

Four Common Core ‘flimflams’

By **Valerie Strauss** September 17, 2014

Award-winning Principal Carol Burris of South Side High School in New York was once a supporter of the Common Core but came to be a critic after her state began to implement the initiative. (You can read some of her work on the botched implementation in New York [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).) Burris [was named](#) New York’s 2013 High School Principal of the Year by the School Administrators Association of New York and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and in 2010, tapped as the 2010 New York State Outstanding Educator by the School Administrators Association of New York State. In this post she looks at what she calls the “Four Flimflams of the Common Core.”

By Carol Burris

The cheerleaders for the Common Core are on a “happy tour.” Anthony Cody [explains here](#) how the Gates Foundation is now financing a public relations offensive in response to the growing opposition to national standards. Recently, a professionally produced YouTube video depicted Common Core critics as misinformed Archie Bunkers who have no rational reason for their critique. The video was abruptly taken down when criticism appeared on Twitter, but you can see a screen [shot of it here](#). Expect to see more affronts to the sincerity and intelligence of Core critics in the coming months.

The public relations campaign started because a majority of Americans ([60 percent in one poll](#)) now oppose the Common Core. Although conservatives lead the way, in the bluest of states, California and New York, more people now disapprove than approve of the standards. Perhaps most telling of all, in one year national teacher support for the Common Core [has dropped 30 points](#). The Common Core has shifted from theory to practice, and like the lemon it is, it is breaking down on the highway of implementation.

Since the standards were first introduced, Common Core supporters have created amorphous platitudes and spin to market it. Even as more Americans like me “wise up,” do not expect the Common Core-ites to give up. Think tanks have received millions from Gates to support it and education companies are making millions on new Core-aligned materials. There is big money being spent — and big money to be made — in the Common Core.

So, expect that when the happy bus pulls into your town, you will hear the same old arguments. These arguments, which I call the Four Flimflams of the Common Core, go like this:

Flimflam # 1: The Common Core standards are internationally benchmarked and grounded in research.

For the life of me, I cannot figure out to which nations the Common Core standards were benchmarked. They look nothing like the [bare-boned standards](#) of high-achieving Finland. And the Common Core academic standards for kindergarten look nothing like the standards of Ontario, Canada, which underwent successful school reform that raised student achievement. Their kindergarten curriculum is [based on inquiry](#), curiosity and play. Ontario’s standards are far more in line with the research on early childhood development, and that research has no friend in the Common Core.

In 2010, when the standards were being rolled out, [500 early childhood experts](#) – pediatricians, researchers and psychologists—found the early childhood Common Core standards to be so developmentally inappropriate that they called for their suspension in grades K-3.

Dr. Louisa Moats, one of the few early childhood experts on the team that wrote the literacy standards, is now an outspoken critic because the Common Core standards disregard decades of research on early reading development. She began expressing her concerns in 2012 in [a paper entitled](#) “Reconciling the Common Core State Standards with Reading Research” which can be found here. In it, Moats describes the Common Core as a “political (and philosophical) compromise” which reflects contemporary ideas, not reading research. She is not alone in her critique. Researchers Hiebert and Sluys [also among other researchers who have expressed concerns](#) about the consequences of the premises and practices embedded in the Common Core [].

So where is the research to support: close reading, [increased Lexile levels](#), the use of informational texts and other questionable practices in the primary grades? During [our recent Intelligence Squared debate](#) on the Common Core the Fordham Institute’s Mike Petrilli told the audience he “spent the big part of the weekend talking to some reading experts.” When I later asked Mr. Petrilli for the evidence of the research on Common Core reading methods he said, “Well, I will be happy to go find it for you after this debate.” I am still waiting.

Flimflam #2: The standards are merely goal posts and do not tell teachers how to teach.

Of course the standards seek to influence instruction. Unlike previous standards that were statements of content matched to grade level, the Common Core standards embed 12

Instructional Shifts.

Here is an example. This is a pre-Common Core Kindergarten standard from Massachusetts.

Use objects and drawings to model and solve related addition and subtraction problems to ten.

It is clean, clear and developmentally appropriate.

Here is the equivalent Common Core standard:

Compose and decompose numbers from 11 to 19 into ten ones and some further ones, e.g., by using objects or drawings, and record each composition or decomposition by a drawing or equation (e.g., $18 = 10 + 8$); understand that these numbers are composed of ten ones and one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, or nine ones.

Notice the difference. The Common Core insists upon the use of a particular method of math instruction (decomposing numbers) which [you can see demonstrated here](#). Although this may be helpful in increasing understanding for some students, it should be up to a teacher to use it, or not use it, as a strategy. Instructional strategies have no place in state standards, and indeed they are noticeably absent from other national standards, including those of high performing Finland.

Flimflam # 3: *The Common Core will close the achievement gap.*

The Common Core is a standardized, test-based reform. Since the invention of the IQ test,

poor kids and kids of color have been [consistently disadvantaged by standardized tests](#). As Alan Aja and I explained [in this Answer Sheet post](#), the Common Core tests in Kentucky and New York have resulted in a widening of the achievement gap. This spring's round of New York Common Core tests made [the achievement gap in math wider still](#). The “rigorous” MCAS tests of Massachusetts never resulted in the closing of the gap. In [a recent report](#), Mass Insight Education, which is dedicated to help create and implement strategies that close educational achievement gaps, stated that the state's reform which increased the rigor of standards and tests created a “two-class system in which some students have benefited from the reforms ushered in 1993 and some have not.” Those who have not are disadvantaged students.

Twelve states have laws that mandate student retention in Grade 3 based on low-scores on state reading tests, with disproportionate numbers of disadvantaged students being retained. According [to a report by the Carnegie Corporation](#), the Common Core may double the drop-out rate (15 percent to 30 percent) and decrease the four year graduation rate to 53 percent— a level this country has not seen since the 1940s. The GED passing rate [has already dropped 19 points](#) after the test was Common Core aligned. Because dropouts and GED test takers are disproportionately poor and non-white, there is no doubt that the Common Core will have a devastating impact on such students—especially if they have learning disabilities or if they are English language learners.

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Worst of all, the Common Core provides an excuse for avoiding the real work that must be done. Rather than addressing the problems of racially isolated schools, inequitable funding, and insufficient academic and socio-emotional resources in high poverty schools, the Core-ites pretend that low expectations are the only problem to be solved.

Flimflam #4: The problems with the Common Core standards can be fixed at the state and local level.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Common Core standards were built to be national standards. In order to make sure they could not be altered at the state level, they were copyrighted, despite Ms. Martin's claim to the contrary during the debate. In addition, adopting states signed a memorandum of understanding that they would not alter any of the standards, although they could add some additional standards. You can find that the Common Core Memorandum of Understanding on Page 129 of Delaware's Race to the Top application [which can be found here](#).

The rationale for the copyright is obvious. If the standards were not copyrighted and were able to be altered by the states, it would be impossible to create national tests that could be used for accountability purposes.

The [PARCC assessment](#), one of the two tests being developed by a pair of multi-state consortia with \$360 million in federal funds, provides insight into how narrow a skill set will be developed in English Language Arts. [Here is the "research task"](#) of the third grade assessment that requires 8 year olds to show their "college and career readiness skills" regarding the use of evidence across informational texts. Third-graders will be asked to synthesize and evaluate information and write two analytical essays.

Readers who are familiar with Blooms Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain will recognize that this task makes cognitive demands at the highest level of taxonomy, something that children of this age are not equipped to do—at least not in more than a superficial and mechanical way. What is even more troubling is that eleventh graders are [to perform the exact same research simulation task](#). In fact, all three tasks are the same for all of the grade levels between Grades 3 and 11.

Curriculum will standardize and narrow as students practice three English Language Arts tasks for the PARCC exam. All that will vary will be the difficulty of the texts to which they respond. The lack of imagination, as well as the lack of knowledge on how writing and critical thinking skills develop, is breathtaking. The combination of common, prescriptive standards, national tests and a re-alignment of the SAT and GED will act as a vise pushing schools toward similar curricular experiences for American students. Make no mistake, this is by design.

If the goal of Common Core supporters is to create a standardized curriculum across states and schools, then they are obligated to make sure that the Common Core standards are both remarkable and sound. They are neither. It will take more than a public relations campaign to convince the American public to buy the homogenized vision of the few who created the Common Core.

(Correction: Earlier version had dropped the word 'million' in referring to \$360 million in federal funds)

Valerie Strauss covers education and runs The Answer Sheet blog.
