

# Why I'm for the Common Core

by E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

When I'm asked if I support the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS), I give an emphatic "yes." They constitute the first multi-state plan to give substance and coherence to what is taught in the public schools. They encourage the systematic development of knowledge in K–5. They break the craven silence about the critical importance of specific content in the early grades. They offer an example (the human body) of how knowledge ought to be built systematically across grades. They state,

*By reading texts in history/social studies, science, and other disciplines, students build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that will also give them the background to be better readers in all content areas. Students can only gain this foundation when the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades.*

That principle of building coherent, cumulative content animates the most effective school systems in the world, and for good reason: The systematic development of student knowledge from the earliest grades in history, literature, science, and the arts is essential to high verbal ability—which in turn is the key to social mobility and college readiness.

The words quoted above don't define the specific historical, scientific, and other knowledge that is required for mature literacy. (If they did, no state would have adopted the CCSS, because specific content remains a local—or teacher—prerogative in the U.S.) But those words are an impetus to a brave and insightful governor or state superintendent to get down to brass tacks. In early schooling, progress cannot be made without coherence and specificity. Little can come from today's incorrect but widespread assumption that critical-thinking or reading-comprehension skills can be gained without a specific, systematic buildup of knowledge.

Nobody can know whether the Common Core standards will end in triumph or tragedy. The certitudes and fierce warrior emotions that beset this topic, however, are misplaced. It's said that truth is the first casualty in a war. Subtlety has been the first casualty in this one. Whether the CCSS improve American education will depend on what the states actually do about developing rich content knowledge "within and across grades" as required. Doing so will take, at minimum, the courage to withstand the gripe-patrols that will complain about the inclusion of, say, Egypt in the second grade. But who can be sure such courage won't be forthcoming from a forceful governor or superintendent once the absolute need for specific, cumulative content is understood? Niels Bohr said, "Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future." It will take

just one state to have the guts to form a specific curriculum. Big, unmistakable gains will result, and those results will influence others and the die will be cast. That will be the triumph. The tragedy will be the status quo, which is all the opponents of the CCSS currently have to offer.

The Bohr principle ought to be the watchword in this debate. Those who confidently predict failure haven't any more knowledge about what will really happen than I do.

But this can be said with confidence: Unless the alternative educational plans of the critics (where are they?) also require coherent content knowledge within and across grades, their schemes are not likely to be as effective as the CCSS. If critics do support those key principles of specificity and coherence—well, then, why not just support this daring effort that has been miraculously adopted by multiple states and correct whatever defects you see in the course of its actual implementation?

### **Common Core Can Reduce Teacher Bashing**

For many years, my son Ted has been principal of the elementary grades of a K–12 public charter school in Massachusetts. It uses the *Core Knowledge Sequence* (a grade-by-grade outline of essential content) as a primary tool for developing its curriculum. His school ranks in the top-performing group of schools in the nation's top-performing state. Needless to say, the school has long followed the rightly admired Massachusetts standards. Indeed, the Massachusetts standards are so good that some of the most vocal opponents of CCSS are claiming that the Common Core State Standards will represent a watering down. But Ted's school justifies a very different inference. His Core Knowledge–based curriculum is consistent with *both* the Massachusetts standards *and* the CCSS. How so? It's because both sets of standards set rigorous goals but don't specify content for each grade level. In the course of actual implementation, therefore, a school can simultaneously fulfill both the Massachusetts standards and the CCSS, as Ted's school so effectively does.

This fall, Ted's daughter, Cleo, will be teaching in a school in the Bronx, assigned to teach the American Revolution to seventh-grade public school students. Though hugely competent, she panicked and called me: "O my gosh. Granddad, are there any teaching guides for this?" Her school could offer no real support. I sent her one of the thick, grade-by-grade teacher handbooks produced by the Core Knowledge Foundation. These handbooks explain each topic and provide instructional suggestions. In addition, they also lay out the knowledge above and beyond the lesson topics that would be useful for the teacher to have by way of background. The best sources for further relevant materials wrap up each section. Cleo was greatly relieved.

But what about all the other Cleos out there who are being thrown into these sink-or-swim situations in our public schools, sent into classrooms in which it's impossible to know what their students already know and in which teachers are given scant guidance about what they should

be teaching or—worse—are asked to teach literacy classes based on the trivial and fragmented fictions found in the standard literacy textbooks?

Teachers in the typical American classroom cannot rely on their students having previously acquired any specific item of knowledge. But effective classroom teaching depends on key prior knowledge being shared by all the members of the class. Without such shared knowledge, truly effective whole-class teaching cannot occur—no matter how potentially effective the teacher is. In today’s schools, teachers are compelled to overuse all sorts of individualizing strategies—at huge opportunity cost to the progress of the class as a whole. Individualized instruction is always important. But it is far more effective when students share prior academic knowledge, which alone enables the teacher to engage in varied instructional approaches.

That’s why I have become so impatient with the teacher bashing that has overtaken the education-reform movement. The favored structural reforms haven’t worked very well. The new emphasis on “teacher quality” implies that the reforms haven’t worked because the teachers (rather than the reform principles themselves) are ineffective. A more reasonable interpretation is that reforms haven’t worked because, on average, they have done little to develop “rich content knowledge within and across grades.”

The single most effective way to enhance teacher effectiveness is to create a more coherent multi-year curriculum, so that teachers at each level will know what students have already been taught. The Common Core State Standards offer a framework for any state to create the curricular coherence that could lead to massive gains in student learning. If we created a more coherent school environment in which a teacher’s work in one year reliably builds on what has been taught in prior years, teacher effectiveness would improve on a large scale. A conscientious and intelligent realization of the new Common Core Standards would introduce a key element that has been missing in our schools for too many tragic decades.

### **The Misuse of Common Core Tests**

So far, I am leery of both sets of official tests for the Common Core, at least in English language arts (ELA). They could endanger the promise of the Common Core. In recent years, the promise of NCLB was vitiated when test prep for reading-comprehension tests usurped the teaching of science, literature, history, civics, and the arts—the very subjects needed for good reading comprehension.

Previously, I wrote that if students learned science, literature, history, civics, and the arts, they would do very well on the new Common Core reading tests—whatever those tests turned out to be. To my distress, many teachers commented that no, they were still going to do test prep, as any sensible teacher should, because their job and income depended on their students’ scores on the reading tests.

The first thing I'd want to do if I were younger would be to launch an effective court challenge to value-added teacher evaluations on the basis of test scores in reading comprehension. In the domain of reading comprehension, the value-added approach to teacher evaluation is unsound both technically and in its curriculum-narrowing effects. The connection between job ratings and tests in ELA has been a disaster for education.

The scholarly proponents of the value-added approach have sent me a set of technical studies. My analysis of them showed what anyone immersed in reading research would have predicted: The value-added data were modestly stable for math but fuzzy and unreliable for reading. It cannot be otherwise, because of the underlying realities. Math tests are based on the school curriculum. What a teacher does in the math classroom affects student test scores. But reading-comprehension tests are not based on the school curriculum. (How could they be if there's no set curriculum?) Rather, they are based on the general knowledge that students have gained over their life span from all sources—most of them outside the school. That's why reading tests in the early grades are so reliably and unfairly correlated with parental education and income.

Since the results on reading-comprehension tests are not chiefly based on what a teacher has done in a single school year, why would any sensible person try to judge teacher effectiveness by changes in reading comprehension scores in a single year? The whole project is unfair to teachers, ill conceived, and educationally disastrous. The teacher-rating scheme has usurped huge amounts of teaching time in anxious test prep. Paradoxically, the evidence shows that test prep ceases to be effective after a few lessons. So all that time is wasted, time during which teachers could be calmly pursuing real education, teaching students fascinating subjects in literature, history, civics, science, and the arts, the general knowledge that is the true foundation of improved reading comprehension.

The villains in this story are not the well-meaning economists who developed the value-added idea but, rather, the inadequate theories of reading comprehension that have dominated the schools, principally the unfounded theory that when students reach a certain level of "reading skill," they can read anything at that level. We know now that reading skill—especially in the early grades—varies wildly depending on the subject matter of the text or the test passages.

The Common Core tests of reading comprehension will naturally contain text passages and questions about them. To the extent that such tests claim to test "critical thinking" and "general" reading-comprehension skill, we should hold onto our wallets. They will be only rough indexes of reading ability—probably no better than the perfectly adequate and well-validated reading tests they mean to replace. To continue using them as hickory sticks will distract teachers from their real job of enhancing students' general knowledge and will encourage teachers to continue doing the wasteful sorts of unsuccessful skill exercises that our classrooms have already been engaged in.

The solution to the test-prep conundrum is this: First, institute in every participating state the specific and coherent curriculum that the Common Core standards explicitly call for. (It's passing odd to introduce "Common Core" tests before there's an actual core to be tested.) Then base the reading-test passages on those knowledge domains. Not only would that be fairer to teachers and students, it would encourage interesting, substantive teaching and would, over time, induce a big uptick in students' knowledge—and hence in their reading-comprehension skills. That kind of test would be well worth prepping for.

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