Common Core standards widen the opportunity gap

Standards-based education reform is not a good use of U.S. taxpayers’ time or money
April 6, 2014 8:00AM ET
by Nicholas Tampio  @NTampio

Elementary and middle schoolers in New York state sat for the second round of Common Core tests this week amid boycotts and protests from parents, teachers and principals. The Common Core is a set of academic standards in mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA) meant to prepare students for college and career success. Its advocates argue that such standards are crucial for establishing equal opportunity for all students. Its opponents worry that the Common Core gives early-grade students minimal exposure to subjects other than math and ELA. The key problem, however, is that the Common Core has the opposite effect of that intended — it widens the opportunity gap rather than narrowing it.

Narrow curriculum

Proponents of the Common Core standards consider its implementation a civil rights issue. In her book “The Flat World and Education,” Linda Darling-Hammond, a Stanford professor and former education adviser to President Barack Obama’s campaign, presents a powerful version of this view. America is founded on the principle of educational equality. In practice, however, there is an opportunity gap between the predominantly white wealthiest school districts and poorer districts with a sizable percentage of racial and ethnic minorities. National education standards, according to Darling-Hammond, increase the likelihood that
children of every racial, ethnic and economic background will have access to a high-quality education.

In her book, Darling-Hammond explains how standards-based education reform works. Curriculum experts establish standards to prepare students to compete in the global economy. The federal government grants aid to states on condition that they adopt those standards. States then use end-of-year tests to measure their students' mastery of the standards. School districts and teachers are rewarded or punished based on the student test scores, thus creating a high-stakes environment. This exerts immense pressure on educators to raise the academic bar for all students.

The standards-based reform has flaws, Darling-Hammond admits. For example, it narrows the curriculum. High-stakes testing creates incentives to reduce the curriculum to subjects and skills that can be evaluated. In addition, the reform widens the gap between private schools that offer courses in the arts, natural sciences, social studies, physics and engineering and public schools that focus primarily on subject matters covered by the standardized tests.

Darling-Hammond remains convinced, however, that the Common Core can succeed where previous policies designed to address educational inequity, such as the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, failed. Currently, she serves on New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's Common Core Implementation Panel, which is reviewing the state’s implementation of these standards.

In a comprehensive report last month, the panel unveiled a set of recommendations to improve the Common Core implementation and provide quality education for all students. The report urged state education officials to invest in developing an online information and resources portal for Common Core standards, offer professional development training for teachers on how to integrate the standards into their lesson plans and produce accessible Common Core curriculum modules that teachers may use in the classroom.
The crucial problem of an overly narrow curriculum remains. EngageNY, a Web portal created by the New York State Education Department, already provides a detailed map of what children should learn in each grade. In the early grades, the Common Core math and ELA curriculums cover almost the entire teaching portion of a typical school day. Some of the lesson plans touch upon science or social studies, but primarily as subject matters of informational texts taught in the ELA curriculum.

In response, Darling-Hammond insists on improving, rather than abandoning, the Common Core assessments. As senior research adviser to the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, a multistate group that designs assessments aligned to the Common Core state standards, Darling-Hammond advocates for performance tests that measure “higher-order thinking” and problem solving skills. However, she and other advocates of standards-based reform have so far been unable to steer the standardized testing regime in a more thoughtful direction.

**Learner-centered approach**

Americans committed to the ideal of educational equality should reconsider whether standards-based reform is a good use of their time and money. The financial costs of implementing the Common Core are staggering. My school district in New York’s Westchester County is looking at a $400,000 price tag to purchase the technology necessary to administer the Common Core tests next year. As a point of contrast, here are what other items in the 2013–14 budget cost:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten teacher</td>
<td>$102,327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school musical</td>
<td>$52,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-5 art program</td>
<td>$91,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-5 music program</td>
<td>$175,653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic department</td>
<td>$320,743</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Common Core prep takes up time that students could spend learning other subjects and exploring their creative potential. For example, studies show that learning a foreign language in the early grades leads to higher levels of proficiency and knowledge about other cultures. Many parents in our district think elementary schools should offer courses in Spanish, French, Arabic or Mandarin. Given the time demands of the Common Core, however, that is not a viable option.

In order to close the opportunity gap, our politicians and corporate test makers should stop focusing on education standards while ignoring the problem of income inequality. Nearly 23 percent of American children live in poverty. Children will not do well on standardized tests, or focus on college and career preparation, if they lack basic human necessities. Living in a homeless shelter, or a lack of proper nutrition, precludes a child’s ability to concentrate on academics. Politicians and quality-education advocates use these myriad problems to justify the need for standards-based reform. However, they must start seeking collaborative, learner-centered alternatives to testing regimes that punish already disadvantaged students. Ultimately, in order to address pervasive educational inequality in this country, we have to renew our commitment to providing children with all the resources they need to have a good start in life.

It is also important to acknowledge that local control of schools has its advantages. The current set of education standards used around the country is increasingly unpopular. There will be a temptation in the near future to replace the Common Core with another set of national education standards. We must resist that temptation. Parents should be given a chance to explore many ways to educate their children. Americans should seek ways to hold schools, teachers and students accountable without relying heavily upon standardized tests that narrow the curriculum. Finally, as a country, we should encourage community-based, participatory school systems rather than yearning for a simple solution to the complex problem of raising intelligent, ethical, well-rounded children.

Nicholas Tampio is an associate professor of political science at Fordham University. He is the author of “Kantian Courage,” “Deleuze’s Political Vision” and many academic articles. He is writing a book on democracy and national education standards.
The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.