

Is the Common Core just a distraction?

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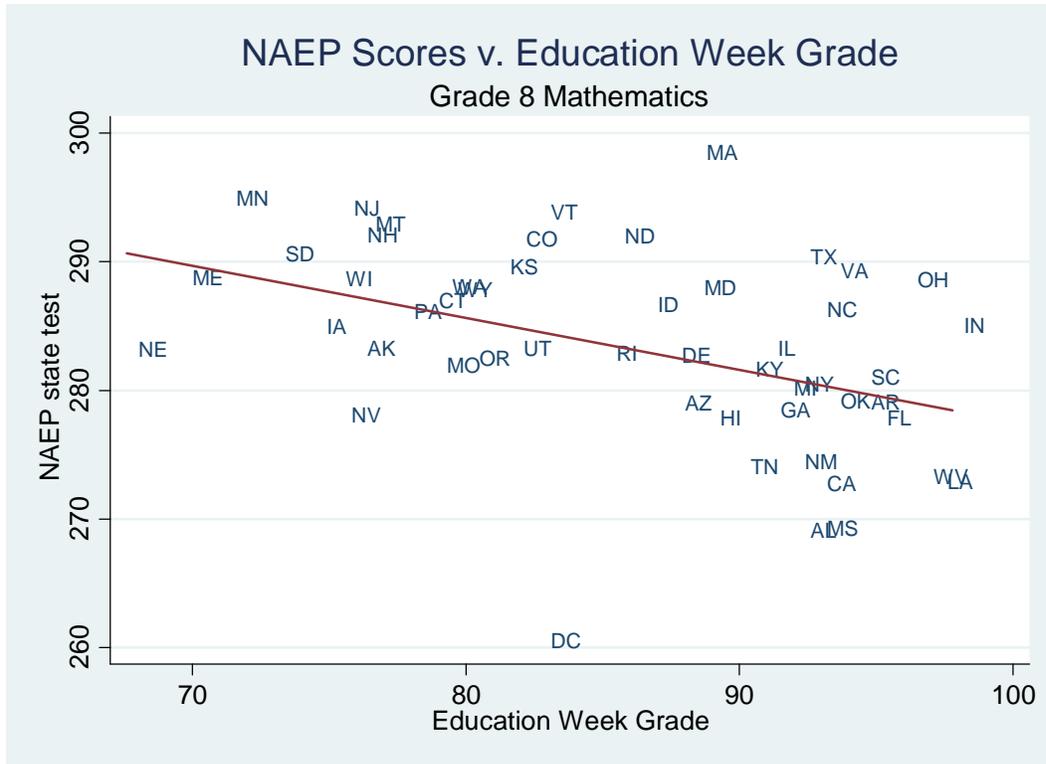
All of the intense pushing and shoving about the “common core” leaves one simple question, “should we care?” Policy makers and reform advocates alike have rallied around movement toward a national curriculum, suggesting that this will break the stagnation in achievement of U.S. students. But there is little evidence that confusion about what we should teach has been a real inhibition to student achievement. In fact, the existing evidence suggests just the opposite: There is no relationship between learning standards of the states and student performance.

To be sure, it is a real problem when students in one state learn very different things than those in other states, and in particular when students from some states lack the skills needed for our modern economy. We really do have a national labor market, and significant numbers of our population end up living and working in a state different than that where they were born and went to school. The presumption behind having national standards (whether voluntary or coerced) is that having a clearer and more consistent statement of learning objectives across states would tend to lessen the problem of heterogeneous skills that students bring to the labor market. Again, however, the fundamental problem is lack of minimal skills and not the heterogeneity of skills per se.

Experience provides little support for the argument that just more clearly declaring what we want children to learn will have much impact. In arguing for focusing on standards, proponents of national standards conventionally point to Massachusetts: strong standards and top results. But, it is useful to expand thinking from just Massachusetts to include California, a second state noted for its high learning standards. Indeed, some have argued that both states would have to lower their standards in order to fit into the structure of the common core. But, California balances Massachusetts: strong standards and bottom results.

In order to see the issue more broadly, it is possible to compare state-by-state measures of learning standards to student outcomes. There are different independent ratings of the quality of the existing learning standards currently existing for each state, and these can be combined with assessments of student performance from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The most comprehensive rating of state standards is probably that of [Education Week](#). Education Week developed a comprehensive grading across grade-specific standards, testing, and the accountability that goes with them in each state. This ranking provides aggregate grades for each state. (Another widely acknowledged rating of state standards by subject is produced by the [Fordham Institute](#). These competing rankings are correlated with those of Education Week, though not perfectly, and it really makes no difference for the analysis which we use.)

The figure below shows how the ranking of standards compares to NAEP scores – here the 8th grade math scores. (The specific NAEP assessment for grade and subject has no influence on the overall conclusions).



As can be seen, the better the state standards the worse the students tend to do. But, of course, this does not imply that we should move toward weaker standards. The real conclusion is that state standards have little to do with student performance.

In other words, what really matters is what is actually taught in the classroom. Simply setting a different goal – even if backed by intensive professional development, new textbooks, and the like – has not historically had much influence as we look across state outcomes.

There are a number of refinements that one can think about for this analysis, but they do not change the answer. This conclusion holds even under more sophisticated analysis, as demonstrated quite conclusively by [Tom Loveless](#) of the Brookings Institution. Indeed his analysis helps to frame the entire debate.

The continuing emphasis on common core standards, including the debates about the legality of them, is often interpreted as indicating that the common core is a really big deal in school reform. The data suggest otherwise.

The one possible complementary gain from the move to national standards is that the assessments of performance might become better. It is widely recognized that the current tests used to judge outcomes within individual states tend to be quite weak. (This concern about tests is not leveled at NAEP, which was used in the comparisons above, but instead applies to the tests states use for accountability purposes). If the new standards lead to better tests – something that might come out of the two testing consortia funded by the U.S. education department – we might have the basis for

improved school policies. But, that is also not certain and cannot be used as a primary justification for the focus on common core standards.

One interpretation of the emphasis on developing the common core curriculum is that these debates provide a convenient distraction from potentially more intractable fights over bigger reform ideas like teacher evaluations, expanded school choice, or improved accountability systems. While I am not against having better learning standards, I believe that we cannot be distracted from more fundamental reform of our schools. The future [economic well-being of the U.S.](#) is dependent on improving the achievement and skills of today's students.

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