The Common Core Standards: A Utilitarian Straitjacket for Education in America?

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What it means to educate well remains a source of tension.

The early twentieth-century Harvard professor Irving Babbitt once wrote that "[t]he firmness of the American's faith in the blessings of education is equaled only by the vagueness of his ideas as to the kind of education to which those blessings are annexed."[1] One century later our nation finds itself in a remarkably similar position. Virtually everyone would agree on the importance of education, and education done well, and yet the question of what education is—and what it means to educate well—remains a source of confusion and tension. The most recently proposed solution to America's educational woes is a set of national standards, known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS or the Standards). Those familiar with the Standards comprise a small minority of Americans, particularly in the states in which implementation has only begun. The authors of a *New York Times* opinion piece humorously quipped, "Americans know more about the events in Benghazi than they do about the Common Core"[2] (i.e., next to nothing). So what are these stan-

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[1] Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities* (Washington, DC: National Humanities Institute, 1986), 71.

[2] Andrew Hacker and Claudius Dreifus, "Who's Minding the Schools?" *New York Times*, June 8, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/09/opinion/sunday/the-common-core-whos-minding-the-schools.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed Mar. 19, 2014).

dards, and where did they come from? Will they improve education? What exactly will they be improving? Is the increasing hostility merited or simply the result of over-politicization?

This article will offer a description of the Common Core documents, the arguments of its proponents and critics, and a brief look at the results of Common Core in states where it has already been implemented. I will conclude by offering an assessment. The following is based upon an ongoing investigation of news stories, the findings of education think tanks, a survey of the history and philosophy of education, and interviews with scholars, public officials, and public school teachers. Before delving into the CCSS, however, a cursory history of the educational standards movement might prove helpful.

History of the Standards Movement

Harvard professor of history Niall Ferguson writes that if "the education revolution of the twentieth century was that basic education become available to most people in democracies. . . . The education revolution of the twenty-first century will be that good education will become available to an increasing proportion of children."[3] Former Secretary of Education William Bennett's 1983 report to the nation reflects this desire for good education for all. In his report, Bennett described "the promise first made on this continent, [that] all, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost."[4] Bennett went on to discuss the decline in the United States' "once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation."[5] Histories of Western education written as early as the 1950s and 1960s have indicated a similar decline in U.S. educational rank as other countries have become increasingly competitive and the world more globalized.[6] Bennett's report

[3] Niall Ferguson, *The Great Degeneration: How Institutions Decay and Economies Die* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013), 132.

[4] William Bennett, "A Nation at Risk," The National Commission on Excellence in Education, Apr. 1983, http://datacenter.spps.org/uploads/sotw_a_nation_at_risk_1983.pdf (accessed Jan. 25, 2014), 11.

[5] Ibid., 9.

[6] H. G. Good, *A History of American Education* (Toronto: Macmillan Company, 1956), 572.

was replete with statistics about high illiteracy rates and high school graduates who are ready "neither for college nor for work."[7] He insisted that, although the figures were disconcerting, these problems had solutions and that the solutions were attainable.[8] A key element Bennett put forward as part of the solution was "a coherent continuum of learning" to replace "an incoherent, outdated patchwork quilt."[9]

It would seem that the nation took Bennett's advice seriously, as district-level, standards-based education systems began to take shape as early as the late 1980s.[10] Eventually the states began to get involved with the standards movement in an effort to guide schools and districts toward educational "true North." Toward the turn of the century, most states were offering assistance to local school districts, unifying standards, and also providing financial backing for the districts. The Federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 solidified the shift toward state involvement. The legislation urged states to set statewide standards. But naturally there were discrepancies among the standards adopted by different states. Some standards were considerably more rigorous than others; each emphasized different subjects, and each state measured different results. With fifty states creating their own standards, this was inevitable. These discrepancies among state standards and their diagnostic corollaries created a situation that many educators found problematic: when students moved to another state, or even to another district, the standards, and therefore the curriculum, were different. Thus, some students were learning the same concepts twice, or worse, missing entire sections of vital educational material.

A plausible solution might be national standards. A student could move from Oregon to Maine and continue learning the same material in Maine that he had been studying in Oregon. The idea of unified standards by which all students in K-12 public schools across the country could be assessed was appealing to many. From their perspective, the states' diagnostic

[7] Bennett, 13.

[8] Ibid., 15.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Margaret Spellings, "A Nation Accountable," ED, http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/accountable/accountable.pdf, (accessed Mar. 15, 2014), 5.

results could be measured with greater accuracy and would allow for more comprehensive comparative analysis. What is more, it would give teachers and policy makers specific guidance on how best to formulate future education policy. The "incoherent, outdated patchwork" that Bennett had described could at last be replaced with a unified and consistent approach to education.

Adoption of Common Core by states a condition for receiving federal grant money.

In the spring of 2009, a joint collaboration began between the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. Governors and education experts came together and drafted what has become known as the Common Core State Standards. The next step was to get the states to implement the CCSS. Since the U.S. Constitution grants no enumerated power to the federal government authorizing it to *mandate* education policy to the states,[11] the U.S. Department of Education (ED) created an incentive system known as "Race to the Top" (RTTT), which was announced in July 2009, just months after the Common Core collaboration process began. Grant money would be made available to all states interested in bringing about educational reform. As a condition for receiving a share of the $4.35 billion incentive fund, the ED "asked" states to be willing to adopt national standards when they were issued.[12]

Less than a year later, in June of 2010, the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (CCSS-ELA) and the *Common Core State Standards for Mathematics* (CCSS-M) were published. Most states adopted those Standards within weeks of their release.[13]

In some ways, the Common Core is the natural next step in

[11] H. G. Good, *A History of American Education* (Toronto: Macmillan Company, 1956), 567.

[12] "Race to the Top Fund," ED, last modified Mar. 25, 2014, http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html (accessed Apr. 3, 2014). The particular phrase at the ED website is: "Through Race to the Top, we are asking States to advance reforms around four specific areas." The first of the four suggested reforms was, "Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy."

[13] "Standards in Your State," Common Core State Standards Initiative, http://www.corestandards.org/standards-in-your-state/ (accessed May 11, 2014).

the educational standards movement that began at the district level in the early1990s.[14] It has been four years since the documents' publication. Forty-three states have adopted the Standards and are at various stages in the implementation process. The states that have not adopted the Standards (or adopted but have since rescinded the initiative) are Nebraska, Texas, Minnesota, Alaska, Virginia, Indiana, and Oklahoma.

The Common Core Documents

CCSS-ELA. Let us begin with the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. The CCSS-ELA's introductory section provides a helpful primer on the standards themselves. The introduction describes the standards as "the culmination of an extended, broad-based effort . . . to help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school."[15] The introduction further describes the Standards as: (1) research- and evidence-based; (2) aligned with college and work expectations; (3) rigorous; and (4) internationally benchmarked.

Study of literature to be de-emphasized in favor of increased attention to "informational texts."

Other key design considerations described in the introduction include the focus on results rather than means, the grade-specific standards, and the emphasis on technology. This is followed by a breakdown of educational emphases, including the use of both "informational" and "literary" texts under CCSS, with "informational texts" defined as texts in social studies, science, and technical subjects and "literary texts" as literature. In accordance with the National Assessment of Education Progress, the CCSS gradually shifts the balance between literary texts and informational texts in favor of the latter from a 50-50 ratio in fourth grade to a 70-30 ratio in twelfth grade. The rationale behind this is "to be ready for college, workforce training and life in a technological society."[16]

Additionally, the CCSS-ELA introduction portrays a vision of the ideal Common Core student, who is to become college

[14] John Kendall, *Understanding the Common Core State Standards* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2011), 2.

[15] CCSS-ELA, 3.

[16] Ibid., 4.

and career ready in Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, and Language. This is perhaps the most explicitly stated list of values of the CCSS document. What can be distilled from this section are seven values that Common Core promotes: (1) free-thinking; (2) encyclopedic knowledge; (3) adaptability to tasks given; (4) critical thinking; (5) empiricism and logic; (6) the use of technology; and (7) multiculturalism.

CCSS – M. The *Common Core State Standards for Mathematics* (CCSS-M) document begins with a brief introduction that contains many elements similar to those featured in the CCSS-ELA's introduction. This introduction includes a brief note about the Math Standards' emphasis on "focus and coherence"; a section on how to read the standards; and a clarification of CCSS-M's scope (e.g., "Standards do not dictate curriculum or teaching methods" and "do not define intervention methods [for those] . . . who are well below or well above grade-level expectations"[17]); and it ends with a vision of the student who is college and career ready in the subject of math. Problem solving, abstract reasoning, dexterous utilization of appropriate tools, and a productive disposition are among the desired skills listed in this section.[18]

Arguments for Common Core

Various arguments have been put forward by Common Core proponents, most of which run along pragmatic lines. Proponents generally acknowledge that contemporary public education is riddled with significant problems, but these, it is argued, could be effectively addressed by the CCSS. Common arguments for the implementation of the Standards include the following:

(1) The problems that arise from students moving to different states and districts and missing significant blocks of material in the process would be resolved by the implementation of Common Core. A national Core would create a unity among states so that students could move and continue their educational journey unhindered by the moving process.[19]

(2) The United States has long been riddled with disparate

[17] CCSS-M, 4-5.
[18] Ibid., 6-8.
[19] Kendall, 5.

academic standards throughout the nation. It is no longer acceptable that some students should be held to higher standards than others.[20] The implementation of national standards will mean that students in Mississippi, for example, will be held to the same standards as students in Massachusetts. National standards will establish a rigorous curriculum across the board as well as a means of assessing student and teacher progress, of measuring and comparing results, and of providing useful data that will allow for more informed decisions with respect to education policy.

(3) The problems of declining achievement in U.S. education and increasing global competition will be remedied by national standards designed to insure that the rising generation is "college and career ready." Students will be provided with opportunities to learn practical skills. Moreover, the math and science standards established by the Core will enable American students to maintain competitiveness in the global market, especially regarding technological innovation.

(4) The coherent, content-rich set of standards provided by Common Core will facilitate significant gains in education for students. Moreover, proponents of CCSS argue that their proposal is the best available insofar as its opponents have not proposed an alternative vision for meeting the needs of the next generation of students.[21]

Arguments Against Common Core

Arguments in opposition to the Common Core have arisen from various sources and involve not only practical concerns but also social, legal, and constitutional considerations. Common arguments put forth by opponents include:

(1) The CCSS represents an unacceptable overreach by the federal government. With respect to both content and implementation, the Standards represent a violation of the federal form of government established by the U.S. Framers.

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[20] Ibid., 2.

[21] E.D. Hirsch, Jr., "Why I'm for the Common Core," in *Knowledge at the Core: Don Hirsch, Core Knowledge, and the Future of Common Core.* ed. Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Michael J. Petrilli (Washington, DC: Fordham Institute, 2014), 80-81. http://edexcellence.net/sites/default/files/publication/pdfs/EDHirsch-Report-Papers-Final.pdf (accessed April 1, 2014).

(2) Parents and local school districts will lose control over the education of their children.[22]

(3) The CCSS violates federal law that prohibits the federal government's control, direction, or supervision of educational curricula or instruction.[23]

(4) The CCSS is not a move toward equality, as proponents argue, but rather will exacerbate race and class tensions and deepen the divide between rich and poor, black and white. The experience of New York's implementation of CCSS is generally offered as evidence of such a claim.[24]

(5) CCSS examinations are often two or three times more expensive than current state diagnostic tools. Such increased costs, in addition to bureaucratic red tape, an emphasis on expensive technology, and plans to create a technological infrastructure,[25] insure that CCSS is an unfeasible, unsustainable program.[26]

(6) Though its creators promised that the Common Core's math standards would make high-school students "college and career ready" and strengthen the pipeline for careers in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), critics charge that, with the exception of a few standards in trigonometry, the math standards end after Algebra II and that Common Core includes no standards for precalculus. As a result, write R. James Milgram, professor of mathematics emeritus at Stanford Uni-

[22] Lindsey Burke, Brittany Corona, Jennifer A. Marshall, Rachel Sheffield, Sandra Stotsky, "Common Core National Standards and Tests: Empty Promises and Increased Federal Overreach Into Education," Heritage Foundation Special Report #141 on Education, Nov. 5, 2013, http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/10/common-core-national-standards-and-tests-empty-promises-and-increased-federal-overreach-into-education (accessed May 2, 2014).

[23] Diane Ravitch, "My Response to Alexander Nazaryan of Newsweek," May 2, 2014, http://dianeravitch.net/2014/05/02/my-reply-to-alexander-nazaryan-of-newsweek/ (accessed May 14, 2014).

[24] Diane Ravitch, "Charles Blow is Wrong About the Common Core," Aug. 22, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-ravitch/common-core-education_b_3794918.html (accessed Dec 20, 2013).

[25] Pioneer Institute, "Study Estimates the Cost of Transition to National Education Standards At 16 Billion," Feb. 22, 2012, http://pioneerinstitute.org/education/study-estimates-cost-of-transition-to-national-education-standards-at-16-billion/, Accessed May 2, 2014.

[26] Valerie Strauss, "8 Problems with the Common Core Standards," Aug. 8, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/eight-problems-with-common-core-standards/2012/08/21/821b300a-e4e7-11e1-8-f62-58260e3940a0_blog.html (accessed Jan. 28, 2014).

versity, and Sandra Stotsky, professor of education reform emerita at the University of Arkansas, high school graduates will not be prepared to pursue four-year degrees in STEM.[27]

A Unique Controversy

Opposition and support from both sides of the ideological divide.

The controversy surrounding Common Core is relatively unusual in that opponents and proponents cross the typical partisan and ideological divide characteristic of contemporary American politics. Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Education William Bennett supports the Standards, but so do the majority of Democrats in the state legislatures. [28] Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton recently toured together to discuss the issue of education, urging audiences to support, among other proposals, the CCSS.[29] The opposition is not exclusively constituted by Tea Partiers, as the news media typically suggest, or by "white suburban moms," as Secretary of Education Arne Duncan quipped last November.[30] The nation's largest teachers' union, the National Education Association, has voiced opposition to the CCSS in their current form, as have well-known scholars such as New York University's Diane Ravitch, Stanford University's James Milgram, and the University of Arkansas's Sandra Stotsky. Such individuals and groups oppose or support the Common Core for different reasons, but it is clear that support or opposition is not predictably black and white, or rather, blue and red. The standards controversy has led to atypical alliances on both sides of the debate.

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[27] R. James Milgram and Sandra Stotsky, "Lowering the Bar: How Common Core Math Fails to Prepare High School Students for STEM," Pioneer Institute White Paper No. 103, September 2013, 9-10, http://pioneerinstitute.org/download/lowering-the-bar-how-common-core-math-fails-to-prepare-high-school-students-for-stem/

[28] Chester E. Finn, Jr., "GOP and the Common Core," May 29, 2013, http://www.hoover.org/research/gop-and-common-core (accessed May 3, 2014).

[29] Dana Davidsen, "Bush and Clinton Together Again to Talk Education," *CNN* Mar. 24, 2014, http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2014/03/24/jeb-bush-hillary-clinton-together-again-to-talk-education/ (accessed Mar. 29, 2014).

[30] Rene Marsh and Mike M. Ahlers, "Education Sec. Duncan under fire for comment about 'white suburban moms," *CNN* Nov. 19, 2013, http://www.cnn.com/2013/11/18/politics/duncan-comment-controversy/ (accessed Apr. 28, 2014).

Considerations

Now that a history of the movement for U.S. educational standards has been provided, along with a description of the Common Core itself and some of the main arguments both for and against its implementation, let us move toward an assessment. But first, it is worth noting that both the proponents' hopes and the opponents' concerns are largely speculative at this juncture. We will not know for certain what its impact on U.S. education will be until full implementation occurs. This has been used both as an argument for[31] and against[32] implementation. Thus, I begin this section with the caveat that though these practical, political, and philosophical considerations are all informed by research, there are elements of the CCSS discussion that are necessarily speculative, as many states have yet to fully implement the Standards. It remains to be seen whether these concerns will be ameliorated or warranted.

The Practical

Let us begin in the educational trenches: the classrooms. After conducting interviews in teachers' lounges, classrooms, and coffee shops frequented by numerous K-12 educators and administrators, it was clear that most teachers had little idea what CCSS actually is or what it would entail. In many cases, their superiors did not know either and were unable to answer questions adequately. At one Florida high school, a number of the math and English language arts teachers declined requests to interview. According to another teacher at the same school, those who declined did so because they were embarrassed by the prospect of not having answers to basic questions. For the most part, those willing to speak about the CCSS confirmed their ignorance about the Standards. According to a number of teachers, the general ignorance about the CCSS spanned the spectrum in the chain of authority. From state to district to in-

[31] "In Defense of Common Core," *Los Angeles Times* (editorial), Mar. 23, 2014, http://www.latimes.com/news/custom/topofthetimes/opinion/la-ed-common-core-one20140313,0,1799302.story#axzz2z55nQDRt (accessed Apr. 29, 2014).

[32] Diane Ravitch, "The Biggest Fallacy of the Common Core Standards," *Huffington Post,* Aug. 24, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-ravitch/common-core-fallacy_b_3809159.html (accessed Apr. 16, 2014).

dividual school administrators to teachers, there was a general lack of understanding.

To be fair, the Standards have been more thoroughly implemented in Florida's elementary schools than in high schools. Like many states, it has wanted to avoid New York's mistake of implementing the CCSS too quickly.[33] Florida has begun intensive introduction of the CCSS at the early elementary grade levels over the past several years, but its full implementation is scheduled for next school year, which is less than two months away as this is written. The rollout process could be a strained one—and thus something to monitor.

The Political

For those who have followed the unfurling of the CCSS, many news stories cover the protests of the Tea Party and other conservative groups objecting to the Common Core on grounds that it is federal overreach. It is important here to define terms. If what is meant by federal overreach is an explicit violation of a power reserved by the Constitution to the states, then the CCSS cannot be categorized as such. The CCSS's adoption by states has not been effected by a direct federal-level fiat; rather, it has been implemented by means of a multi-million dollar incentives system. That is, the distribution of vast sums of taxpayers' money, collected from the people of all of the states, is made contingent on each state's willingness to comply with the federal government's goals. It is the carrot, not the stick. But the results are the same, and, at the very least, they violate the spirit of the Constitution's division of authority between the federal and state governments. Federal-state joint programs increase the power of the federal government as states become more dependent on federal funding and are expected to comply with federal "suggestions" on how the state is to use that money.[34] This transfer of power is implicit, rather than explicit, but it is a transfer nonetheless.

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[33] Valerie Strauss, "Common Core Test Gives Students No Time to Think," *Washington Post,* Apr. 7, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/04/07/common-core-test-gives-students-no-time-to-think-teacher/ (accessed Apr. 15, 2014).

[34] Thomas Sowell, *Knowledge and Decisions* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 324.

This trend within education has been noted by historians,[35] economists, and the ED.[36] This is what has happened with No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and Common Core, and many are concerned that state dependency on federal funds within education will only increase under Common Core. What this means is a continued shift in the locus of decision-making power away from localities and the people who are most directly affected.

The Standards are replete with scientific studies that seek to validate the rationale behind certain emphases (e.g., logical argumentation, critical thinking, the use of technology, and informational texts). Studies show, for instance, that there is a connection between critical thinking and the capacity to read complex texts.[37] What is important here is that the heavy emphasis on social scientific studies and abstract language often leaves teachers confused as to how to develop curricula. This has created a niche for big business test developers and textbook companies to fill the gap with educational and curriculum materials that are intended to align with CCSS. The Wheatley Portfolio, Pearson, McGraw-Hill, and other companies have already stepped in to develop curricula to accompany Common Core.[38]

Standards developed with little input from teachers.

Another consideration worth noting is that the decision-making processes have become rather insulated from public feedback throughout the process of implementation (e.g., CCSSI was designed behind closed doors, drafted by governors and educational professionals with little to no public school teacher input).[39] Unlike presidents and governors, policies cannot be voted out of educational office. Those who were part of the education standards movement back in the early 1990s understood that imposing new standards even at a district level would require overcoming multiple social, political, and mar-

[35] William Boyd, *The History of Western Education*, enlarged ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965), 451.

[36] Spellings, 3.

[37] CCSS –ELA Appendix A, 2.

[38] Wheatley Portfolio, *Common Core,* http://commoncore.org/maps/ (accessed Apr. 18, 2014).

[39] "Dr. Stotsky and Dr. Milgram: 'Why I Refused to Sign Off on Common Core Standards,'" (interview) Common Core: Education Without Representation, Jan. 10, 2014, https://whatiscommoncore.wordpress.com/tag/dr-sandra-stotsky/ (accessed Feb. 24, 2014).

keting obstacles. Implementing district-level standards would be difficult enough; how much more involved and complex would it be to implement a nationwide set of standards? With networks encompassing K-12 teachers, administrators, colleges, politicians, bureaucrats, textbook companies, and testing companies, we are looking at a massive and increasingly homogenized piece of social machinery that could prove not only detrimental to education, but utterly resistant to public accountability.

A gargantuan social-engineering endeavor.

Thirty years after his 1931 novel *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley revisited his dystopia, writing a series of essays in which he offers reflections on the trajectory of Western society. In an essay on the over-organization of society, he poses the famous line from the Roman poet Juvenal: *quis custodiet ipsos custodes*?—"who will mount guard over our guardians," or, the more pertinent question in Huxley's mind: "who will engineer the engineers?"[40] For Huxley, to ignore the fact that no one would be able to monitor the social engineers was "a bland denial that they need any supervision."[41] The point here is that Common Core is not simply another inconsequential experiment in education. Its adoption marks a commitment to what is becoming a gargantuan social-engineering endeavor—one that has yet to prove its merit. Even if it were to achieve its advocates' vision of college and career ready students, the public still would be left to wonder about the nature of the educational engineers' work. If, as seems at least equally probable, it proves unsuccessful, one worries that it will be all but impossible to remove the infrastructure that has already been crafted to allow for Common Core's implementation. Both the bureaucratic and technological pathways that need to be cleared to make this endeavor possible are far from minor ventures.[42]

Some writers have gone so far as to say that Common Core is an attempt to brainwash the next generation. While

[40] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World: And, Brave New World Revisited* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 259-60.

[41] Ibid., 260.

[42] Stephen Sawchuk, "Vision, Reality Collide in Common Core Tests," *Education Week,* Apr. 21, 2014, http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/04/23/29cc-promises.h33.html (accessed Apr 25, 2014).

it is impossible to judge the intentions of the people involved in the CCSS's creation and implementation, the mechanisms and educational structures are now in place that would make brainwashing possible. One education expert reminds us of the words of Plato, who asserted that whoever owns the children owns the future.[43] Certainly, the conditions will have been created that would make such indoctrination possible on a previously unmatched scale.

Standards would make possible indoctrination on previously unmatched scale.

The Philosophical

Like many other policies in education (e.g., Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 or the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), Common Core has been framed in terms of its hoped-for outcomes instead of the mechanisms involved in implementation. Certainly, everyone wants schools to improve, and no one wants to leave a child behind, though aptitudes and abilities differ greatly from one child to the next. But what is missing from the framing of these discussions? In the case of Common Core, the rhetoric often skips over questions of implementation, feasibility, and sustainability, jumping to CCSS's promise to make students "college and career ready" and able to succeed in a "competitive global economy." Again, it remains to be seen whether or not these ideals will be realized. This could be yet another case in which, as economist Thomas Sowell puts it, "lofty goals distract attention from actual consequences."[44] Indeed, the history of U.S. education initiatives over the past half century would suggest that this concern is far from outlandish.[45]

But, assuming for the sake of argument that the Common Core standards were to achieve their described goal—the achievement of college and career ready students who are prepared for a globally competitive market—would that in itself be sufficient to justify the program's existence nationwide? This question raises an issue that has received little attention from proponents of the CCSS, yet which is central to

[43] Plato, *The Republic*, 2d ed., trans. H. D. P. Lee (London: Penguin, 2007), 1.

[44] Sowell, *Knowledge and Decisions*, x.

[45] Myron Lieberman, *Public Education: An Autopsy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 228.

evaluating Common Core and its motivating values: "what is education?" In a culture that is anxious to find politically and economically efficient solutions to problems (or 'crises') and where the ideas most likely to receive media attention consist of pithy catchphrases and sound bites, serious reflection on the meaning of education rarely occurs in the public sphere.[46] The philosophical aspects of policy require deeper reflection than allowed by sloganeering and fifteen-second sound bites. Yet the philosophical usually receives short shrift in a superficial culture whose members often must choose "between an unduly brief exposition and no exposition at all."[47] Such considerations certainly hold true within the realm of education policy.

Before addressing the question of what should be *done* about education, it is necessary to pose the more fundamental questions—what is education and why is it important? There has been much ado concerning the "how" of education but the 'what' and the 'why' have not been adequately addressed. As Irving Babbitt observed early in the last century: "The task of organizing and operating a huge and complex educational machinery has left us scant leisure for calm reflection. We are likely, however, to be arrested from the very outset of any attempt to clarify our notions about education . . . by the need of accurate definition."[48] Let us then examine the definition of education informing the Common Core.

Despite the CCSS writers' attempt to project an appearance of value-neutrality and objectivity through ubiquitous references to documentation and research, the standards they formulated inevitably rest upon value judgments. As will be seen, the values expressed in the documents imply a definition of education that is unblushingly utilitarian.[49]

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[46] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 113.

[47] Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited,* 235.

[48] Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 72.

[49] In this portion of the paper, I will use the terms "pragmatism" and "utilitarianism" fairly interchangeably. While the former is an epistemological category and the latter an ethical one, both are, at heart, consequentialist. Furthermore there is significant overlap within the realms of truth and ethics. Given this philosophical "common core," I considered the conflation warranted for the purposes of this section.

The CCSS-ELA Introduction explicitly enumerates, for example, the qualities of the student who is to be considered "college and career ready." Such a student is a freethinker, possesses encyclopedic knowledge, comprehends complexity, thinks critically, utilizes modern technologies, employs logical and empirical criteria for assessing problems, and works well in collaboration with "diverse partners."[50] These desired attributes reflect a largely modernistic, pragmatic paradigm interlaced with traces of postmodernism (e.g., the requirement of multiculturalism) and are presented as qualities that will assure college and career readiness. Education is presented as, preeminently, that which prepares a student to make a living after K-12. Contrary to more traditional understandings of the meaning and purposes of education, the paradigm embodied in Common Core does not regard learning as primarily a laudable end-in-itself but, rather, as mere means to a largely utilitarian end, namely, a vocation or profession.

Education viewed as mere means to a largely utilitarian end.

Further reflecting the Common Core's utilitarian assumptions, the CCSS-ELA document emphasizes that the standards are "research and evidence based,"[51] seemingly taking for granted that empirical data alone could provide sufficient warrant for the Common Core's one-size-fits-all educational goals and methods. Numerous scholars, however, are skeptical of the value of social-scientific research in this ahistorical context. Thomas Sowell has argued, for example, that science and scientific language are frequently utilized as "a verbal garnish for a set of ideological fashions."[52] Similarly, Aldous Huxley describes "science" in in his essay "Education for Freedom" as "that wonderfully convenient personification of the opinions, at a given date, of Professors X, Y, and Z."[53] Though Huxley's description is clearly sardonic, the methodology underlying the Standards—in particular, the prolific use of current statistics and studies to bolster their credibility—seems to corroborate his position.

In keeping with the ostensibly empirical basis of the Common Core curriculum, its creators describe their product as

[50] CCSS-ELA, 9.

[51] Ibid., 3.

[52] Sowell, *Inside American Education: The Decline, the Deception, the Dogmas* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 62.

[53] In Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited*, 322.

Controversial assumption that purposes of education should be subject to sweeping changes in response to latest trends.

a "living document," subject to change "based upon further evidence."[54] The implicit assumption is that the purposes and content of education should be subject to sweeping changes in response to the latest cultural, social, and political trends. Such a view may sound appealing to those who perceive versatility as a means of keeping education "relevant," but others have warned against the "reconstruction of [educational] ends" to fit the times.[55] Philosopher and educator Jacques Maritain asserts that "the pragmatist [utilitarian] theory can only subordinate and enslave education to the trends which may develop in collective life and society."[56] He continues, "in the final analysis, the aims newly arising . . . will only be determined by the precarious factors of the environment to be controlled and the values made at each moment predominant by given social conditions or tendencies or by the state."[57] Though written over seventy years ago, during the Second World War, Maritain's description of the relativist-utilitarian paradigm prevailing in modern Western culture and its effect on education bears striking resemblance to the shifts within the current educational landscape under the CCSS.

A major concern of Maritain and similarly minded thinkers: if recent scientific findings are to be the determinants of educational policies and directives, what place will history and the voices of past generations have in such a paradigm? If policies are based primarily upon contemporary data and statistics and the latest pedagogical fads, the experience of the past is easily dismissed as "irrelevant" to the needs of the present and future. The British historian Niall Ferguson writes, for example, that a major impetus for his 2011 book *Civilization: The West and the Rest* was a concern that "people currently living were paying insufficient attention to the dead."[58] Noting that the world's current population comprises a mere seven percent of all the people who have ever

[54] CCSS – ELA, 3. In this regard, as in others, it resembles the Progressive notion of the "Living Constitution."

[55] Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads,* The Terry Lectures (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 17.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., 17-18.

[58] Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), xviii.

lived, Ferguson writes that in ignoring history "we ignore the accumulated experience of such a huge majority of mankind at our peril."[59] Yet the Common Core documents make clear that, in the eyes of its creators and proponents, transmitting the intellectual and cultural inheritance of the past to the new generations ranks hardly at all among possible purposes of education, and exponentially lower than the imparting of practical "skills" needed, in their view, for success in college and the workplace.

Transmission of intellectual and cultural inheritance accorded little importance.

Addressing the same issue in a 1988 essay, political philosopher Claes Ryn expresses an opposite view. "There is today," writes Ryn, "much talk of the need for excellence in education. These discussions are usually hampered by confusion regarding the aim of education. By what standard is excellence to be judged, and how is the goal to be achieved? Educators need answers to these questions that are put in the form of specific curricular recommendations, but tenable proposals presuppose a philosophy of knowledge and education. The purpose here is to address that primary need. . . . The thesis to be argued is that the central aim of education is to strengthen our sense of reality and that the humanities must form the core of this effort."[60]

In support of that thesis, Ryn notes that conceptual thought rests on pre-rational, intuitive experience and that intuition in turn is related to an underlying orientation of will. Thus, for scholarship to be able "to formulate realistic ideas, it must build upon realistic intuition, and such intuition presupposes a will that does not allow escape from uncomfortable parts of reality."[61] Long experience has shown that some ways of acting bring individual and communal happiness in their wake, while other ways are inherently incompatible with a deeper harmony and satisfaction. But because the former ways of living require the sometimes difficult development of habits of inner self-control, individuals and sometimes whole societies seek to evade the truths of their existence as human beings. A deepened sense of reality is ultimately dependent, therefore, on an ethical reorientation of will. Yet, because the imagination, ow-

[59] Ibid., xix.

[60] Claes G. Ryn, "The Humanities and Moral Reality," *Educating for Virtue*, ed. Joseph Baldacchino (Washington, D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1988), 13.

[61] Ibid., 18.

ing to its concreteness, immediacy, and magnetism, has great power to influence the will, for good or evil, it follows, writes Ryn, that representatives of the arts and humanities potentially have great influence as well. "They can help reconstitute the imagination of Western man and through the imagination his will. They may do so by exposing the rising generation to artistic masterpieces that can bring about a cathartic cleansing of the emotions. The social sciences, too, must be highly sensitive to the role of the imagination." The reason, Ryn continues, is that our perception of society, politics, and reality in general "is most fundamentally an intuitive vision. Beneath the various ideologies and political theories lie intuitive habits that must be scrutinized before they can be adequately assessed or refuted.

"Today's Western society sorely needs . . . . scholars, writers and teachers who are capable of analyzing works of culture in the context of life as a whole. Above all, it needs people who can assess the quality of these works in relation to the highest values known to mankind."[62]

"In the effort to recover a sense of the meaning of life," according to Ryn,

> the great examples of goodness, truth and beauty in the Western heritage are indispensable. And yet it is not sufficient to imitate even the noblest achievements of the past. In each historical period, keeping the great traditions alive and relevant requires work of creative adaptation and development. Art in particular is forever discovering new ways. This is the case even though the truly great works of art can be seen as variations on a theme. The classical tradition in education and culture generally used to make possible a comparative analysis of the best potential ways of life that had been wrought by civilization.[63]

Over the centuries, the continuing assessment and ranking by scholars and educators of the leading alternatives provided a standard of universal good that lies beyond human theories and dogmas: a general direction for the enhancement of human existence. But, thanks in large part to adverse trends in educational theory and practice, society today lacks the benefit of such guidance; it is largely disoriented and rudderless. "For

[62] Ibid., 31.
[63] Ibid., 32.

many today," Ryn concludes, "comparisons of competing possibilities of life are restricted, because of the withering of tradition, to the preferences of the hour." And with such a dearth of historical experience to serve as the basis of judgment, the millions upon millions who have been affected find themselves imaginatively and intellectually short-changed, lacking in discernment and a sense of proportion, and bereft of the depth of intuitive insight without which it is impossible to distinguish what is important from what is marginal and trivial.[64]

Thanks to adverse trends in education, society today is largely disoriented and rudderless.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in light of the foregoing analyses, the Common Core standards themselves give evidence of having been created by persons incapable of distinguishing what is important from what is marginal and trivial. Thus, the standards devote page after page of obtuse jargon-laden sentences to describing goals the meaning and import of which should be virtually self-evident. One professor, for example, has called attention to Standard RL.2.10 from the CCSS-ELA, which is typical of the structure and language of the majority of the standards: "By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories and poetry, in grades 2-3 complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range."[65] The scholar then translated this same standard into layman's terms: "Students in second grade should read and understand more difficult books at the end of the year than at the beginning. They may need help, though."[66]

Meantime, other aspects of the program that are fraught with significance, so much so that they should have been considered in great detail, were simply ignored. For example, that the primary purpose of education in every case should be skill acquisition for college and career is presented as a timeless truism that needs no further justification. The CCSS's narrowly utilitarian framework is not a subject of discussion anywhere in the documents. It is presented as an axiom that requires no validation. The validity of mandating a predominantly utilitarian education for all students is by no means self-evident, however, and, indeed, is strongly rejected by many philoso-

[64] Ibid., 26-27, 32.

[65] CCSS-ELA, 11.

[66] Terrence O. Moore, *The Story-Killers: A Common-Sense Case Against the Common Core* (n.p.: Terrence O. Moore, 2013), 68.

A dramatic break with classical Western view of education.

phers and educational scholars. One would never know from the CCSS literature that its narrowly pragmatic/utilitarian paradigm represents a dramatic break with the classical Western view of education extending into antiquity. For Plato, Aristotle, and their Western intellectual descendants, the goal of education was to elicit and develop wisdom, virtue, and sound character,[67] to inform the complete, well-rounded person, *totus, teres atque rotundus.*[68]

It was this purpose that had inspired the founding of the great medieval universities of Europe, including Oxford and Cambridge in England, as well as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and virtually every other American college launched prior to about a century ago. The same purposes, albeit at a more elementary level, were pursued in America's primary and secondary schools from colonial times through much of the nineteenth century. But with the triumph of the natural sciences and rising prestige of technological achievements, there arose near the turn of the twentieth century a rival emphasis in American education. Instead of the pursuit of wisdom and virtue, the new goal was on teaching methods for acquiring power and wealth.

Failure of education to nourish self-restraint in deference to a higher standard potentially devastating.

In his 1908 book on education *Literature and the American College*, the Harvard professor Irving Babbitt decried this shift away from emphasizing the classical disciplines in favor of training for utilitarian success in gratifying appetites: a tendency Babbitt associated in part with the influence of the seventeenth-century thinker Francis Bacon.[69] Citing Emerson, who wrote that "There are two laws discrete / Not reconciled,— / Law for man, and law for thing," Babbitt warned that the failure in education adequately to distinguish between nature and human nature and the laws appropriate to each could prove devastating. In keeping with the classical tradition, what Babbitt identified as the "law for man" or "human law" was prominently a principle of individual self-restraint—an "inner check"—a deference to a higher standard of human

[67] Russell Kirk, "Babbitt and the Ethical Purpose of Literary Studies," Introduction to Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 10.

[68] Babbitt, *Literature and the American College*, 80.

[69] See ibid., Chapter 2, "Two Types of Humanitarians: Bacon and Rousseau."

aspiration. For Babbitt, as for Edmund Burke, the standard of universal good is in large part the product of ethical will and imagination. With Burke, Babbitt held that "much of the wisdom of life consists in an imaginative assumption of the experience of the past in such fashion as to bring it to bear as a living force upon the present. The very model that one looks up to and imitates is an imaginative creation. A man's imagination may realize in his ancestors a standard of virtue and wisdom beyond the vulgar practice of the hour; so that he may be enabled to rise with the example to whose imitation he has aspired."[70] Babbitt further agreed with Burke that, ultimately, it is the shared deference to this higher standard by individual men and women that brings them together in genuine community. With community itself hanging in the balance, therefore, Babbitt called upon educators to remain faithful to their traditional role as transmitters and nurturers of civilization. The rank or worth of academic studies, he wrote, "will finally be determined, not by the number of intellectual foot pounds they involve, but by the nearness or remoteness of these studies to man, the boundaries of whose being by no means coincide with those of physical nature:—

"'Man hath all which nature hath, but more,
And in that *more* lie all his hopes of good.'"[71]

"What is wanted," Babbitt emphasized, "is not training for service and training for power, but training for wisdom and training for character."[72]

"What is wanted is not training for service . . . and power, but . . . for wisdom . . . and character."

But the popular new tendency within education in Babbitt's time was precisely in the opposite direction: to give ever more emphasis to the forces of nature that man holds in common with the lower forms, rather than to the '*more*' that makes him human. Should that tendency continue, Babbitt cautioned, social institutions and standards of behavior would disintegrate, and men and women would be "disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality."[73]

Babbitt's warning was ignored. Though pockets of traditional learning continued to exist—in private and parochial

[70] Ibid., 127-28.

[71] Ibid., 123; the quotation is from Matthew Arnold, "To an Independent Preacher," *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems* (1849).

[72] Ibid., 108.

[73] Ibid., 121; Babbitt was here quoting Edmund Burke.

schools primarily but in some public school districts as well—the general direction of American education throughout the twentieth century was toward increasing concentration on practical training, empiricism, and the manipulation of economic incentives and disincentives as the keys to individual and collective well-being. And true to Babbitt's prediction, American society has indeed entered a period of long-term decline.

Viewing the moral and social decay foreseen by Babbitt through the lense of contemporary social science, some scholars maintain that at the root of contemporary social issues in general and education in particular is a decline in "social capital." In an essay of the same name, Francis Fukuyama describes social capital as "an instantiated set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permit them to cooperate with one another."[74] It is the social glue that holds society together, as well as the "lubricant that makes any group or organization run more efficiently."[75] Virtues such as trustworthiness, reciprocity, and stability lead to increases in social capital. The presence of social capital is difficult to quantify numerically, but its absence within a culture is painfully noticeable. As such fundamental social requirements as truth-telling, meeting obligations, and reciprocity begin to disappear, so does social capital. The decline in social capital leads to social dysfunction. In *Public Education: An Autopsy*, Myron Lieberman describes "a decline in children's social capital," identifying nearly a dozen factors suffering serious erosion since the 1950s: a growing absence of fathers in the home; weakening ties and interdependence between children and parents; soaring divorce rates; decline in religious observance; the growing influence of television and technology in general; and the shift from families to peer groups as the primary source of developing values.[76] Since, plainly, a child's education does not occur in isolation from social context, the

[74] Francis Fukuyama, "Social Capital," in *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress,* ed. Samuel P. Huntington and Lawrence E. Harrison (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 98.

[75] Ibid., 98.

[76] Myron Lieberman, *Public Education: An Autopsy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 25-29.

improvement of education would seem contingent on addressing deeper social and moral issues.

As Robert Nisbet and others have observed, government today performs many of the functions once provided by the family, church, and other institutions. In assuming, not to say usurping, the functions historically provided by such institutions, the state has in large measure deprived them of the moral and cultural authority that previously enabled them to shape the rising generation and integrate its members into the culture.[77] The increasingly pervasive role of government in American society raises the question of whether its programs can regenerate the shared deference to universal standards that no longer is fostered by the now increasingly marginalized traditional institutions.

Utilitarian thrust of American education has brought social disintegration.

The Common Core Standards and other initiatives in educational policy (e.g., universal pre-Kindergarten, daycare, subsidized breakfasts and lunches) seem to assume an affirmative answer, i.e., that government can indeed compensate for the growing deficit in American social capital. Yet exploding numbers of single-parent households; an epidemic of urban violence; growing racial, partisan, and ideological polarization; spiking financial inequality; a declining middle class; and other evidence of societal decomposition have led many to conclude that the predominantly utilitarian thrust of American educational policy has been counterproductive and that more of the same will only make conditions worse.

One result has been the emergence in recent years of a rapidly growing movement in favor of a renewal of classical education, with ends very similar to those championed by Babbitt and Ryn above. In an article for CNN.com, former *Washington Times* culture page editor Julia Duin explains that "[c]lassical schools are less concerned about whether students can handle iPads than if they grasp Plato. They generally aim to cultivate wisdom and virtue through teaching students Latin, exposing them to great books of Western civilization and focusing on appreciation of 'truth, goodness and beauty.'" She adds that students are typically held to strict behavioral standards and given examples of characters from history to emulate, ranging from the Roman nobleman Cincinnatus to St. Augustine of

[77] Ibid., 27.

Hippo.[78]

One indication of the classical education movement's popularity is that *The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home*, a book by Susan Wise Bauer published in 1999, has sold more than a half-million copies. In addition, there are more than 55,000 members of the forums at welltrainedmind.com, a site founded by Bauer.[79]

More to classical education than unimaginative repetition of old texts.

Like Babbitt and Ryn, Bauer emphasizes that genuinely classical education consists of more than unimaginative repetition of old texts. "As the movement has grown, there's been an increasing tendency to define a classical education as 'This is what Plato or Aristotle would have recognized,'" she says. "But there are whole new fields of knowledge since then. We wouldn't reproduce their view of women, which was that they shouldn't get an education. What we're really doing now is neo-classical education."[80]

While many of the new classical schools were launched by evangelical Protestants beginning in the early 1990s, the movement more recently has attracted many Catholic educators. In 2010 in the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., St. Jerome's, a typical pre-Kindergarten-through-eighth-grade parochial school in Hyattsville, Maryland, was debt-ridden and in danger of closing. With the support of Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl, the school adopted a detailed education plan on the classical model. As reported in the *Washington Post Magazine*, the plan "included curricula for each grade and subject, lists of suggested books, and criteria that each detail of the school's life would have to satisfy. Examples: Is it beautiful? Are we doing this because it's inherently good or as a means to an end? If the latter, what end? Does it encourage reverence for the mystery of God and the splendor of His creation? Does it encourage the student to desire truth, to understand virtues and to cultivate these within him (or her) self?"[81]

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[78] Julia Duin, "Classical Schools Put Plato over iPad," CNN.com, http://schoolsofthought.blogs.cnn.com/2013/06/21/classical-schools-put-plato-over-ipad/.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Julia Duin, "Embracing a Classical Education," *The Washington Post Magazine*, April 10, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/embracing-a-classical-education/2011/03/09/AFj6amwC_story.html.

"When we started developing a new curriculum, we were trying to save our school," said Mary Pat Donoghue, St. Jerome's principal. "But now, in an era of growing malaise and cynicism, we're equipping young minds and hearts to save civilization itself." Catholic schools in Colorado, Kentucky, and New York state have adopted the St. Jerome's curriculum, and the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education has been established to encourage the spread of Catholic classical education throughout the nation.[82]

The movement is also spreading to public charter schools, including the Ridgeview Classical Schools, a K-through-twelve institution administered by the Poudre School District in Fort Collins, Colorado, and the Great Heart Academies, a network of sixteen public charter schools in the state of Arizona.

As summarized above, however, the Common Core curriculum, with its narrowly utilitarian emphasis, runs directly counter to the spirit animating the spreading movement in favor of classical education. With their mandatory emphasis on "informational reading" at the expense of classical literature (weighted 70 percent to 30 percent in favor of the former at the twelfth-grade level), the Common Core's English and Language Arts standards will allow high school English teachers time to consider only excerpts of novels, plays, or epic poems if they want students to read more than very short stories and poems.[83] And what will high-school seniors be reading instead of Shakespeare? A volume published in 2011 by the National Council of Teachers of English on how English teachers might implement Common Core's standards offers as examples of informational or nonfiction texts selections on computer geeks, fast food, teenage marketing, and the working poor.[84] Such educational malpractice would be harmful enough if it were imposed on only the traditional public schools within the states that adopt the controversial standards. But the effects are likely to extend even further. Not only are major textbook publishers moving to align their materials with the Common Core standards, but key standardized tests, including col-

[82] Duin, "Classical Schools."

[83] Sandra Stotsky, "Common Core Standards' Devastating Impact on Literary Study and Analytical Thinking," Heritage Foundation Issue Brief No. 3800, December 11, 2012.

[84] Ibid.

lege entrance exams, are expected to be geared towthe CCSS. Hence the effects of the one-size-fits-all Common Core standards may extend not only to the public schools of those states that adopt them but also to private institutions—and even to home-schoolers—nationwide.

Instead of Shakespeare, selections on computer geeks, fast food, teenage marketing, and the working poor.

Conclusion

Despite the news stories and politics swirling around the subject of Common Core, there has been surprisingly little discussion of its philosophical underpinnings and presuppositions. In the arena of public education, contemporary culture marches, perhaps unknowingly, to the drums of educational utilitarianism and the Baconian vision of social improvement via scientific progress. As long as the educational paradigm of the United States remains within the long shadows cast by Bacon and the pragmatists, education will continue to be regarded as a means to certain narrowly circumscribed ends. Initiatives such as Common Core will continue to be proposed as panaceas to educational difficulties of any shape and form. The problems with American education, however, may not be amenable to solution by policies in this mold but may require deeper reflection regarding the very nature and purpose of the educational process and social existence more generally.

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