David Coleman’s plan to ruin education

The architect of Common Core must be stopped
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In the summer of 2008, David Coleman changed the course of American education. For decades, reformers had argued that the country needed a national standards-based model of education to ensure economic prosperity. He helped make that a reality by convincing Bill Gates to support the Common Core State Standards initiative, to the tune of over $200 million.

In part because of his experience supervising the writing of the standards, Coleman became the head of the College Board, where his philosophy of education will further shape how U.S. high schools prepare students for college.

He has expressed this vision in an essay published by the College Board, “Cultivating Wonder.” With this document and the early results of the Common Core, it’s easy to see where his grand plans fall short.

Cultivating wonder

In “Cultivating Wonder,” Coleman unpacks several Common Core standards, shows how students may decipher classic works of literature and reflects on appropriate questions to ask students, revealing the philosophy of the Common Core and the College Board.
As a professor of political philosophy, I agree that education ought to cultivate wonder. The first book of political philosophy, Plato’s “Republic,” begins with Socrates experiencing wonder at a remark made by one of his interlocutors. Wonder is what compels us to keep investigating a question using every resource at our disposal.

Yet Coleman’s pedagogical vision stifles this kind of wonder by imposing tight restrictions on what may be thought — or at least what may be expressed to earn teacher approval, high grades and good test scores. He expects students to answer questions by merely stringing together key words in the text before them. This does not teach philosophy or thinking; it teaches the practice of rote procedures, conformity and obedience.

The first standard is the foundation of his vision. “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it,” it reads, and “cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.” According to Coleman, the first standard teaches a rigorous, deductive approach to reading that compels students to extract as much information from the text as possible.

Throughout the document, he reiterates that students need to identify key words in a text. He analyzes passages from “Hamlet,” “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” the Gettysburg Address and an essay by Martha Graham. There is minimal discussion of historical context or outside sources that may make the material come alive. For instance, he suggests that teachers ask students, “What word does Lincoln use most often in the address?” rather than, say, discuss the Civil War. In fact, he disparages this approach. “Great questions make the text the star of the classroom; the most powerful evidence and insight for answering lies within the text or texts being read. Most good questions are text dependent and text specific.”

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As a professor, of course I demand that my students provide evidence to support their arguments. Coleman’s pedagogical vision, however, does not prepare students for college. He discourages students from making connections between ideas, texts or events in the world — in a word, from thinking. Students are not encouraged to construct knowledge and understanding; they must simply be adept at repeating it.

His philosophy of education transfers across disciplines. After analyzing literary passages, he observes, “Similar work could be done for texts … in other areas such as social studies, history, science and technical subjects.” Like a chef’s signature flavor, Coleman’s philosophy of education permeates the myriad programs that the College Board runs.

Computers can grade the responses generated from his philosophy of education. Students read a passage and then answer questions using terms from it, regardless of whether the text is about history, literature, physics or U.S. history. The Postal Service sorts letters using handwriting-recognition technology, and with a little tinkering, this kind of software could seemingly be used to score the SAT or AP exams.

**Stifling wonder**

Coleman’s vision will end up harming the U.S. economy and our democratic culture.

The U.S. should be wary of emulating countries that use a standards-based model of education. In “World Class Learners,” the scholar Yong Zhao commends America’s tradition of local control of the schools and an educational culture that encourages sports, the arts, internships and other extracurricular pursuits. In diverse ways, U.S. schools have educated many successful intellectuals, artists and inventors. By contrast, the Chinese model of education emphasizes rigorous standards and high-stakes tests, pre-eminentely the gaokao college entrance exam. Chinese policymakers rue, however, how this education culture stifles creativity, curiosity and entrepreneurship. The Common
Core will lead us to the same trap. Educators should not discard what has made the U.S. a hotbed of innovation and entrepreneurship.

Democracy depends on citizens’ treating one another with respect. In perhaps his most famous public statement, Coleman told a room of educators not to teach students to write personal narratives, because “as you grow up in this world, you realize that people really don’t give a shit about what you feel or what you think.” This statement expresses, albeit more crassly, the same sentiment as his essay on cultivating wonder. He demands that students do what they are told and not offer their own perspectives on things. Ideally in a democracy, by contrast, citizens have a sincere interest in what other citizens have to say. As John Dewey argued in “Democracy and Education,” the purpose of the schools is to create a democratic culture, not one that replicates the worst features of the market economy.

A recurrent defense of the Common Core is that the standards are good but the implementation has been bad. Even if Coleman’s educational vision is perfectly actualized, it is still profoundly flawed. Under Common Core, from the time they enter kindergarten to the time they graduate from high school, students will have few opportunities to ask their own questions or come up with their own ideas. It’s time for Americans to find alternatives to Coleman’s educational vision.

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