

The Common Core: A Disaster for Libraries, A Disaster for Language Arts, a Disaster for American Education

Stephen Krashen

Krashen, S. 2014. The common core: A disaster for libraries, a disaster for language arts, a disaster for American education. *Knowledge Quest* 42(3): 37-45.

There never has been a need for the common core and there is no evidence that it will do students any good. The common core ignores the real problem in American education: Poverty. The common core will continue the process of turning schools into test-prep centers, and bleed billions from places it is badly needed, where it can help protect children from the effects of poverty. The only real goal of the common core is to do the opposite, to profit a small group of the elite, the .01% at taxpayer expense, a classic case of "take from the needy, give to the greedy."

There has never been a need for the common core, and there is no evidence it will do students any good.

The major argument for the common core is the assertion that our schools are terrible and that something needs to be done about it. The only evidence cited in support of this argument is the claim that our international test scores are very low. We must therefore force students and teachers into doing better. This will be done by establishing tough standards that control what is taught, and by testing students on the standards, thereby making sure that the standards are taught.

But analyses of our international test scores have revealed that American international test scores are nowhere near as bad as critics claim and that they have not declined (Loveless, 2011). In fact, when we control for the effects of poverty, American students rank near the top of the world (Carnoy and Rothstein, 2013).

Our overall scores are unspectacular because of our high rate (more than 23%) of child poverty, the second highest among all industrialized countries (UNICEF, 2012). In comparison, Finland, a country that consistently has high scores, has about 5% child poverty.

The products of our educational system do very well: The U.S. economy is ranked as the fifth most innovative in the world out of 142, according to the 2013 Global Innovation Index, which is based in part on the availability of education, new patents and the publication of scientific and technical journal articles (Cornell University, INSEAD, and WIPO, 2013).

There is every indication that this record of success will continue and that our educational system is doing much better than it needs to in the area of science and technology: There are two to three qualified graduates for each science/tech opening (Salzman, 2012; Salzman and Lowell, 2007, 2008; see also Teitelbaum, 2007) and

according to the *Atlantic* (Weismann, 2013), the US is producing more Ph.D.s in science than the market can absorb.

Finally, there is no evidence that having national standards and increasing testing have improved student learning in the past (Nichols, Glass and Berliner, 2006; Tienken, 2011).

The real problem: Poverty

As noted above, when we control for poverty, American students rank near the top of the world on international tests. This finding confirms that poverty is the major factor in determining school achievement, a finding that is consistent with the results of many studies showing the powerful negative impact of poverty on many aspects of learning, including, of course, reading comprehension and other aspects of literacy development (e.g. Biddle, 2001; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn, 2001).

Studies have documented how poverty impacts school performance: "Food insecurity," lack of health care, and lack of access to books, among other aspects of poverty, all have devastating effects on student's ability to learn.

Food insecurity

Children of poverty are likely to suffer from "food insecurity." Studies (Coles 2008/2009) show that food insecure children more likely to have slow language development, problems in social behavior and emotional control. They are more likely to miss school days, repeat a grade, and have academic problems.

The effects of food insecurity are reversible: When previously food secure children experience food insecurity, their reading development slows down relative to food secure children. But "a change from food insecurity to food security can bring concomitant improvements: the study also found that poor reading performance for food insecure children in the beginning grades was reversed if the household became food secure by 3rd grade" (Coles, 2008/2009).

Lack of health care

High-poverty families are more likely to lack medical insurance or have high co-payments, which results in less medical care, and more childhood illness and absenteeism, which of course negatively impacts school achievement. Berliner (2009) cites studies showing that "children in poor families in most states are six times more likely to be in less than optimal health, experiencing a wide variety of illnesses and injuries, as compared with children in higher income families" (p. 16). School is not helping: Poor schools are more likely to have no school nurse or have a high ratio of nurses to students (Berliner, 2009).

Lack of access to books

There is very clear evidence that children from high-poverty families have very little access to books at home, at school, and in their communities (Newman and Celano, 2001;

Duke, 2001; additional studies reviewed in Krashen, 2004). Studies also show when children have access to interesting and comprehensible reading material, they read (Krashen, 2001; 2004). And finally, when children read, they improve in all aspects of literacy, including vocabulary, grammar, spelling, reading and writing ability (McQuillan, 1998; Krashen, 2004). In fact, the evidence is strong that reading for pleasure, self-selected reading, is the major cause of advanced literacy development. Making sure that all children have access to books makes literacy development possible. Without it, literacy development is impossible.

Libraries

Libraries are often the only source of books and other reading material for children of poverty and they are a potent source: A number of studies confirm that providing access to books via libraries has a positive impact on reading development: The better the library (more books, presence of a credentialed librarian, better staffing), the higher the reading scores (e.g. Lance, 2004, no date; Krashen, 2011). Multivariate studies show that the positive impact of libraries can be as strong as the negative impact of poverty on reading achievement (Achterman, 2008; Krashen, Lee and McQuillan, 2012): In other words, a good library can offset the effect of poverty on literacy development.

Protect children from the effect of poverty

The implications are straight-forward: Until poverty is eliminated, until we have full employment at a living wage, we need to protect children from the effects of poverty. This means adequate food programs, improved health care, including providing more school nurses in high poverty schools, and, of course, more investment in libraries and librarians.

As readers of this journal know, library funding is not being increased: It is being cut (Kelley, 2010).

Funding

There is an obvious source of funding to support food programs, increased health care and libraries and librarians: Reduce testing. An unprecedented amount of testing has been planned to enforce the standards, far more than the amount done under No Child Left Behind and far more testing than has ever been seen on this planet (Krashen, 2012). The new tests will include the usual end of year tests, but in more subjects, and in more grade levels, as well as interim tests during the year and possibly pretests in the fall to measure improvement over the academic year.

All tests are to be delivered online. This means that all students must be connected to the internet, with up-to-date equipment. This will involve a staggering expense, and one that promises to increase as systems require updating, replacement, and even complete overhauls as progress is made in technology (Krashen and Ohanian, 2011), despite the fact that there is no evidence that standards will help, that new tests will help, or that online technology will help.

What is clear is that the testing and computer industry will profit, and taxpayers will pay the cost of setting up the infrastructure and the numerous adjustments and changes, as software and hardware regularly become obsolete.

(I need to point out that I am not presenting an argument against all standardized testing. My position is that we should only have standardized tests that actually do some good, that help with teaching and learning (Krashen, 2008). My position is No Unnecessary Testing (NUT).)

The Nature of the Standards

Despite the claim that the standards do not tell teachers how to teach, the nature of the language arts standards (especially Reading: Foundational Skills, Writing, and Language) make it hard for teachers to do anything but direct instruction.

First, the standards have accepted in full the conclusions of the National Reading Panel: “Materials that are aligned to the standards should provide explicit and systematic instruction and diagnostic support in concepts of print, phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, and fluency,” Coleman and Pimental, K-2 (page 2), as well as text structure (Standards p, 11, 42) and grammar (Appendix A, p. 31, 33). The language arts standards creators appear to be unaware of the extensive and deep criticism of the National Reading Panel's conclusions, and the unimpressive results of Reading First, which was based on these conclusions (Garan, 2002; Krashen, 2001b; 2005; 2009; Allington, 2002; Coles, 2003).

Second, the common core standards are so demanding that there will be little time for anything not directly linked to the standards in English language arts classes. Nor should there be, according to the Publisher's Criteria: “By underscoring what matters most in the standards, the criteria illustrate what shifts must take place in the next generation of curricula, including paring away elements that distract or are at odds with the Common Core State Standards.” (Coleman and Pimental, Publishers, Criteria, 3-12, page 1). As Ashley Hastings has pointed out, the common core is clearly more than a “core”: it is the entire apple.

Third, constant high-stakes testing insures direct teaching. As noted above, the standards will be enforced by a massive amount of testing, including “interim” testing through the academic year, to make sure students stay on their “educational trajectory.” (Arne US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's terminology.) Performance on these tests will have serious consequences for students, for teachers, and, we are told, even for schools of education: “We need comprehensive data systems that do three things, track students throughout their educational trajectory, . . . track students back to teachers...track teachers back to their schools of education.” (Duncan, 2009). The pressure to stick with what is in the standards will be extreme, and the force of constant testing will ensure that direct teaching methods will be used; educators will be concerned that there is no time for the target structures to emerge naturally; it may not happen in time for the next test.

In short, it is likely that language arts will consist entirely of direct instruction, with no

time for self-selected reading. (1) This is in conflict with the massive research that shows direct teaching of aspects of literacy produces very limited results and that most of our literacy and academic language competence is the result of reading, especially self-selected reading.

The common core and self-selected free reading

The common core disparages self-selected free reading. This quote from the common core presents its position on free reading:

“Students need opportunities to stretch their reading abilities but also to experience the satisfaction and pleasure of easy, fluent reading within them, both of which the Standards allow for.”

The quote appears in "Common Core Learning Standards, Appendix A" on page 11, a section with the title "Research supporting key elements of the standards."

The quote sends the message that hard reading requiring grim determination is the real stuff, the true way to "stretch reading abilities." Easier, more comprehensible reading that we actually enjoy is fine for a break, but only to experience some "satisfaction and pleasure."

Common Core's Appendix A does not cite any of the plentiful research that strongly indicates that reading that does not require struggle is the source of nearly all of our literacy competence, that it is the bridge between "conversational" language and "academic" language.

Appendix A, along with the rest of the Language Arts standards, has very little respect for the power of reading. It assumes that must be taught directly, even though many studies show that our grammatical competence is largely the result of reading, and barely acknowledges that vocabulary is the result of reading, maintaining that "direct instruction is ... essential"(p. 35). (Appendix A states that "at most between 5 and 15 percent of new words encountered upon first reading are retained" (p. 34), which is not what the studies show: Studies actually show that when you see a new word in print, you typically pick up a small part of its meaning, about 5-15%, and as you read more, you encounter the word more and gradually acquire the meaning. Appendix A does not point out that research, including studies cited in Appendix A, show that if people read enough, a 5-15% increase in acquisition of a new word's meaning each time it is encountered is more than enough to account for vocabulary growth.)

The common core standards do not allow "easy reading": Appendix A insists that independent reading must remain within a certain "complexity band," or slightly above (pp. 13-14). Nothing below the readers' current official level is allowed. The Publisher's Criteria agrees: The materials available for independent reading "need to include texts at students' own reading level as well as texts with complexity levels that will challenge and motivate students." (Publisher's Criteria, K-3, p. 4, see also p. 14). The common core is not aware that reading below one's current official level can be beneficial; reading level is

an average – "easy" texts often contain plenty of language above one's level; easy reading provides background knowledge; and easy reading can increase enthusiasm for more reading (Krashen, 2005).

Consequences for libraries

The common core movement will be a disaster for libraries and will have a negative impact on nearly every aspect of our educational system.

Like other major educational organizations, the library organizations have dedicated their efforts to finding a way to live with and adjust to the common core. In fact, a current argument for supporting libraries is that libraries and librarians can help students meet some of the requirements of the common core.

Given the serious problems with the common core (it is unsupported by research, it creates a rigid, test-prep version of schooling, and there is the real possibility that it will drain every spare dollar from the educational system), to paraphrase Alfie Kohn, we should not be "scrambling to comply with its provisions." Rather we should be trying to figure out the best ways to resist. (From Alfie Kohn "[Test Today, Privatize Tomorrow](#)," April 2004)

We should, at a minimum, demand that experiments and descriptive studies of groups of students be carried out so that the standards and measures can be evaluated. Instead, the common core is using nearly the entire student population of the USA as experimental subjects. When the new standards and technology fail to produce dramatic results, "experts" will blame teachers and call for tougher standards, and even more testing, requiring newer (and even more expensive) technology. And the profits for the .01% will be even greater.

Like other groups, librarians have argued that the common core is inevitable; the train has already left the station. Yes it has, but it has not yet arrived. The public has little idea of what the common core is, and no idea of what its drawbacks are. If the public were aware that the common core is, as Susan Ohanian has described it, "a radical untried curriculum overhaul and ... nonstop national testing," it would be halted immediately.

Works Cited

- Achterman, Douglas. *Haves, Halves, and Have-Nots: School Libraries and Student Achievement in California*. PhD dissertation, University of North Texas. 2008. <http://digital.library.unt.edu/permalink/meta-dc-9800:1>
- Allington, Richard. (Ed.) 2002. *Big Brother in the National Reading Curriculum: How Ideology Trumped Evidence*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann
- Berliner, David. 2009. *Poverty and Potential: Out-of-School Factors and School Success*.

- Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. <http://epicpolicy.org/publication/poverty-and-potential>
- Biddle, Bruce. 2001. "Poverty, ethnicity, and achievement in American schools." In Bruce Biddle (Ed.) *Social Class, Poverty, and Education*. New York: Routledge. pp.1-29.
- Carnoy, Martin and Rothstein, Richard. 2013, *What Do International Tests Really Show Us about U.S. Student Performance*. Washington DC: Economic Policy Institute. 2012. <http://www.epi.org/>).
- Coles, Gerald. 2003. *Reading the Naked Truth: Literacy, Legislation, and Lies*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Coles, Gerald. 2008/2009. "Hunger, academic success, and the hard bigotry of indifference. *Rethinking Schools* 23 (2). http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/23_02/hung232.shtml
- Cornell University, INSEAD, and WIPO. 2013. *The Global Innovation Index 2013: The Local Dynamics of Innovation*, Geneva, Ithaca, and Fontainebleau.
- Duke, Nell. 2000. "For the rich it's richer: Print experiences and environments offered to children in very low and very high-socioeconomic status first-grade classrooms." *American Educational Research Journal* 37, no 2: 441-478.
- Duncan, Greg and Brooks-Gunn, Jeanne. 2001. "Poverty, welfare reform, and children's achievement." In Bruce Biddle (Ed.) *Social Class, Poverty, and Education*. New York: Routledge. pp. 49-75.
- Garan, Elaine. 2002. *Resisting Reading Mandates*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Kelley, Michael. 2011. "LJ's Budget Survey: Bottoming Out?" *Library. Journal*. 136 no.1:28-31.
- Krashen, Stephen. 2001. "Do Teenagers Like to Read?" Yes! *Reading Today* 18 no.5: 16
- Krashen, Stephen. 2005. "Is In-School Free Reading Good for Children? Why the National Reading Panel Report is (Still) Wrong." *Phi Delta Kappan* 86 no.6: 444-447. (available at <http://www.sdkrashen.com/index.php?cat=2>)
- Krashen, S. 2008. A fundamental principle: No Unnecessary Testing (NUT). *The Colorado Communicator* 32 no. 1: 7
- Krashen, Stephen. 2011. "Protecting students against the effects of poverty: Libraries." *New England Reading Association Journal* 46 no.2: 17-21.
- Krashen, Stephen. 2012. "How Much Testing?" <http://dianeravitch.net/2012/07/25/stephen----krashen----how----much----testing/> and <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet>)

Krashen, Stephen, Lee, Syying and McQuillan, Jeff. 2012. "Is the Library Important? Multivariate Studies at the National and International Level." *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* 8 no. 1: 26-36.

Krashen, Stephen and Ohanian, Susan. 2011. "High Tech Testing on the Way: a 21st Century Boondoggle?" http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2011/04/high_tech_testing_on_the_way_a.html

Lance, Keith 2004. "The impact of school library media centers on academic achievement." In Carol Kuhlthau (Ed.), *School Library Media Annual*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited. p: 188-197.

Lance, Keith. *The Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement*. <http://www.lrs.org/impact.php>

Loveless, Tom. *How Well are American Students Learning? The 2010 Brown Center Report on American Education*. The Brown Foundation: Houston. 2011.

McQuillan, J. 1998. *The Literacy Crisis: False Claims and Real Solutions*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Publishing Company.

Nichols, Sharon, Glass, Gene, and Berliner, David. 2006. "High-stakes testing and student achievement: Does accountability increase student learning?" *Education Policy Archives* 14(1). <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v14n1/>.

Neuman, Susan and Celano, Donna. 2001. "Access to print in low-income and middle-income communities: An ecological study of four neighborhoods." *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36 no.1, 8-26.

Tienken, Christopher. 2011. "Common core standards: An example of data-less decision-making. *Journal of Scholarship and Practice*." *American Association of School Administrators [AASA]*, 7 no. 4: 3-18. <http://www.aasa.org/jsp.aspx>.

Salzman, Hal, and Lowell, B. Lindsay. 2007. *Into the Eye of the Storm: Assessing the Evidence on Science and Engineering Education, Quality, and Workforce Demand*. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1034801>

Salzman, Hal, and Lowell, B. Lindsay. 2008. "Making the grade.: *Nature* 453 no. 1: 28-30.

Salzman, Hal. 2012. "No shortage of qualified American STEM grads" (5/25/12) <http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/should-foreign-stem-graduates-get-green-cards/no-shortage-of-qualified-american-stem-grads>.

Teitelbaum, Michael. 2007. *Testimony before the Subcommittee on Technology and Innovation*. Committee on Science and Technology, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC, November 6, 2007

UNICEF *Measuring Child Poverty: New League Tables of Child Poverty in the World's Rich Countries*. Innocenti Report Card 10, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence. 2012.

Weismann, Jordan. 2013. "The Ph.D bust: America's awful market for young scientists—in 7 charts." *The Atlantic*, Feb. 20.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/02/the-phd-bust-americas-awful-market-for-young-scientists-in-7-charts/273339/>