

**An Analysis of Available Literature Regarding the Discrepancies Between Common Core  
Standards and the Reality of Early Childhood Education**

A Research Paper submitted to the Department of Engineering and Society

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science

University of Virginia • Charlottesville, Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Science, School of Engineering

**Taylor Newton**

Spring 2024

On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this  
assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

## **Introduction**

Upon the adoption of Common Core Standards across the United States, the landscape of K-12 education has been significantly altered, specifically in regards to early mathematics and English education. The standards aimed to provide standardized educational goals and benchmarks, and have been enacted in more than 40/50 states (The Core Standards, n.d.). Unfortunately, beneath the surface of the seemingly comprehensive approach to education, there are clear oversights—namely the lack of input from key actors affected by the standards in the development of the standards. The push for Common Core Standards has led to numerous challenges, which will be elaborated on in this paper.

In this paper, I will examine the extent to which Common Core Standards are in alignment with the principles of care ethics, including whether or not the standards were developed with the best interests of students and educators in mind. Care ethics places emphasis on building and maintaining relationships in order to prioritize the needs and well being of both care-givers and care-receivers. According to Care Ethics, humans have a fundamental obligation to care for one another, specifically those more vulnerable and dependent (Sander-Staudt, nd.d).

Through document analysis I hope to assess the impact these standards have on educational outcomes. In this exposé, the development, usage, and effectiveness of Common Core Standards will be subject to critical examination. Ultimately, the goal of Common Core Standards was to increase the equitability and effectiveness of the educational experience; I plan to determine whether or not the Standards achieved their goal and why.

## **Historical Basis for Common Core**

One of the main reasons for the push for Common Core Standards is to equip students with the knowledge and tools necessary for college and career readiness. The Common Core Standards were developed right around the 2007-2009 Great Recession, and Obama's administration demonstrated a desire for reform surrounding academic standards. Educational standards have historically been considered a state's right, so the authority of the federal government to require the states to adopt the Common Core Standards is limited. In fact, in order to encourage the adoption of the standards nationwide, the Obama administration made the adoption of the standards mandatory for the states to be able to qualify for Title I funding from the federal government (Mathis, 2010). Because states were desperate for funding after the recent economic downturn, it is likely that many states adopted the Common Core Standards in order to receive funding from the federal government and did not fully evaluate the standards prior to adopting them.

It stands out that the Obama administration pushed so hard for Common Core Standards because the standards were not developed by the administration. Achieve Inc., a private company, was contracted by the National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to develop the Common Core Standards. The standards were developed rapidly, taking less than a year to write and involving minimal input from qualified educators (Mathis, 2010). Mathis' 2010 journal piece comes prior to the 2014 adoption of Common Core Standards throughout the country, yet, even then, Mathis predicts the standards will likely not have the intended positive effect, highlighting the "lack of essential capacity at the local, state and federal level." Mathis notes that the standards have yet to be tested and validated,

and the initiative should be continued as more of an assistive tool that states and local districts can use in order to develop their curriculum (2010).

### **Care Ethics & Education**

The lack of consistency in expectations regarding math and English education across the states in the US for primary and secondary education around the early 2000s acted as a catalyst for the development of the Common Core Standards. These standards were developed by the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve Inc.. All three of these organizations received millions of dollars in funding to develop the standards from the Gates foundation, yet the actual standard writing coalition contained only 27 members, including “few educators, but a significant number of representatives of the testing industry (Strauss, 2014).” Strauss’ article was written informing the general public about Common Core Standards, based on a speech by Diane Ravitch, an education historian. Because Common Core became so widely adopted across America, one would assume that it was created with the teachers and students in mind. The lack of teacher/educator input while developing the standards is apparent and clearly has a negative impact on students affected by Common Core Standards.

Although Strauss’ initial article on Common Core was published in 2014, she wrote a follow up article regarding Common Core Standards that was published in 2021; more specifically, the 2021 article focuses on the outcomes, mainly failures, of Common Core Standards post-haste. Strauss’ continued research and reporting on the Common Core Standards for The Washington Post helps add to her credibility as a reliable source regarding the topic. The fact that Strauss published an unofficial follow up to her initial article also highlights her dedication to covering education reform, and in her 2021 article, Strauss gives an in depth examination of how the Common Core initiative failed to accomplish its goals and promises. The

fact that Strauss initially reported on Common Core Standards, then felt the need to follow it up with an evaluation of the standards also indicates her credibility and reliability on the subject matter. Unfortunately, the highlights of the article are the failures relating to Common Core Standards, meaning if millions of teachers are expected to the Common Core Standards in their classrooms, then the fact that these standards were developed without any input from people with practical experience in the field is mind boggling.

An obvious goal of any educational system is to continuously strive to create a learning environment in which students can thrive. MacGill introduces ethics of care, as it relates to education, claiming it is a form of social constructivism that creates a student centered approach to learning (2016). This article does not mention the relationship between ethics of care and Common Core Standards, yet it suggests that “teachers engage students in learning within a relationship of reciprocity” (MacGill, 2016). This is an important lens to view education through, and throughout this paper because it will become increasingly clear that the Common Core Standards are not in alignment with care ethics and are not designed with the students’ best interest in mind. If Common Core Standards had been developed through the lens of ethics of care, the standards would have taken into consideration both the locality of the schools along with the needs/desires of teachers.

According to work by Nel Noddings, the aspect of caring and relationship building should be both a fundamental aspect of education and should be a primary goal of education (2020). Noddings has written a book about care ethics, and has written several books covering the relationship between caring and education while working primarily in New Jersey public schools during her years as an educator. It is no question that teachers care about their students, but do higher ups in the standardized testing world have this same regard for the students and

their education and well-being? The simple answer is no, testing professionals lack the same opportunity and responsibility teachers have to care for and support students. Testing professionals may have a vested interest in the student's educational performance, but their primary focus is profiting off of standardized testing. The lack of educators involved in the development of the standards means the standards did not primarily concern the needs and well being of the average American student. As Noddings points out in an earlier work "Caring-about is empty if it does not culminate in caring relationships." (2002: 23-4) Because the Common Core Standards were developed without input from teachers and educators, it is highly likely that the standards were developed by people who do not care about the student's well being, and more importantly, these people are not education experts. This lack of care for the student becomes evident in the curriculum that focuses too heavily on test scores and moves through content quickly.

### **Long Term Effects**

Not only does care and relationship building affect the education a child receives, it also affects the child's future development. According to Ruhm & Waldfogel (2012), the educational policies in place even have the ability to alter the role of parental care in a student's life as well as affect short and long-term development. Ruhm & Waldfogel also argue that the policies are an investment in human capital, even if the effects of the policy differ across children. Ruhm & Waldfogel are both trusted resources on the matter, as Ruhm is a professor at the University of Virginia who is researching the role of government policies in work and family life, and Waldfogel is a professor at Columbia University who is working towards the prevention of children's and youth problems. If the creators of the standards had truly viewed this as an investment in human capital they would want it to be as successful as possible and would take

the actors of the situation better into account. Unfortunately, the Common Core Standards were created by and for the benefit of standardized testing companies, and this prioritization points to the lack of care for the students and educators alike by the developers of Common Core Standards.

According to measurements of national student achievement in mathematics such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the average scores were improving up until the adoption of Common Core Standards in 2014, where the general trend became declining math scores (Rebarber, 2020). Rebarber also points out that if we break this down based on student achievement levels, historically higher achieving students have recovered well from the initial downwards ‘bump’ of Common Core Standards, but as the achievement percentile decreases, the statistically significant decline in math achievement increases (2020). Rebarber is a trusted source in regards to education and educational reform, he is the CEO and founder of AccountabilityWorks, a non profit organization encouraging the development of high quality education, and has experience running a charter school management company. One could argue that this decrease in achievement is correlation rather than causation, but the noticeable decrease in testing proficiency upon the widespread use of Common Core Standards indicates that students are struggling to adapt to the new, higher expectations. Sure, some students exhibited an initial downfall and were quickly able to recover the higher scores, but this is only shown in the already high achieving students.

### **Failures of Common Core**

The lack of time taken to develop the standards and the lack of relevant data regarding the success/failure of the new standards prior to adoption is very much to the disadvantage of American students. If the standards had been first tested on various small groups of students,

rather than adopted on a large scale, there would have been a chance for the standards to be corrected and reformed to better meet the needs of the students affected. Starting with limited adoption would also have likely demonstrated the need for the Common Core Standards to be adjusted by locality to better fit the needs of the students.

In the words of Loveless, “High Expectations Are Not Enough” (2021). In Loveless’ 2020 article, he explores why the Common Core Standards failed to work. One of the main reasons is that Common Core Standards simply raised the expectations of the students, as a 2017 study found the benchmark for academic performance was raised by many states. Expecting high student achievement across the board in Math and English is an unrealistic expectation without providing additional tools and resources at the students’ disposal. Common Core Standards were adopted under the guise that creating standard expectations across the country for students would result in higher performance metrics. And while the high standards would result in increased performance for some students, the students that were already behind would usually end up farther behind because no additional tools became available upon the utilization of the standards. Only the top percentile was able to recover their pre-Common Core Standards test scores, meaning the majority of students are left behind and continue to struggle to catch up to and keep up with their higher achieving classmates. Loveless also points out that in order to drive successful educational reform, it would take more effort than simply raising the expectations of the students (2021).

In fact, upon closer examination, the teachers are also struggling to adapt to and teach the new Common Core Standards in the classroom environment. The goal was to provide a standard of college readiness for American students, however, the standards are a measured outcome, rather than a curriculum, and fail to highlight successful teaching methods for achieving the



standards (McTighe & Wiggins, 2012). This is problematic because teachers did struggle to adjust to the standards considering they had little to no training. Furthermore, comparison amongst teachers became a sticky task considering how the subsequent utilization of the standards varied heavily on a case by case basis. This variation can be considered problematic, especially during transitional periods in a student's life. For example, it is common for one middle school to have multiple feeder schools within the same district, the problem comes in when the students do not share common knowledge due to the restructuring of the standards based on school/teacher standard interpretation choices. Common Core Standards attempted to ameliorate the problem of inconsistent learning, yet was unable to due to the lack of consistency in regards to the expectations for translation of the standards throughout the American school system. If the Common Core Standards were clarified in conjunction with training seminars and opportunities for the affected teachers, then it is possible they would have been significantly more successful at achieving the standardized college and career readiness goals.

Disdain for the standards also stems from the view that the learning expectations of the students are higher than appropriate for the student's age and grade level. This is a viewpoint shared by both parents and educators alike. Laura Main, an educator at Mesa Community College, points out that the Common Core Standards have high expectations and may challenge the developmental readiness of students (2012). McCarthy reports that although informed parents initially had a generally positive outlook on the standards, there was a noticeable shift in opinion against the Common Core Standards over the course of 2014, the year of primary enactment(2014). It makes sense that the impact of the standards would be noticed by educators and students, but the changing opinions of parents from a positive to negative outlook upon adoption proves the significance of the standards' effect. Parents are only indirectly affected by

the standards, so one would expect that the parents' opinions on the standards would exhibit a more gradual decline over the course of the standards' practical application. The negative outlook of teachers and parents regarding the Common Core Standards is likely shared by students, as evident by the decline of standardized testing scores beginning in 2014, when prior the math and reading testing scores had been gradually increasing each year (Historic drop... 2020).

It would be convenient for the states experiencing academic decline post-Common Core Standards instigation to simply reexamine the standards with the intent to fix the glaring problems without another major shift in academic expectations. Unfortunately, the academic decline is so prominent and consistent across the states that educational professionals, like Sandra Stotsky, are recommending that the standards be forgotten entirely in favor of newly curated standards (2020). Revamping the education standards entirely, in favor of new standards based on input from qualified educators, would be an enormous task. If the Common Core Standards could be salvaged and simply adjusted to better fit the needs of students and teachers, that would be the obvious choice.

Education should consider external and environmental factors relevant to the local community, and standardizing education throughout one large area (such as the United States) is idealistic. The United States is very large geographically, meaning the differences in culture and educational necessities from one area of the states to another are rather significant. Additionally, the Common Core Standards are primarily focused on math and English standards, which may leave some knowledge types blocked out of the curriculum. In his 2016 article, Drew argues that some skills sets typically developed in schools are being left out of the curriculum entirely which puts students at a disadvantage. Drew focuses on the lack of creative writing in the Common

Core Standards, arguing that creative writing can develop critical thinking skills and communication skills that might not otherwise develop. Topics like creative writing give students the opportunity to hone their writing and creativity skills, and leaving topics out of the standard curriculum leaves something to be desired about the standards.

Historically, the US has been a place where certain groups of people are marginalized and disadvantaged simply based on their background. A good goal for Common Core Standards would have been to equalize the standing for disadvantaged children. However, according to Tampio, the focus on standardized testing as a result of Common Core Standards not only takes away from a collaborative learning environment, but also puts already disadvantaged students at a further disadvantage (2014). The fact that historically disadvantaged students are worse off upon the utilization of Common Core Standards further indicates that Common Core Standards are not created with the vulnerable students' wellbeing in mind and that the Common Core Standards should not have been so widely adopted.

## **Conclusion**

The effects of the Common Core Standards have highlighted that Common Core Standards may not align fully with Care Ethics and equity in education. Common Core Standards aimed to standardize educational goals and benchmarks, yet many oversights, like the lack of input from key actors, have led to negative consequences, like a decrease in standardized testing performance for many students. Looking at Common Core Standards from Care Ethics framework highlights the disconnect between Common Core Standards and the fundamental need to consider the wellbeing of those affected by the policy. The apparent challenges resulting from Common Core Standards include but are not limited to declining student achievement and educators struggling to understand and follow the standards.

Common Core Standards focus on standardized testing as an achievement metric, but this sort of emphasis is not in the best interest of the students. The emphasis placed on testing and test scores by the Common Core Standards further widens the gap between high-achieving and struggling students. This, in conjunction with the specific knowledge domains emphasized by Common Core Standards proves that Common Core Standards are failing American students. Students exemplify diverse needs and Common Core Standards fail to meet those needs. One clear solution would be to reexamine the Standards to see how they could better fit the needs of students and teachers, and adjust accordingly. Another obvious choice would be to respect the state's right to choose their own educational standards and offer Common Core Standards as an optional guide, rather than a required aspect.

## References

- byinfed.org, (2020, March 9). Nel noddings, the ethics of care and Education. *infed.org*.  
<https://infed.org/mobi/nel-noddings-the-ethics-of-care-and-education/>
- The Core Standards. (n.d.). Standards in your State. *Common Core State Standards Initiative*.  
<https://www.thecorestandards.org/standards-in-your-state/#:~:text=Forty%2Done%20states%2C%20the%20District,to%20adopt%20their%20academic%20standards.>
- Drew, Chris (2016) "Minding the Pedagogical Gap: Creative Writing Studies, Common Core Standards, and the Secondary Creative Writing Moment," *Journal of Creative Writing Studies*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 3.
- Historic drop in National Reading & Math scores: Common core. (2020, April 27). *Pioneer Institute*.  
<https://pioneerinstitute.org/academic-standards/study-finds-historic-drop-in-national-reading-and-math-scores-since-adoption-of-common-core-curriculum-standards/>
- Loveless, T. (2020). Common Core has not worked. *Education Next*, 20(2), 73-77.
- Loveless, T. (2021, March 18). Why common core failed. *Brookings*.  
<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-common-core-failed/>
- MacGill, B. (2016). A paradigm shift in education: Pedagogy, standpoint and ethics of care. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, 11(3), 238-247.
- Main, Laura. "Too Much Too Soon? Common Core Math Standards In the Early Years." *Early Childhood Education Journal*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1 Apr. 2012, pp. 73 - 77.
- Mathis, W. J. (2010). The "Common Core" Standards Initiative: An Effective Reform Tool?.
- McCarthy, J. (2014, October 28). Public School parents now divided on common core. *Gallup.com*.  
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/178889/public-school-parents-divided-common-core.aspx#:~:text=WASHINGTON%2C%20D.C.%20%2D%2D%20Parents%20of,don%27t%20have%20an%20opinion.>
- McTighe, J., & Wiggins, G. (2012). From common core standards to curriculum: Five big ideas. *The New Hampshire Journal of Education*, 16, 25-31.
- Noddings, N. (2002). *Starting at Home: Caring and social policy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rebarber, T. (2020). The Common Core Debacle: Results from 2019 NAEP and Other Sources. White Paper No. 205. *Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research*.

Ruhm, C., & Waldfogel, J. (2012). Long-term effects of early childhood care and education. *Nordic Economic Policy Review*, 1(1), 23-51.

Sander-Staudt, M. (n.d.). Care Ethics. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.  
<https://iep.utm.edu/care-ethics/>

Sandra Stotsky. "How to Clean Up the Common Core Mess In Massachusetts." *Nonpartisan Education Review*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1 Aug. 2020, pp. 1 - 4.

Strauss, V. (2014) Everything you need to know about common core — Ravitch. *The Washington Post*.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/01/18/everything-you-need-to-know-about-common-core-ravitch/>

Strauss, V. (2021). Why the common core standards failed — and what it means for school reform. *The Washington Post*.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/04/05/common-core-failed-school-reform/>

Tampio, Nicholas. "Common Core standards widen the opportunity gap." *Al Jazeera America* (2014).