How Common Core's Standards Have Begun to Damage the School Curriculum
Sandra Stotsky

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In the normal course of events, development of standards leads to development of school curricula. Tests are then developed because they must be based on what students have been taught (or expected to have been taught). The Common Core initiative chose to short-circuit this rational process—and I will discuss how it did so in my remarks. But let’s start where we now are.

In anticipation of common tests based on the Common Core standards in mathematics and English language arts, states that adopted these standards have begun to require teachers to address them in their classrooms because they think the process outlined in the first two sentences is taking place. However, just in trying to address the Common Core standards in English language arts, teachers are beginning to damage the academic nature of the school curriculum. How so?

First, the Common Core standards require English teachers to emphasize skills, not literary or cultural knowledge. They do so because the Common Core “college readiness” reading standards are empty skills, not academic standards. Figure 1 shows Common Core's ten College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading. As can be seen, they are devoid of literary and cultural content. They can be applied to The Three Little Pigs as well as to Moby-Dick, or to The Hunger Games as well as to Federalist #10. They are reading skills and by themselves do not point to any particular level of difficulty or quality.

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Figure 1. The Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading
In contrast, Figure 2 shows a grade-by-grade progression of a set of authentic academic standards. They were in the 2001 Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework. This particular progression addressed Myth, Traditional Narrative, and Classical Literature. As can be seen, they specify genre, formal and substantive content, and cultural/literary tradition.

Grades 5/6: Compare traditional literature from different cultures.
Grades 5/6: Identify common structures (magic helper, rule of three, transformation) and stylistic elements (hyperbole, refrain, simile) in traditional literature.
Grades 7/8: Identify conventions in epic tales (extended simile, the quest, the hero’s tasks, special weapons or clothing, helpers).
Grades 7/8: Identify and analyze similarities and differences in mythologies from different cultures (ideas of the afterlife, roles and characteristics of deities, types and purposes of myths).
Grades 9/10: Analyze the characters, structure, and themes of classical Greek drama and epic poetry.
Grades 11/12: Analyze the influence of mythic, traditional, or classical literature on later literature and film.

Figure 2. Massachusetts 2001 Standards for Myth, Traditional Narrative, and Classical Literature

The standards in the 2001 Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework were one (but not the only) factor that propelled Bay State students to first place on the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) tests for grades 4 and 8. Moreover, all students had improved their scores. As noted in a 2012 Fordham Institute analysis of the impact of high standards on student achievement, the 2009 NAEP reading tests showed that "students scoring in Massachusetts’s bottom 25 percent score higher than students in the bottom 25 percent of any other state in the nation. And students scoring in the top 25 percent perform better than students in the top 25 percent of any other state."

Why do authentic academic standards matter? Only such standards can guide development of a coherent and progressively demanding literature/reading curriculum in K-12, and only such a curriculum can prepare students adequately for a high school diploma, never mind authentic college coursework. Skills, processes, and strategies by themselves cannot propel intellectual development or serve as an intellectual framework for any K-12 curriculum.

Did the Common Core initiative not want authentic academic standards for English language arts and reading? There are at least four sources of evidence suggesting this was the case.

(1) The key people selected to write the ELA standards were not trained in English, reading, rhetoric, or composition and had never taught an English class at any educational level.

(2) No English/humanities scholars or high school English teachers were selected to be on the committee that developed ELA college readiness standards. Most committee members were test developers.
The USDE has requested a budget item to expand PISA’s testing in the USA. Why PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) and not TIMS (Trends in Mathematics and Science Study)? PISA will conveniently be able to serve as the international validation of the effects of Common Core’s standards and tests because it assesses skills used in daily life by the average adult and therefore uses much lower levels of academic content in its test items than TIMSS does. As one example, the content knowledge needed for passing the PISA math test for 15-year-olds has been judged by mathematicians to be at the grade 4 level. TIMSS assesses the math typically taught in a normal academic school curriculum for the grade level assessed. Its grade 8 test does not assess what is used in the daily life of the average adult. Moreover, the person in charge of benchmarking for PISA was on the Validation Committee. No one from TIMSS was.

Last but not least, skills, not content, are the focus of a large group of high technology companies, nicknamed P 21, that supported the Common Core initiative. Schools will need to purchase a lot of technology to implement tests based on a technology-driven curriculum.

Second, the Common Core standards require English teachers to teach "informational" texts for over 50% of their reading instructional time. This is not what English teachers are trained to teach. But that isn't the most serious problem with this requirement. It eliminates authentic literary study as the focus of the secondary school English class, makes construction of a coherent literature curriculum impossible, and allows use of a large number of seeming "informational" texts that are actually intended to promote attitude-formation.

As an example, here is what a grade 10 Iowa English teacher, described as the 2010 National Teacher of the Year, is teaching to satisfy this requirement, according to a March 14, 2012 article in Education Week.

"Her students are analyzing the rhetoric in books about computer geeks, fast food, teenage marketing, the working poor, chocolate-making, and diamond-mining. They were allowed to choose books about those real-world topics as part of a unit on truth. Students are also dissecting the sources, statistics, and anecdotes the authors use to make their arguments in books like Branded by Alissa Quart and Nickel and Dimed by Barbara Ehrenreich.”

For those unabandoned with these books, Branded is about marketing to teens, and Nickel and Dimed (a book with a grade 8 reading level) is an anti-capitalist tract disguised as a diary about the author's three-month experiences as a low-wage worker. And for those unabandoned with the National Teacher of the Year award, it is given annually by the very organization in charge of the Common Core initiative (the Council of Chief School State Officers). This English teacher, highlighted as a model to other English teachers, selected tendentious readings to address Common Core's requirement, with no questions raised by the Education Week reporter.

Third, the Common Core college readiness standards are designed to lead to a uniform, federally controlled, and intellectually undemanding curriculum. The two testing consortia that were funded by the USDE to develop the common tests were also expected to develop curriculum guidelines or models. After all, tests must be based on the kinds of materials students are expected to have studied. That is why
Common Core’s ELA “standards” were not internationally benchmarked. Skills cannot be benchmarked. Passing tests based on the Common Core college readiness standards in both English and mathematics will not mean that American high school students are capable of competing in a global economy. It will mean only that they are qualified to enroll in one of our non-selective community or state colleges, as Jason Zimba, the lead writer of the mathematics standards admitted at a March 2010 meeting of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

On what basis does this conclusion for English rest? Appendix B in the Common Core document is deceptive. It provides titles as exemplars of increasing levels of complexity through the grades because Common Core explicitly requires assigned reading to be increasingly more complex from grade to grade. But, what do the exemplars in grades 6-12 really amount to?

The novels for grades 9/10 in Common Core’s Appendix B are on average at about the fifth-grade readability level using a well-known readability index (informational texts are closer to an eighth-grade reading level), while the novels for grades 11/12 hover around the eighth-grade readability level on average. (A readability level refers to vocabulary and sentence difficulty.) Yes, they have mature themes, plots, and characters, but few titles have readability levels above grade 8 (as The Scarlet Letter and Pride and Prejudice do). How many reading passages on the common tests determining “college readiness” will be above a grade 8 readability level we do not yet know.

The current administration seeks to make all students college-ready, but the testing consortia have not indicated what readability level “college readiness” means. We’ll find out when we can apply a readability index with a grade-level placement score to all the reading passages selected for the common tests. I will be pleasantly surprised if the college readiness cut score reflects a grade 10, 11, or 12 readability level with respect to vocabulary and syntactic difficulty.

**What Could Congress Do?**

First, Congress can require something before the common tests are given. Congress can request an official report from the two mathematical societies in this country (the AMS and the MAA) on the level of difficulty of the mathematics tests produced by the two testing consortia for determining "college readiness." It can request the two major college literary organizations (the MLA and the ALSCW) to do the same for the passages and questions used on the high school reading tests.

Second, Congress can require something after the common tests are given. Congress can require the two testing consortia (funded by the USDE) to release all reading passages and questions based on them (as well as the mathematics examples and answers) on the high school tests used for determining college readiness after each test administration. In English, the public should be able to examine, in the name of transparency, the kinds of reading passages and writing prompts on the tests in order to determine their level of reading difficulty. In mathematics, the public should be able to examine the mathematics test items (and the questions based on them) on the tests in order to determine their quality, accuracy, and difficulty level. The public should also be able to learn on what basis the cut scores (passing scores) were set—and then be able to determine the level of difficulty of both the reading and the mathematics tests, after each test administration, once a cut score is in place.