Let Them Take Tests: The Common Core State Standards as Implemented in Illinois Elementary Schools

By Claire Gillespie


This time, people are not throwing these words at the latest political scandal or the economy. Parents, teachers, scholars and legislators use these words to describe America’s latest education reform.

The Common Core State Standards are a set of concepts and skills that K-12 students are expected to master. They emphasize student-generated answers through group work and essays. The English language arts standards mandate that teachers expose children to informational texts as well as fiction and provide samples of history, science and technology texts. The math standards focus less on rote memorization and more on essay-based problem solving, where students are asked to provide multiple solutions to the same problem.

Parents and educators criticize the standards because they are both too rigorous and not rigorous enough. State legislators and school administrators are unsure if they can fund implementing the standards’ new computer-based testing system that, in many school districts, necessitates expensive technology updates. Citizens take issue with the amount of data these tests will make available to the federal government.

In Illinois, where students are as likely to take public transportation to school as the yellow school bus, arguments for and against the standards reveal the national discussion.

Bill Evers, a research fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institute and U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education for Policy from 2007–2009, said that the standards will not improve American education.

“They’re missing topics all over the place here,” Evers said. “They have experimental methods in geometry. They have procedure and statistics that’s just not even math but they prescribe it anyway. And presumably it would have been better if there had been time to deliberate on this, time to review it.”

States rushed to adopt the Common Core State Standards, in part because adopting the standards leads to federal government money in the form of President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s competitive Race to the Top grants.

On June 24, 2010 – less than one month after education scholars finished writing the English language arts and mathematics Common Core State Standards – the Illinois State Board of Education adopted them. In December 2011, the federal government rewarded Illinois with a $42.8 million Race to the Top grant for, among other reforms, implementing the Common Core.

With a $6.1 billion deficit as of the last fiscal year, the state of Illinois needs all the money it can get.

The Common Core State Standards are backed by philanthropies like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has given millions of dollars to research, develop and – most recently – improve public perception of the Common Core State Standards.
Erin Raasch discovered that her son’s elementary school was implementing the Common Core when she came to a parent-teacher meeting with concerns about her son’s handwriting and spelling skills. A teacher told her that under the Common Core the school did not have time to teach spelling and handwriting.

Soon after, Raasch said that she began spending hours helping her fourth-grade son complete his math homework.

“This took two hours with ten breaks to get through,” Raasch said about her son’s latest assignment. “It’s not a confidence builder. It’s difficult.”

After some research, Raasch started the website StopCommonCoreIllinois.org. Though she did not intend to, she has become a “Common Core hotline.”

“I’ve had teachers call me crying from the teacher’s lounge,” Raasch said. “Children are throwing themselves on the floor crying because…they’ve pushed a lot of expectations down and children are not developmentally able to handle the demands of some of that work.”

Raasch’s son’s school in Villa Park, where 8.1 percent of people are below the poverty line, according to the U.S. Census, is very different from Chicago, where 22.1 percent of people lived below the poverty line between 2008 and 2012.

Illinois Policy Institute’s Director of Education Reform Josh Dwyer advocates for students in Illinois’ lowest-performing elementary schools, many of whom are concentrated in urban areas like Chicago.

“Of the students who graduate, 40 percent after graduation are neither employed nor in college,” Dwyer said about Chicago Public Schools. “…You’re either receiving food stamps or welfare, or you’re doing something where you’re earning nontaxable income. That, to me, is sort of a reflection of a failed system.”

This system – the one that Illinois has operated on for the past decade – is made up of other standards that school districts tested students on each year. Unlike the Common Core State Standards, however, these standards were specific to the state of Illinois and, according to the Deputy Superintendent and Chief Education Officer at the Illinois State Board of Education Susie Morrison, the previous standards were more disordered.

Morrison worked for the Board of Education when the Board decided to adopt the Common Core State Standards in 2010. She prioritizes the amount of resources the Common Core State Standards make available to teachers when discussing their benefits.

“Never before has there been something like this, where so many states work together,” Morrison said. “There are many resources, some of which we’ve created, some of which other states have created.”

Evers sees the 45 states that have adopted the Common Core State Standards working together negatively.

“People can leave a state or move to a state because they like a school system,” Evers said about education before the Common Core. “They are in rivalry with each other. …It allows innovation.” Though a group of educators developed the Common Core State Standards based on the most
recent education scholarship, the standards did not go through a trial run or any revisions before the vast majority of the United States began to implement the standards, leaving elementary school students in the middle of an expensive experiment.

Administrators will test students’ mastery of the Common Core State Standards through a computer-based test. In many more rural school districts, schools do not have the technology to administer this test on computers, necessitating an update and the funds to finance new computers.

These updates, along with the teacher training and new textbooks that go into a curriculum overhaul, add up quickly.

Morrison believes that the shared Common Core resources will reduce costs and allow the states to spend their money elsewhere.

Rep. Michelle Mussman, a Democrat, sits on the Appropriations Elementary and Secondary Education committee, which decides where and what public education programs to fund.

“This is a huge obstacle to overcome that we’re just not financially ready for,” Mussman said about implementing the new technology.

For students with learning disabilities or special needs, meeting the standards proves near impossible. As of yet, no standards have been developed for children with special needs. For now, Morrison says teachers will give students the special help they need to reach the standards.

“It’s important to remember that these new standards are for all students,” Morrison said. States will test their students using assessments developed by the PARCC coalition beginning in the 2014-15 school year. Because these tests will be linked to students’ school records, those who have access to the test scores will access information like students’ tardiness and disciplinary records.

The Department of Education awarded PARCC one of its own Race to the Top grants in September 2010, and in doing so, put itself in a position to request certain data stipulations, like what data elements the test records.

Though Dwyer thinks that the amount of data he can obtain from the Common Core State Standards will help his policy research, he thinks that the standards will not significantly reform education.

“I think it’s not the panacea that [supporters] think it is,” Dwyer said about the Common Core. “…I would argue that in ten years’ time, we’re going to see that it had about as much impact as No Child Left Behind.”

No Child Left Behind requires all schools receiving federal funding to administer a standardized test to students each year. If students fail to make progress over time, the federal government will eventually close the school. By 2014, the federal government expected 100 percent of students to pass state-generated standardized tests.

Adopting the Common Core, however, gives states the option to apply for a waiver that relinquishes schools of the No Child Left Behind requirements.
More than a decade ago, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation contributed money to No Child Left Behind in a similar manner that they contributed to the Common Core State Standards initiative.

“You have some parents who are all in and happy to see us doing something different and very positive about the changes and you have other parents who are very concerned, they don’t necessarily understand what’s happening; they are worried that we are watering down the curriculum or lowering our standards to make it easier for other kids,” Mussman said.

A group of legislators in the Illinois House of Representatives signed a resolution asking the state to cease implementation of the standards until the body looks at how much implementation will actually cost.

“What’s our return for investment?” Republican Illinois Rep. Barbara Walker said. “That’s a really big question I don’t think the state of Illinois has asked.”

Similar legislature is circulating nearby states. The Indiana State Senate passed a bill that would repeal the Common Core in Indiana and replace it with Indiana’s own standards. Websites like Raasch’s StopCommonCoreIllinois.org are active. Illinois even changed the name of the Common Core State Standards to the Illinois Learning Standards to distance the standards from negative public perception.

Though the standards have seen criticism from conservatives and progressives and the debate is as dictated by politicians as by educators, the people most affected by the standards are children.

“This is being characterized as political, but it is not,” Raasch said of her experience with her son. “It’s really an accumulation of years and years of problems with our schools.”