A Hidden Cost of Common Core: Teacher Accountability

Bill Gates said that education reform is more difficult than eradicating polio, malaria or tuberculosis. He supports all of these causes, but the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative that he helped spearhead is coming under increasing criticism.

Common Core is a set of national academic standards for individual states to adopt. CCSS outlines what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. The math and English standards were released in 2010 and implemented by many states in 2014. Forty-three states have adopted and implemented the standards. Texas, Alaska, Nebraska and Virginia rejected the standards. Indiana and Pennsylvania have withdrawn after adopting the standards, and Alabama and Arizona are also taking steps to withdraw.

The backlash against Common Core has grown steadily since states first implemented the initiative, and now teachers' unions are withdrawing their support because of its increased teacher accountability requirements. Meanwhile, conservative critics have argued that the initiative is another instance of federal overreach, attempting to exert federal control over the public school curriculum. This reasoning is understandable given the exhaustive examples of the Obama administration's expansion of federal (largely executive) powers.

Common Core and Race to the Top. While there is no denying the federal government's appetite for new power, Common Core is not, in fact, a government mandate. Common Core's relationship with the federal government is a result of President Obama's Race to the Top Initiative. He awarded $4 billion in grants to 11 states that demonstrated dedication to education reform. Cheryl Oldham, vice president of education policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, argued that Common Core is not a national takeover of education — because if it were, the Chamber of Commerce would not support it.

The problem with Common Core is more subtle than a federal power grab, but perhaps just as nefarious. Teachers' unions across the United States are using this period of reform to try to modify or remove value-added measures — algorithms that link teacher evaluations to student performance — under No Child Left Behind. States agreed to these value-added accountability evaluations for students and teachers in exchange for federal funding though the Race to the Top program. Student outcomes on CCSS exams are tied to teacher evaluations. Teachers whose students do not achieve "success" on the CCSS annual exam are labeled "ineffective."

■ Classroom observations — still probably best way to measure teacher effectiveness — account for approximately 60 percent of a teacher's annual rating.

■ With slight variations by state, the other 40 percent of

a teacher's rating is based on student performance.

- However, teachers rated "highly effective" based on classroom observations could receive an overall rating of "developing" or "ineffective" based on poor student performance.

- Two years of an "ineffective" rating can be grounds for termination.

Teacher Accountability and the Unions. Economist and education reformer Eric A. Hanushek says, "Educational improvement requires strong accountability systems, rewarding teachers who are effective, eliminating teachers who are harming students, and providing added choice to parents about where their children go to school. Research has shown that these policies, while not silver bullets, each push toward higher student achievement." The teachers' unions advocate revoking the most critical component of improving student achievement: teacher accountability ratings.

At their national convention, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the second largest teacher union in the United States, recently discussed how they would oppose and/or reform Common Core, having called for a moratorium on the accountability standards over a year ago.
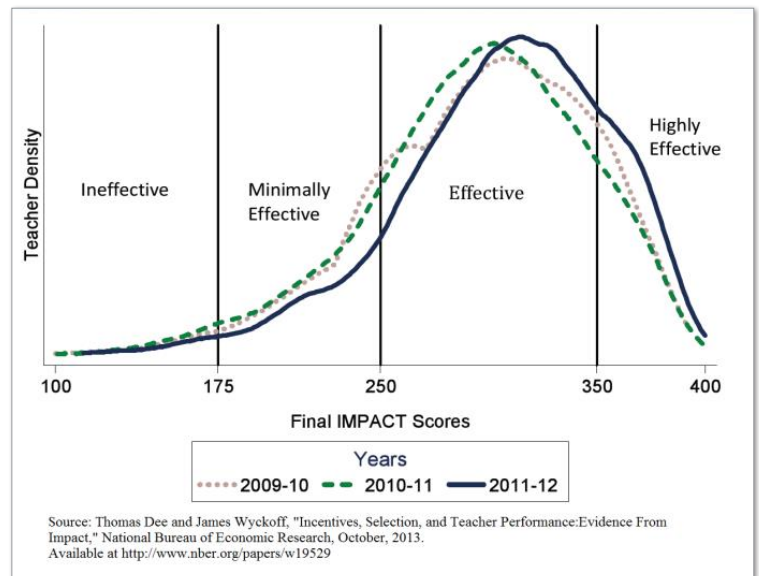
- The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) would like to rewrite the Common Core standards as well as remove testing measurements that hold teachers accountable for student performance.

- National Education Association President Eskelsen Garcia brands

value-added measures as a "mark of the devil."

- Union leaders in Tennessee initially adopted Obama's Race to the Top Initiative (thus receiving federal money); however the union has now called for a delay and even entered a lawsuit against the evaluation phase of the initiative.

Teacher Accountability in D.C. Public Schools. Numerous studies have found that teacher accountability has an important impact on student performance. A program called IMPACT, a local initiative in Washington, D.C., rated individual teachers based on detailed observation and student achievement. IMPACT rewarded "highly effective" teachers with base salary increases and bonuses and removed teachers rated "minimally effective" two years in a row.

Between 2011 and 2013, the National Assessment of Education Progress, which calls itself "The Nation's Report Card," found student achievement in the District of Columbia improved more than in any of the other 21 participating urban school districts. Furthermore, a National Bureau of Economic Research study found the program significantly improved teacher

Source: Thomas Dee and James Wyckoff, "Incentives, Selection, and Teacher Performance: Evidence From Impact," National Bureau of Economic Research, October, 2013. Available at http://www.nber.org/papers/w19529

effectiveness over three years [see the figure]:

- Most teachers fell into the "effective" category, with IMPACT scores between 250 and 350.

- Very few teachers were considered "minimally effective" and even fewer "ineffective," with IMPACT scores below 250.

The most important goal of education reform should be linking student performance to teacher accountability. Value-added measures of accountability are the key to reforming our nation's education system. If implementing Common Core includes suspending teacher accountability, the program will not achieve its goals. Bill Gates may have an easier time eradicating polio or malaria than teachers' unions have coping with rigorous accountability standards.

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