National Education Standards are a Bad Idea
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In the spring of 2015, over 155,000 New York students refused to take the Common Core standardized tests.¹ In America, the Obama administration has tried to frame opposition to the Common Core as coming from right-wing political extremists or uneducated parents who do not want to hear that their children are not brilliant. According to a recent Columbia University national survey of test-refusing families, however, many opt out activists are highly educated and politically liberal. In New York, as in the rest of the country, the test refusal movement includes progressives and conservatives, people who live in the city, the suburbs, and the country, and families of every ethnicity and race.² Despite the best efforts of the federal and state government, the test refusal numbers increased in 2016.³

Today, many Americans are highly dissatisfied with the Common Core education system. Parents in the test refusal movement have often heard the arguments for national education standards, standardized tests, and accountability mechanisms. We have heard that this paradigm will prepare all children for college and careers, lift a country’s ranking in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and close the “opportunity gap” between children born into privilege and children born into poverty. Those arguments have a certain appeal, and in 2013, 65% of the American public, and 76% of teachers, supported the Common Core standards.

By 2015, however, support for the Common Core had plummeted to 49% of the American public and 40% of teachers.⁴ According to one critic, the Common Core is a “lemon,” an American slang term for a car that looks great but drives poorly and breaks down often. The advertisements for the Common Core are misleading, and many of the problems have become more apparent after the education system has been transformed. As the author of a recent academic article on national education standards, I offer four reasons why Brazil should rethink its commitment to the National Curricular Common Base.⁵

Bad for Children

In thinking about the question of national education standards, I have found it helpful to use the ideas of John Dewey, arguably America’s greatest philosopher of education and democratic political theorist. The first problem Dewey would identify with rigid standards is that they do not consider the needs and desires of the individual student.

In his 1899 essay, “The School and Society,” Dewey announces a “Copernican revolution” in education whereby “the child becomes the sun around which the appliances of education revolve.”⁶ According to Dewey, a good teacher discovers and cultivates the interests of each child in the classroom. Dewey thinks that good teachers connect the child’s interest with the appropriate curricular materials that will advance the child’s knowledge and abilities. As much as possible, skilled educators take advantage of a child’s curiosity so that school does not feel like drudgery. In this way, schools teach children that their own thoughts and desires matter and should influence the social world.
National education standards betray Dewey’s “Copernican revolution” in education. By stipulating what all children should know by when, policymakers do not allow children to deviate from a one-size-fits-all plan. Performance-pay programs make the problem worse by forcing teachers to stick to the plan or suffer financial loss. In America, wealthy parents have exited the public school system because they do not want their children to be just another number in a standardized system. Children deserve to develop their own singular talents and interests, not just go through a maze designed by distant authority figures.

Bad for Teachers

The second problem with national education standards is that they transfer education decision-making out of the school. Top-down education reform comes with costs, including that teachers lose their professional autonomy and children receive an inferior education.

Dewey identified this dynamic in a 1922 speech on “The Classroom Teacher.” Policymakers like the idea of giving educators a packaged curricula and using tests to put teachers and students in line. This factory model is cheap, efficient, and keeps control in the hand of economic and political elites.

The result, however, is that teachers become uninterested and uninspired. Teaching becomes just a job where you have to do what your boss tells you to do or you will get fired. According to Dewey, teachers only throw themselves into their work with “enthusiasm and wholeheartedness” when they are carrying out plans and ideas that they help develop. The reverse is also the case: people get discouraged when they simply have to follow orders.7

Dewey does not concede that standardization makes education better. On the contrary, you cannot expect “creative, independent work from the student when the teachers are still unemancipated.”8 Students know that teachers in this order do not have power to change the plans. As a result, schools become places where teachers and students focus on preparing for standardized tests in a few content areas. This is not a pleasant work space for teachers, or an optimal learning environment for students.

Bad for democracy

The third problem with national education standards is that they reinforce autocratic tendencies in the modern world rather than create a space for democracy.

Dewey acknowledges that schools need to set flexible, evolving goals for what students learn by a certain time. He calls these goals “aims” and insists that students, teachers, and community members participate in the conversation about what they are. The purpose of these conversations is not merely to map out the curriculum. Rather, the purpose is to create a community where people experience democracy as a living practice rather than merely a means to select leaders.
One school principal expresses Dewey’s intuition this way. “School, family, and community must forge their own standards, in dialogue with and in response to the larger world of which they are a part. There will always be tensions; but if the decisive, authoritative voice always comes from anonymous outsiders, then kids cannot learn what it takes to develop their own voice.” Dewey thinks schools should teach students in democracy, not just for democracy; that is, schools should model democracy as a way of life in which ordinary people contribute to the discussion of how to raise the next generation and thereby create a new world.

Local education control empowers many people to run the schools. In a system of national education standards, on the other hand, local authorities, principals, teachers, parents, and students have little power or say over what happens in the school. Schools become a place where everyone in the building learns everyday to obey orders or suffer the consequences. It is a lesson in servility.

**Bad for the economy**

The fourth problem with national education standards is that they create a docile population and thus lead to lower long-term economic growth.

More than Dewey, the scholar who makes this argument is the Chinese scholar Yong Zhao. In his book *World Class Learners*, Yong Zhao explains the secrets to China’s success on standardized tests such as PISA. In China, little outside of school work is valued. Creative and entrepreneurial students either exit the system out of frustration with having to do boring, repetitive work, or they conform to the system’s requirements. Chinese students do not spend much time socializing or pursuing their interests or passions. Chinese students lack confidence. According to Yong Zhao, farsighted Chinese policymakers realize that the country needs a different paradigm than the one based on standards and testing.

As an alternative, Yong Zhao looks to the American public school system before the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. When the American education system was “broken,” students pursued extracurricular activities such as music, art, and sports. Children played, by themselves and with others, and often held jobs. American students were happy, confident, and ready to make their own way in the world. As a result of this kind of education, Americans have the world’s largest economy, the best colleges and universities in the world, and a culture that entertains the world.

Yong Zhao thinks that America is making a mistake trying to fix its education system by adopting the Common Core and associated testing. Good standardized test takers do not tend to invent things or start businesses, and “bad” test takers can often be brilliant artists or businesspeople. For Yong Zhao, Brazil should learn the right lessons from China and the United States.

**Conclusion**

People who advocate national education standards often have good motives, including to educate all children and improve the economy. Brazilians debating the National Curricular Base, however,
should learn from America’s disastrous experiment with the Common Core. National education standards do not tend to raise the academic bar; instead, they narrow the curriculum to what is tested. They tend to make educators follow scripted lesson plans, make students hate school, and alienate community members who no longer have a say in what happens in the schools.

National education standards are an expensive, time-consuming distraction from the hard work of educating the next generation. Brazil should look for ways to improve its schools in ways that encourage healthy diversity, community input, teacher autonomy, and student initiative.

8 Ibid., 187.