012, August) Office for Education Policy, 9(6). Retrieved from http://www.officeforeducationpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/9_6_Common_Core_in_AR.pdf

Second, national standards are believed to free up states from reinventing the wheel and creating their “own” state-level standards. What, after all, is the difference between math in North Carolina and in North Dakota? According to advocates of national standards, there is no logical difference.

Finally, supporters believe that national standards will provide coherence across districts and states that will enable children to be taught to high standards, regardless of their circumstance. This will benefit students in several ways, such as mitigate the negative effects that highly mobile students experience from moving from school to school. Ultimately, sufficiently high standards could result in greater educational equity by raising the level of instruction for students in low-performing schools.⁷

E. Opposition to National Standards

Opposition to national standards is found across the political spectrum. Conservative critics argue that educational decision-making should take place at a local level and view the idea of national standards as a federal intrusion into state and local business. These opponents of standards further maintain that, while equity is desirable, uniformity may not be.

Liberal opponents worry that the imposition of national standards would allow for too much influence from those in politically powerful positions. For example, the development of national standards would certainly influence assessments, curriculum, textbooks, and professional development. Thus, there would be numerous opportunities for politically and economically powerful groups to profit from the adoption of these standards at the expense of student achievement.⁸

Perhaps most importantly, skeptics of national standards highlight the fact that education is a state responsibility rather than a federal responsibility, and that national standards represent an inappropriate use of federal influence.

⁷ National Standards: Following the pendulum of debate. (2010, April 15). *Office for Education Policy Brief 7(7)*. Retrieved from <http://www.officeforeducationpolicy.org/downloads/2010/04/national-standards-following-the-pendulum-of-debate.pdf>

⁸ McShane, M.Q. (Summer 2014). Navigating the Common Core. *Education Next*, 14(3). Retrieved from <http://educationnext.org/navigating-the-common-core/>

II. KEY DETAILS OF THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

The Common Core State Standards are student learning expectations that set the bar for the knowledge and skills that must be taught at each grade level. While critics argue that national standards might be too prescriptive, advocates maintain that the standards represent learning goals that allow freedom as to how teachers should teach students.

Much of the debate about how prescriptive the CCSS are is based in confusion about the educational terms “standards” and “curriculum.”

Standards are a set of competencies or skills that students need to know by the end of the school year. For example, one of the Common Core standards in kindergarten requires that students be able to count to 100 by ones and tens.

A curriculum, on the other hand, dictates the specific instructional materials or teaching methodology that will be used to teach that skill. Curricular decisions are made by local school districts, superintendents, principals and school boards. Some schools may not have any particular curricula in place that they use and in that case, teachers have a choice in the materials that they use.

The Common Core State Standards include standards for English language arts (ELA) and math.

The **ELA standards** are split into three sections: Grades K-5 ELA, Grades 6-12 ELA, and Grades 6-12 literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. The K-5 standards are cross-disciplinary, such that history/social studies and science knowledge and skills are embedded in the ELA standards. In grades 6-12, the standards are separated into general ELA standards and ELA standards for other content areas. For K-8, the ELA standards are grade specific; for grades 9-12, the ELA standards are set in two-year bands to allow flexibility in high school course design.

The **math standards** are grade specific for K- 8, and content specific for high school. They do not dictate the exact order of math courses in high school, but they do prepare students for the opportunity to take Algebra I by 8th grade. The math standards are framed by the “Standards for Mathematical Practice,” which is a set of eight standards that lay out expectations for math proficiency.

A. What Instructional Changes Come with the CCSS?

Instructional changes resulting from the CCSS will vary by state since prior to transitioning to CCSS, each state had its own standards in place. Still, there are some central shifts that will take place regardless of one’s location. These shifts will take place in three main areas: English language arts, math, and standardized testing.

Many state policymakers and education observers have discussed these shifts. One group that has published an interesting summary of the changes associated with CCSS is the New York

Department of Education. Other entities have made similar claims, but we will borrow from the New York summary in our tables below.

1. *Instructional Changes in English Language Arts (ELA)*

Six main shifts in English language arts instruction have been identified by the New York State Department of Education for implementing the Common Core State Standards:^{9 10}

Table 1: Shifts in ELA instruction under CCSS

Shifts	Explanation
1 Increase in Nonfiction (Informational) Texts	There is a greater focus on nonfiction texts, with the proportion of nonfiction to fiction texts increasing at higher grade levels. At the elementary level, fiction and nonfiction texts are balanced at 50/50, in middle school, the recommendation is 45/55 in favor of nonfiction, and in high school, the split is 30/70.
2 Literacy in Content Areas	All teachers (including secondary math, science, etc.) are expected to participate in students' literacy instruction.
3 Increase in Complexity of Texts	The CCSS also place emphasis on more complex texts, such as primary sources.
4 Focus on Text-Based Responses	There is a new focus on questions (within classroom discourse and in written responses) that require students to read and respond to the text.
5 Focus on Writing Arguments	Writing instruction will focus on forming arguments and supporting them with text-based evidence as opposed to creative writing and personal reflections.
6 Academic Vocabulary	Another important goal of CCSS is to increase students' academic vocabulary.

2. *Instructional Changes in Math*

Six shifts have also been identified for math instruction under the Common Core.¹¹

⁹ Common Core Shifts. Engage New York. Retrieved from <http://www.engageny.org/resource/common-core-shifts>

¹⁰ Blow, M. (2011, May 10). Common Core State Standards. *Scholastic*. Retrieved from http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/classroom_solutions/2011/05/common-core-state-standards

¹¹ Common Core Shifts. Engage New York. Retrieved from <http://www.engageny.org/resource/common-core-shifts>

Table 2: Shifts in math instruction under CCSS

Shifts	Explanation
1 Focus	The CCSS focuses on fewer concepts but expects the content to be covered in greater depth.
2 Coherence	Concepts are sequenced in a coherent fashion that allows students to build on content learned in previous grades.
3 Fluency	Students are expected to memorize basic facts and core functions and to complete simple calculations with speed and accuracy. Greater emphasis is placed on using mental math instead of calculators.
4 Deep Understanding	Teachers teach more than just how to get the answer and support students' deep understanding of math concepts.
5 Application	Teachers should seek to apply math to real-world problems and across content areas.
6 Dual Intensity	Students need to be able to do fluent calculations and also be able to apply math concepts at a deeper level.

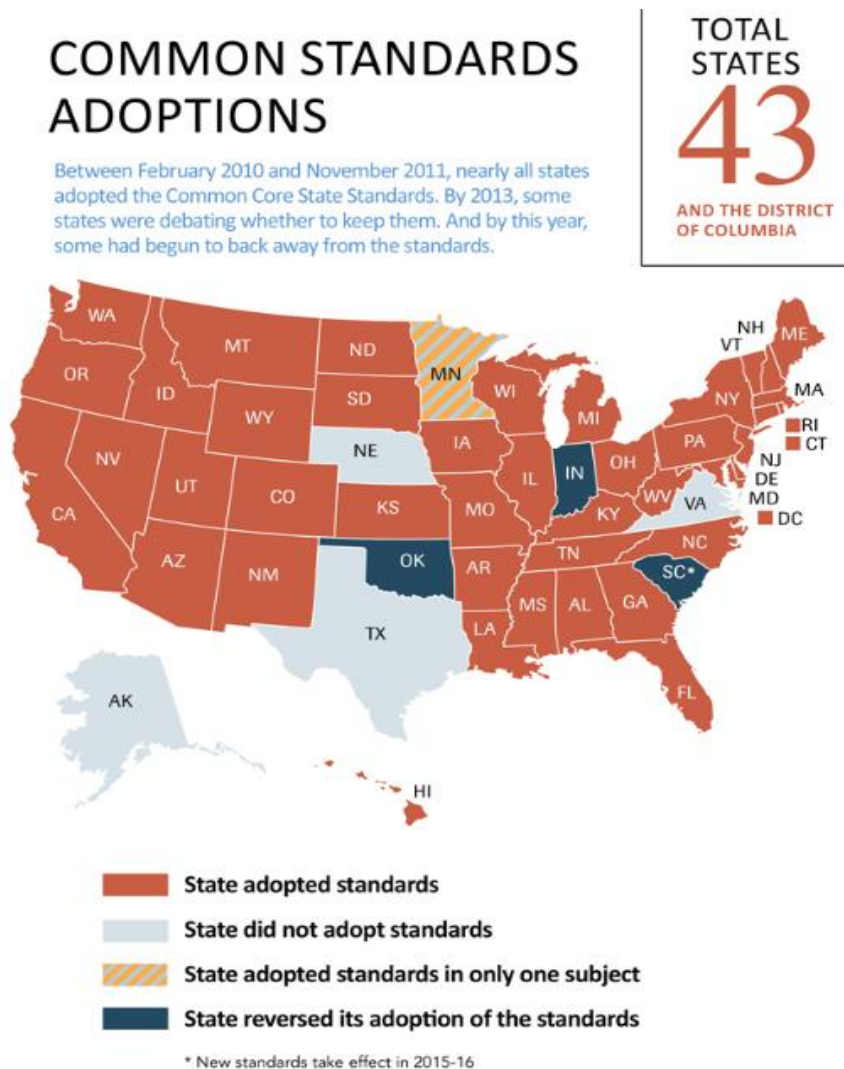
3. Changes in Standardized Testing

The adoption of Common Core State Standards is tied to changes in testing. Previously, each state developed their own assessments that were tied to individual state standards. States that have adopted the Common Core will now administer tests that are Common Core-aligned. Two testing consortia have been developed: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). Both consortiums have received federal funding to develop the tests. A main difference between PARCC and SBAC is that Smarter Balanced assessments will be computer adaptive, meaning that the tests will adjust questions in difficulty based on student responses, while PARCC tests will have a fixed set of questions. Both tests will use a computer-based model, and both will feature open-ended items where students will be required to demonstrate higher-order thinking through problem-solving and writing essays. A common implementation challenge of the new standardized tests is providing the necessary technological infrastructure to administer the tests online.

III. CURRENT STATUS OF THE COMMON CORE

The vast majority of states have adopted the Common Core. Forty-three states, the District of Columbia, four territories and the Department of Defense Education Activity currently (as of July 23, 2014) use the standards.¹²

Figure 1: States that have adopted the Common Core State Standards¹³



As can be seen from the graphic, four states (Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia) never adopted the CCSS, and one state (Minnesota) only partially adopted the standards.¹⁴ Each state has provided its own reasons for rejecting the Core, with Texas standing out as one of the most vocal opponents. In Texas, the legislature passed a bill prohibiting the adoption of CCSS and the

¹² Speedy Process for Common Standards Adoption (2014, January 31). *Education Week*. Retrieved from <http://visual.ly/speedy-process-common-standards-adoption>

¹³ *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/StateEdWatch/status/476074695507578880/photo/1>

¹⁴ Baker, C.R. (2014, January 4). Opting out of the Common Core. *Deseret News*. Retrieved from <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865593461/Opting-out-of-the-Common-Core.html?pg=all>

use of assessments based on the CCSS. In both Nebraska and Virginia, state leaders have said that their standards cover most of the same material as CCSS, just at different grade levels. Virginia also disagreed with many selections on the optional reading lists that accompany the ELA standards. Alaska has indicated that they will keep their own state standards.¹⁵ Minnesota adopted the ELA standards but not the math standards because Minnesota policymakers considered their state math standards to be superior to the CCSS.

Three states, Indiana, South Carolina, and Oklahoma, have officially withdrawn from the Common Core. In March 2014, Indiana became the first state to void its 2010 adoption of the CCSS. Last year, the Indiana legislature “paused” implementation of the CCSS, and this year the Indiana House passed a bill that would prohibit the use of the standards past July 1, 2014 and would require adoption of new standards by the same date. Governor Pence signed this bill in late March 2014 and potential replacement standards have been drafted, but critics of these drafted standards have stated that they are very similar to the Common Core.¹⁶ Following suit, South Carolina Governor Haley signed a bill on May 30, 2014 that drops the Common Core and requires the state to adopt new standards for the 2015-16 school year.¹⁷ Shortly thereafter on June 5, 2014, Oklahoma Governor Fallin signed HB 3399, requiring Oklahoma to return to the standards in place before the Common Core and requiring the State Board of Education to develop “new, more rigorous standards” by August 2016.¹⁸

Additional changes have taken place in other states, although these states have opted to keep the Common Core until new standards can be developed. On July 14, 2014, Missouri Governor Nixon signed HB 1450, which directs Missouri officials to create their own state standards to replace the Common Core, although the Common Core will remain in effect while this effort is taking place.¹⁹ On July 22, 2014, Governor McCrory of North Carolina signed legislation that her state must review and revise its K-12 reading and math standards. The law directs the State Board of Education to rewrite the standards based on input from an 11-member standards advisory commission. The commission may choose to keep parts of the Common Core in the

¹⁵ Baker, C.R. (2014, January 4). Opting out of the Common Core. *Deseret News*. Retrieved from <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865593461/Opting-out-of-the-Common-Core.html?pg=all>

¹⁶ See Moxley, E. (2014, February 18). State lawmakers want Common Core exit in Indiana code. *StateImpact*. Retrieved from <http://indianapublicmedia.org/stateimpact/2014/02/18/state-lawmakers-common-core-exit-indiana-code/> and Ujifusa, A. (2014, March 24). Indiana Gov. Pence voids 2010 adoption of Common Core State Standards. *Education Week*. Retrieved from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2014/03/indiana_gov_pence_voids_2010_adoption_of_common_core_state_standards.html

¹⁷ Ujifusa, A. (2014, June 4). S.C. Governor Signs Bill Requiring State to Replace Common Core. *Education Week*. Retrieved from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2014/06/south_carolina_gov_haley_signs_bill_to.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-TW

¹⁸ Ujifusa, A. (2014, June 5). Gov. Fallin signs bill to replace Common Core with new standards. *Education Week*. Retrieved from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2014/06/okla_gov_fallin_signs_bill_to_replace_common_core_with_new_standards.html?qs=oklahoma+common+core

¹⁹ Singer, D. (2014, July 14). Nixon vetoes armed teacher bill, signs Common Core changes. *St. Louis Public Radio*. Retrieved from <http://news.stlpublicradio.org/post/nixon-vetoes-armed-teacher-bill-signs-common-core-changes>

new standards, and the Common Core will remain in place until the new standards are completed, which may occur by the 2015-16 school year.²⁰

In several states with Republican governors that have not officially withdrawn from the Common Core, Republican governors have also recently initiated their own campaigns against the Common Core. Most notably, in June 2014, Louisiana Governor Jindal issued an executive order withdrawing his state from an agreement to use Common Core-aligned standardized tests and also proposed that Louisiana develop its own set of state standards. Education officials in Louisiana have expressed opposition to Jindal's action. Now, both sides of the debate in Louisiana will be taking the Common Core issue to court. When students return to school in August, a spokesman has stated that teachers will follow the Common Core State Standards, but no one knows which standardized tests will be in place until the lawsuits are resolved.²¹ Beyond the Louisiana conflict, Wisconsin Governor Walker has called for a repeal of Common Core in his state's 2015 legislative session. Mississippi Governor Bryant and Utah Governor Herbert have also recently spoken out against the Common Core.²²

Additional changes have taken place in the states participating in the Common Core-aligned assessment consortia. The initial plan for the consortia was that all states would be included, which would allow for widespread cross-state comparisons in data. Back in 2009, PARCC had twenty-six members, Smarter Balanced had thirty-one, and twelve states belonged to both.²³ Since then, these numbers have dwindled. Among the states that have adopted the CCSS, nine states have officially pulled out of their original assessment consortia: Utah, Oklahoma, Georgia, Alabama, Kansas, Alaska, Florida, Kentucky, and Tennessee.²⁴ Indiana and Pennsylvania are still listed on the consortia websites, but their status is questionable, as is the status of Louisiana. So, why are so many states leaving the consortia? Several states, including Georgia and Oklahoma, cited cost as the main reason for leaving one of the consortia.²⁵ Other states have chosen not to use the Common Core State Standards, so it is not logical for them to contract for Common Core-aligned testing. According to the PARCC website (as of July 23, 2014), fourteen states plus the District of Columbia will participate in PARCC testing, including Arkansas. Twenty-two states will participate in Smarter Balanced testing. Other states are either using their state tests that they were using prior to Common Core or have contracted with other providers that will create exams. It is important to note that dropping out of a consortium does not

²⁰ Ferral, K. (2014, July 22). McCrory signs Common Core changes into law. *SF Gate*. Retrieved from <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/McCrory-signs-Common-Core-changes-into-law-5639148.php>

²¹ Calvert, K. (2014, July 22). Both sides take Louisiana's Common Core political fight to court. *PBS NewsHour*. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/sides-take-louisianas-common-core-political-fight-court/>

²² Ujjifusa, A. (2014, July 17). Wisconsin Gov. Walker calls for repeal of Common Core in 2015. *Education Week*. Retrieved from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2014/07/wisconsin_gov_walker_calls_for_repeal_of_common_core_in_2015.html

²³ Highbanks, V. (2014, July 23). Common Core testing groups won't let some states go. *Heartland Institute*. Retrieved from <http://news.heartland.org/newspaper-article/2014/07/23/common-core-testing-groups-wont-let-some-states-go#.U8-wbL1chOw.twitter>

²⁴ The Common Core FAQ (2014, May 27). NPR Ed. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/blogs/ed/2014/05/27/307755798/the-common-core-faq#q6>

²⁵ Layton, L. (2013, July 23). Georgia, Oklahoma say Common Core tests are too costly and decide not to adopt them. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/georgia-oklahoma-say-common-core-tests-are-too-costly/2013/07/23/e95b312e-f3c9-11e2-aa2e-4088616498b4_story.html

IV. THE COMMON CORE DEBATE IN ARKANSAS

What is the status of the Common Core debate in Arkansas?

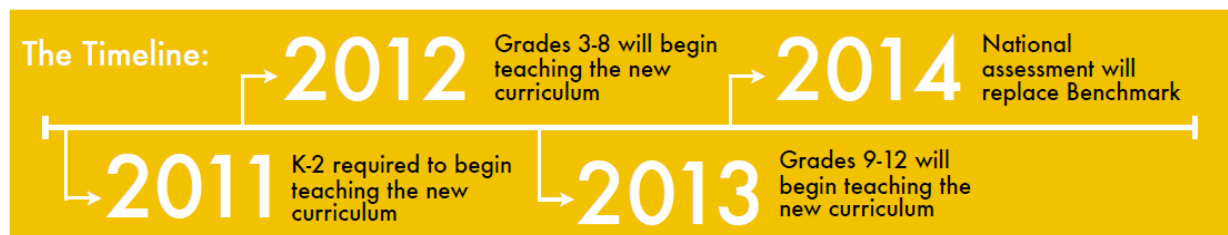
The Common Core State Standards were released to the public in June 2010. In July 2010, the Arkansas State Board of Education voted to adopt both the CCSS and PARCC. State legislators approved the move a year later.

Prior to the vote, the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) performed an analysis in which the CCSS were compared to the Arkansas Curriculum Frameworks in math and ELA. The ADE found a 96% match of ELA standards and a 95% match in math. These matches, however, are not specific to grade-levels; many standards, especially certain math skills, have been shifted to an earlier grade level under CCSS. The ADE has reported that the alignment of CCSS to the previous Arkansas state standards is much closer at K-8 levels than 9-12 levels.

The Arkansas State Board of Education had a choice in whether to adopt the CCSS “as-is” (in their entirety) or to adopt the standards while adding up to 15 percent of their own standards. It was decided to adopt the standards in full without adding new standards.

After adoption, the ADE created a strategic plan and timeline for the implementation of the standards.²⁸

Figure 3: Timeline of Common Core implementation in Arkansas



A. Opposition to the Common Core in Arkansas

As Arkansas progressed through the adoption and implementation of the CCSS, there has been some opposition to the standards. In 2013, “Arkansas Against Common Core” was formed. This group believes that the standards provide “poor content” and has additional concerns about a lack of student data privacy and high costs associated with implementing the standards. Arkansas Against Common Core has organized events around the state and has encouraged parents to “opt out” their children from PARCC field testing in spring 2014. One of the Arkansas Against Common Core’s most vocal leaders is mother Karen Lamoreaux, who has appeared on Fox Business and the Glenn Beck Show.²⁹ Additionally, an Arkansas student, 16-year-old Pat

²⁸ Common Core State Standards in Arkansas. (2012, August) Office for Education Policy, 9(6). Retrieved from http://www.officforeducationpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/9_6_Common_Core_in_AR.pdf

²⁹ Arkansas against Common Core (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.arkansasagainstcommoncore.com/>

Richardson, gave a presentation in October 2013 (available on YouTube) regarding his concerns about CCSS, including data-mining and PARCC testing.³⁰

There has also been action taken against the Common Core in the Arkansas legislature. In July 2013, opponents asked Arkansas lawmakers to drop the CCSS during a two-day hearing, but these efforts were unsuccessful.³¹ In the February 2014 fiscal session, Arkansas legislators voted against two resolutions that would have permitted consideration of bills to defund CCSS. The resolutions are SR4 by Sen. Stubblefield and HR1007 by Rep. Alexander.³² Also during the February 2014 legislative session, parents and a group of teachers that call themselves Arkansas Teachers Against Common Core (ATACC) gathered on the steps of the Arkansas capitol to protest Common Core.³³

B. Support for the Common Core in Arkansas

Arkansas has also demonstrated support for Common Core. In February 2014, Kathy Powers, a language arts teacher at Carl Stuart Middle School in Conway, AR, and 2011 Arkansas Teacher of the Year, wrote a blog post for *Education Week* citing the positive impact that she has seen in her district from teaching with Common Core standards.³⁴

On April 2, 2014, an independent initiative called Raise Our Grade was launched in support of Arkansas' Common Core State Standards. This group supports CCSS because they believe it will "provide a true picture of how Arkansas students in each district and charter school compare to their peers across the country." Many Arkansas businesses have stated their support for this group/CCSS, including Arvest Bank, Murphy Oil and the Arkansas School Boards Association.³⁵

In summary, Arkansans have voiced both opposition and support for the Common Core State Standards. To date, legislative opposition has been unsuccessful. Indeed, the state is moving forward as the PARCC assessments have been piloted in participating schools in the spring of 2014 and will be administered to all schools in spring of the 2014-15 school year.

³⁰ 16-year-old Pat Richardson-Common Core Q&A Presentation 10-10-13 [YouTube video]. (2013, October 11). Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGK5MoHHJno>

³¹ DeMillo, A. (2013, July 23). Opponents ask Arkansas to drop Common Core School Standards. *Arkansas Business*. Retrieved from <http://www.arkansasbusiness.com/article/93667/opponents-ask-arkansas-to-drop-common-core-school-standards>

³² Fiscal session update-private option funding approved; education bills stall. *Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families*. Retrieved from <https://www.z2systems.com/np/clients/aradvocates/viewOnlineEmail.jsp?emailId=d05fd6458146ef2c61e2b43cd0dfa34fdm497423d05>

³³ Parents rally against Common Core. (2014, February 1). KHTV. Retrieved from <http://www.thv11.com/news/article/296732/2/Parents-rally-against-common-core>

³⁴ Powers, K. (2014, February 6). My Common-Core classroom. *Education Week*. Retrieved from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rick_hess_straight_up/2014/02/my_common_core_classroom.html

³⁵ Raise our Grade Arkansas [facebook page]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/RaiseOurGrade>

V. OVERVIEW OF THE COMMON CORE DEBATE

A. Why Might the CCSS Be Helpful?

Proponents of the CCSS tend to argue that the standards will improve the American education system, ranging from those who believe that the Common Core will increase college and career readiness to those who believe that the standards will make the United States' education system more globally competitive. Four key arguments in support of the Common Core are highlighted here.

1. Increased Rigor

The Fordham Institute's study, *The State of State Standards-and the Common Core-in 2010*, reviewed all fifty states' ELA and math standards and found that the CCSS are more rigorous than 37 of the states' standards.³⁶ Fordham assigned grades to each state's standards and also to the Common Core, using criteria of a total of 10 possible points, 3 for clarity/specificity and 7 for content/rigor. The Common Core Standards received an A- in math and a B+ in ELA. Some states' standards, such as Massachusetts, were found to be superior to the CCSS, and others were determined "too close to call." Fordham suggests that states that have standards comparable to CCSS and have invested heavily in teacher training and test development may have reason to hold off adopting CCSS. The study encourages states with less rigorous standards to adopt CCSS. "The reality is that they are better than 85 or 90 percent of the state standards they replace. Not a little better. A lot better," said James Milgram, a mathematician at Stanford University who sat on the Common Core validation committee. However, he added, "That's really a comment on the abysmal quality of these state standards."³⁷

According to Fordham's study, Arkansas standards scored a D for ELA standards and a C for math standards. Thus, based on this report, Arkansas has improved its level of academic rigor by choosing to adopt the Common Core State Standards.

Additionally, proponents of the Common Core affirm that rigor is increased due to international benchmarking. A 2012 study from Michigan State University found that the Common Core math standards are highly correlated with those of high-performing countries.³⁸

2. New Testing Regime

Another possible benefit is that along with the Common Core standards come new assessments. Though we won't know for sure until PARCC is implemented during the 2014-15 school year, PARCC tests may be an improvement on Arkansas Benchmark and End-of-Course exams, which suffer from ceiling effects. That is, as of today, in many districts in the state, 90% and upwards of the students are achieving at the proficient or advanced levels. Thus, for these students and

³⁶Carmichael, S.B., Wilson, W.S., Porter-Magee, K., & Martino, G. (2010, July 21). The state of the state standards-and the Common Core-in 2010. Thomas Fordham Institute. Retrieved from http://www.edexcellence.net/sites/default/files/publication/pdfs/SOSSandCC2010_FullReportFINAL_8.pdf

³⁷Garland, S. (2013, October 15). How does Common Core compare? *The Hechinger Report*. Retrieved from http://hechingerreport.org/content/how-does-common-core-compare_13306/

³⁸Schmidt, W.H. & Houang, R.T. (2012, October 25). Curricular coherence and the Common Core State Standards for mathematics. *Educational Researcher*, 41(8), 294-308. Retrieved from <http://edr.sagepub.com/content/41/8/294.full.pdf+html>

districts, it will be difficult for these assessments to measure and encourage student growth.

Another possible benefit of Common Core-aligned assessments is that they will enable us to compare schools' test results across states, whereas before we could only compare within the state. Currently, we are only able to use National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data to make comparisons among states and certain urban school districts.

3. Greater Access to Instructional Resources

One of the greatest benefits of Common Core is the increased sharing of instructional resources. This potential benefit was articulated in an example by McShane (2013), who began his teaching career in the pre-Common Core days in Alabama, where there were limited instructional materials and professional development opportunities aligned to the Alabama State Standards. Some of the larger states, such as California and Texas, had excellent resources aligned to their standards, but many smaller and more financially-strapped states did not. With the CCSS, educators are able to benefit from a vastly expanded marketplace of teaching resources.³⁹

4. National Curricular Coherence

We live in an increasingly mobile society, and it is believed that Common Core Standards will make it easier for students who move from school to school or state to state to make a seamless transition. This is one reason why the U.S. military supports the standards, as the children of service members often move frequently.⁴⁰

B. Why Might the CCSS Be Harmful?

There are also many opponents to the Common Core, ranging from those who believe the standards are not rigorous to others who disagree with a one-size-fits-all approach to education. Below, we highlight four common criticisms of the Common Core.

1. Lack of Rigor

While many of the proponents of CCSS consider rigor to be a strength of the Common Core, many critics cite a lack of rigor as a real problem. As we noted earlier, the Fordham Institute gave the Common Core math standards a grade of A- and Common Core ELA standards earned a B+. However, curriculum experts Sandra Stotsky and James Milgram scored them differently: B- in math and C- for language arts. Both Stotsky and Milgram served as Common Core validation committee members, and each refused to sign off on the academic legitimacy of the standards.

Stotsky made the following critiques of the ELA standards⁴¹:

- Do not define readiness for college reading or provide coherent grade-level standards

³⁹ McShane, M.Q. (2013, December 13). Common Core debate. *Orange County Register*. Retrieved from <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/core-593371-common-standards.html>

⁴⁰ The Common Core FAQ (2014, May 27). NPR Ed. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/blogs/ed/2014/05/27/307755798/the-common-core-faq#q6>

⁴¹ Milgram, R.J. and Stotsky, S. (2010, March). Fair to Middling: A National Standards Progress Report: A Pioneer Institute White Paper. 56. Retrieved from <http://pioneerinstitute.org/education/fair-to-middling-high-standards-states-far-exceed-national-standards/>

- Include a formula to help judge the complexity of literature that is unusable by the average teacher
- Include vocabulary standards in grades 6-12 that will lead to reading failure in high school
- Unable to serve as a reliable basis for common assessments from grade to grade
- Are not benchmarked against high-performing countries

Milgram has made the following specific criticisms of the math standards⁴²:

- Expectations are too low by the end of elementary
- Delays pre-Algebra skills, which harms Algebra instruction in later grades
- Uses an unproven approach to Geometry in 7th-8th grades
- Algebra I and II and Geometry standards are disorganized
- Barely prepare students for math at a community college, let alone a four-year university⁴³

2. *Centralized Control of Standards Is Harmful*

Perhaps most importantly for many critics, it is problematic to assign the task of developing standards to a single centralized body, especially when we do not know “what works” in standards creation. The state standards system allowed for the “laboratory of states,” in which all fifty states experimented with different standards, allowing states to potentially borrow the best ideas from one another. Even if a centralized body creates a set of standards that is good, they could eventually be replaced with bad standards, and because the standards would be the same for everyone, everyone will be harmed rather than just those in a few states.

3. *Higher Standards Do Not Affect Achievement*

As Hanushek and Loveless point out, research shows that there is no relationship between states’ standards and student performance.⁴⁴ For example, Massachusetts is touted as having strong standards and producing top notch achievement results. However, California also has high learning standards, but student achievement in the state is low. The graph of NAEP data on the following page shows that there is not a correlation between states that earned high marks from *Education Week* in terms of the rigor of their 8th grade math state standards and the strength of their NAEP scores.⁴⁵

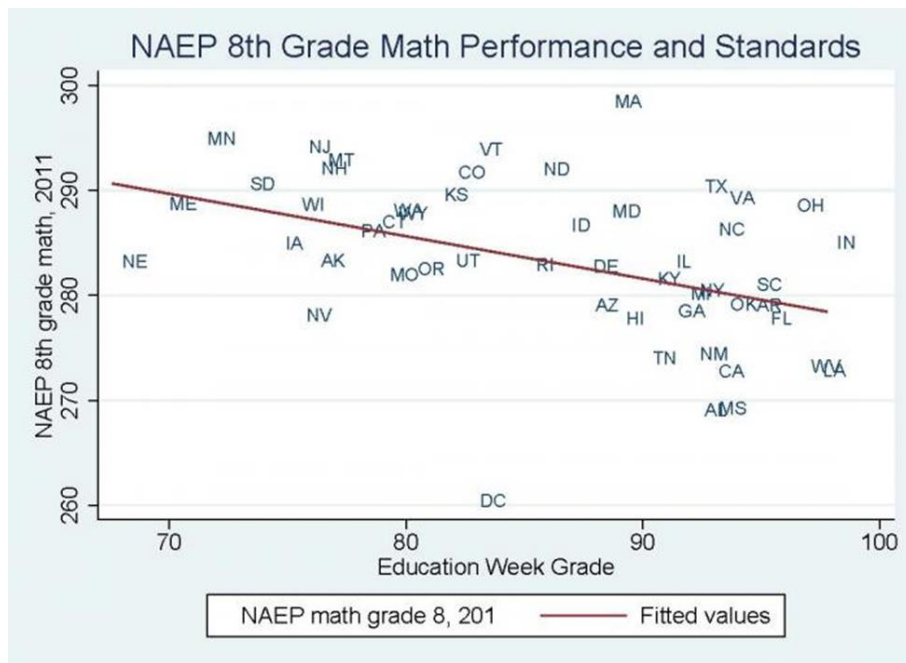
⁴² Milgram, R.J. and Stotsky, S. (2010, March). Fair to Middling: A National Standards Progress Report: A Pioneer Institute White Paper. 56. Retrieved from <http://pioneerinstitute.org/education/fair-to-middling-high-standards-states-far-exceed-national-standards/>

⁴³ Milgram, R.J. (2013). Testimony about issue-with-Core math standards to Arkansas legislature. Retrieved from <http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/assembly/2013/Meeting%20Attachments/810/112058/Dr%20%20J%20%20Milgram%20Testimony.pdf>

⁴⁴ See Hanushek, E.A. (2012, May). Is the Common Core just a distraction? *Hoover Institution at Stanford University*. Retrieved from <http://hanushek.stanford.edu/publications/common-core-just-distraction;>

⁴⁵ Loveless, T. (2012, February). The 2012 Brown Center report on American education: How well are American students learning? http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2012/2/brown%20center/0216_brown_education_loveless.pdf

Figure 4: 2011 NAEP 8th grade math scores to the difficulty level of state standards



4. Implementation Challenges

This is probably the most common criticism of educators, who have three main concerns:

- a. **Rushed accountability:** Many are concerned that Common Core-aligned assessments will not only measure students' progress but will be used to evaluate teachers, rate schools and rank states. Testing experts say if students will be tested on new standards, states should be given time to develop new curricula. Then, teachers should be given the necessary training and all this should be done before mandated accountability measures are set in motion.⁴⁶
- b. **Lack of externally-vetted, high-quality CCSS materials:** Many resources are marketed as being "Common Core-aligned," even if they are not.⁴⁷ A 2014 study found that several fourth grade textbooks that claimed to be "Common Core-aligned" were not actually aligned to the standards.⁴⁸
- c. **Lack of technological infrastructure:** States, including Arkansas, must have the proper technological infrastructure in place by 2014-15 to participate in these exams. Indeed, the inability to administer tests online was cited by Oklahoma as one of its reasons for withdrawing from PARCC.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Sanchez, C. (2014, January 2). Critics say schools' Common Core Standards rollout is rushed. *NPR*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/2014/01/02/259082746/education-critics-say-common-core-standards-rollout-is-rushed>

⁴⁷ McShane, M.Q. (2013, December 13). Common Core debate. *Orange County Register*. Retrieved from <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/core-593371-common-standards.html>

⁴⁸ Polikoff study finds textbooks not aligned to Common Core standards. (2014) Retrieved from <http://rossier.usc.edu/polikoff-study-finds-textbooks-not-aligned-to-common-core-standards/>

⁴⁹ Mullen, M. (2013, July 8). OK pulls out of PARCC, keeps Common Core. *Choice Media Ed Reform Minute*. Retrieved from http://choicemedia.tv/2013/07/08/ok-pulls-out-of-parcc-keeps-common-core/#.UyCho2co_cs

C. What Not to Worry About

It is important to note that there has been a lot of misinformation and misunderstandings related to Common Core State Standards. For instance, a recent survey revealed that 58% of Americans do not know what CCSS are.⁵⁰ In addition, the Common Core website has dedicated an entire section to “Myths vs. Facts.”⁵¹ In our review of the Common Core debate, we have come across some criticisms of Common Core based on misinformation and that we believe to be unsubstantiated. Below are five critiques that we believe do not warrant concern.

1. Federal Overreach

Many argue that the Common Core standards represent “federal overreach,” transferring decisions that were previously made at the local level to the federal government. Contrary to what many believe, the CCSS were not created by the federal government. The National Governors Association Center (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) coordinated the initiative.

The Common Core standards were created in a similar way to Arkansas’ state standards; therefore, the critique that standards were not created locally would apply to Arkansas state standards as well as the Common Core. They were created by a relatively small group of experts at the capitol; the process does not look very different whether the capitol is Little Rock or D.C.

Opponents also argue that states were coerced by the federal government into adopting the standards. Technically, states had a choice in adopting the standards, yet it should be noted that Race to the Top’s federal grant program and waivers from certain provisions of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) had a role in “incentivizing” adoption of the CCSS. In order to qualify for grants and NCLB waivers, states need to adopt college- and career-ready standards. While the CCSS were already approved to meet the college- and career-ready standards criteria, states were free to create their own college- and career-ready standards.

2. No Proven Track Record of Success

The argument that the CCSS should not be adopted because it has no proven track record of success is questionable, since schools often implement new and untested programs or strategies. While we believe that it is important to look to research-tested practices to improve schools, often research is not available on all topics. In addition, there is no way to research whether new approaches are effective without first taking a chance on untested approaches and programs.

3. “Fuzzy” Math and Lack of Literature

Another misconception about the Common Core that is important to correct is that the CCSS prescribes a specific curriculum or teaching methods. In fact, under the CCSS, teachers are free to teach the standards using the instructional materials and instructional strategies of their choice,

⁵⁰ The education roadtrip: A survey of 6,400 Americans across 8 regions. (2014, February 19). *50CAN*. Retrieved from <http://edroadtrip.50can.org/>

⁵¹ Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/>

although curricula are often adopted by individual school districts.⁵² Contrary to what many have argued, Common Core math standards do not abandon traditional algorithms and in fact, require that students demonstrate fluency with the standard algorithm for each of the four basic operations with whole numbers and decimals.⁵³ Another criticism has been that Common Core's ELA standards cut out literature in favor of informational text. While it is true that the Common Core's ELA standards emphasize informational text, literature has not been discarded. Common Core's ELA standards provide an optional reading list but only prescribe three texts that every student must read: the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and Lincoln's second inaugural address.⁵⁴ Other than these texts, individual teachers have the latitude to make choices of which texts they will use in their classrooms.

4. Breaches in Student Data Privacy

The Common Core does not require districts or states to collect more data on their students. There has been some confusion about this because Race to the Top (RTTT), the federal initiative that incentivized the adoption of college- and career-ready standards, also incentivizes the creation of statewide data systems that track individual students from kindergarten through postsecondary education. However, RTTT is separate from the CCSS. Each state chooses how to assess students and how data from these assessments will be used. In many cases, Common Core test scores will be part of the data, but these state-level decisions about collecting student data are separate from the Common Core.⁵⁵

5. Lots of Harmful Testing

First, there is no justification that state tests as they exist now are too burdensome for students. How else do we answer legislative questions about effectiveness? At most, students currently spend 12 hours per year (two school days) taking standardized tests.⁵⁶ In Arkansas, students will be participating in PARCC testing. There is no evidence that there will be more time spent testing with PARCC than the previous Arkansas standardized tests. PARCC requires three assessments: 1) A performance-based assessment to be taken after 75% of the school year is completed, 2) an end-of-year assessment to be taken after 90% of the school year is complete, and 3) a speaking and listening assessment which will be administered by teachers and scored with a rubric.⁵⁷

The table below details the times estimated that each grade will spend on testing. These times may change based on results from PARCC field testing. The estimated times include performance-based and end-of-year assessments for math and ELA but do not include the

⁵² Myths vs. facts. (2014). *Common Core State Standards Initiative*. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/myths-vs-facts/>

⁵³ Common Core State Standards for Mathematics. Retrieved from http://www.corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/Math_Standards.pdf

⁵⁴ Wiener, R. (2014, March 5). The Common Core's unsung benefit: It teaches kids to be good citizens. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/03/the-common-cores-unsung-benefit-it-teaches-kids-to-be-good-citizens/284209/>

⁵⁵ The Common Core FAQ (2014, May 27). NPR Ed. Retrieved from

⁵⁶ Time spent on testing [policy brief]. (2008, April). Office for Education Policy, 5(3). Retrieved from http://www.uark.edu/ua/oep/policy_briefs/2008/Time_Spent_on_Testing.pdf

⁵⁷ PARCC: Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers. <http://www.parcconline.org/>

speaking and listening assessment.⁵⁸

Table 3: Total estimated time of PARCC testing by grade level

Grade	Total Hours
3	8 hrs
4-5	9 hrs 20 min
6-8	9 hrs 25 min
9-10	9 hrs 45 min
11	9 hrs 55 min

As can be seen, Common Core-related testing does not significantly alter the amount of time that Arkansas students will spend on standardized tests.

⁵⁸ PARCC assessment administration guidance version 1.0. (2013, March). *PARCC*. Retrieved from http://www.parcconline.org/sites/parcc/files/PARCC%20Assessment%20Administration%20Guidance_FINAL_0.pdf

VI. CONCLUSION – CCSS IN ARKANSAS?

The debate over the Common Core State Standards is a contentious one, further complicated by the lack of empirical support for or against the usefulness of these or other standards. As a result, the true impact of the Common Core remains to be seen.

Nevertheless, this issue is not a “done deal” in many states, including Arkansas. While there seems to be general consensus among a bipartisan group of educational stakeholders and observers in favor of these standards, there remains a vocal opposition from all across the political spectrum. On the far right, Arkansans, often those affiliated with “Tea Party” groups, argue passionately against what they view as a federal overreach. On the other side, some on the political left maintain that excessive testing in our schools is causing genuine harm to our students; thus, the CCSS, as yet another example of standards-based school reform, will serve to exacerbate this harmful situation.

As the situation remains in some flux, in this final section, we will present our own view on the Common Core question. Specifically, we will conclude this Arkansas Education Report by addressing the straightforward question: *Should Arkansas continue to use (or reverse the adoption of) the Common Core State Standards?*

The view from the OEP is that Arkansas education policymakers should continue on the current track to implement the Common Core standards in 2014-15 and for at least a few years after that. There are a few reasons that we have arrived at this view:

1. First of all, many of the complaints lodged against the Common Core revolve around issues that are actually not connected to these new standards. Some of the more irrelevant concerns or incredible claims are that the Common Core will lead to invasions of data privacy, that the Common Core will perpetuate “fuzzy” math, or that the Common Core will lead to over-testing. In our view, these criticisms focus on non-issues (data privacy), problems that existed before the Common Core and could still exist without the Common Core (“fuzzy” math), or problems that are likely exaggerated (over-testing).
2. Second, some of the more legitimate criticisms leveled at the CCSS are based on the fact that these standards have been developed and shaped by a single entity for all participating states. Many are concerned that a one-size-fits-all set of standards could actually lower the quality of standards in certain states that had existing standards that were considered superior to the Common Core. While this may be problematic in some states, this is not the case in Arkansas. The consensus is that the Common Core standards are generally stronger than the Arkansas Curricular Frameworks that preceded the CCSS and thus improve the level of rigor in Arkansas schools.
3. Finally, the assessments that are currently employed in Arkansas have less usefulness today than they did ten years ago. In many districts, upwards of 90% of the students score at proficient or better and there is little room for growth. In an environment in which education policymakers hope to use testing instruments to measure student growth, a new and improved assessment system will be beneficial for students in Arkansas.

Only time will tell if Common Core State Standards will survive the onslaught of criticisms that they have received and what shape the national standards movement will take in the years to come. As for today, in the state of Arkansas, based on the reaction of teachers and the public, it seems that the transition from the curricular frameworks to the CCSS has been a positive one. This is not to overlook the implementation challenges that await as we begin to attach a testing regime (likely PARCC) to the Common Core. However, our educational leaders have in the past overcome the challenges of implementing new standards. It is our hope that this experience is no exception.