

# Eight problems with Common Core Standards

By Marion Brady

E.D. Hirsch, Jr.'s book, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, was published March 1, 1987.

So it was probably in March of that year when, sitting at a dining room table in an apartment on Manhattan's Upper East Side, my host — publishing executive, friend, and fellow West Virginian — said he'd just bought the book. He hadn't read it yet, but wondered how Hirsch's list of 5,000 things he thought every American should know differed from a list we Appalachians might write.

I don't remember what I said, but it was probably some version of what I've long taken for granted: Most people think that whatever they and the people they like happen to know, everybody else should be required to know.

In education, of course, what it's assumed that everybody should be required to know is called "the core." Responsibility for teaching the core is divvied up between teachers of math, science, language arts, and social studies.

Various motivated corporate interests, arguing that the core was being sloppily taught, organized a behind-the-scenes campaign to super-standardize it. They named their handiwork the "Common Core State Standards" to hide the fact that it was driven by policymakers in Washington D.C., who have thus far shoved it into every state except Alaska, Minnesota, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia.

This was done with insufficient public dialogue or feedback from experienced educators, no research, no pilot or experimental programs — no evidence at all that a floor-length list created by unnamed people attempting to standardize what's taught is a good idea.

It's a bad idea. Ignore the fact that specific Common Core State Standards will open up enough cans of worms to keep subject-matter specialists arguing among themselves forever. Consider instead the merit of Standards from a general perspective:

*One:* Standards shouldn't be attached to school subjects, but to the qualities of mind it's hoped the study of school subjects promotes. Subjects are mere tools, just as scalpels, acetylene torches, and transits are tools. Surgeons, welders, surveyors — and teachers — should be held accountable for the quality of what they produce, not how they produce it.

*Two:* The world changes. The future is indiscernible. Clinging to a static strategy in a dynamic world may be comfortable, even comforting, but it's a Titanic-deck-chair exercise.

*Three:* The Common Core Standards assume that what kids need to know is covered by one or another of the traditional core subjects. In fact, the unexplored intellectual terrain lying between and beyond those familiar fields of study is vast, expands by the hour, and will go in directions no one can predict.

*Four:* So much orchestrated attention is being showered on the Common Core Standards, the main reason for poor student performance is being ignored—a level of childhood poverty the consequences of which no amount of schooling can effectively counter.

*Five:* The Common Core kills innovation. When it's the only game in town, it's the only game in town.

*Six:* The Common Core Standards are a set-up for national standardized tests, tests that can't evaluate complex thought, can't avoid cultural bias, can't measure non-verbal learning, can't predict anything of consequence (and waste boatloads of money).

*Seven:* The word "standards" gets an approving nod from the public (and from most educators) because it means "performance that meets a standard." However, the word also means "like everybody else," and standardizing minds is what the Standards try to do. Common Core Standards fans sell the first meaning; the Standards deliver the second meaning. Standardized minds are about as far out of sync with deep-seated American values as it's possible to get.

*Eight:* The Common Core Standards' stated aim — "success in college and careers"— is at best pedestrian, at worst an affront. The young should be exploring the potentials of humanness.

I've more beefs, but like these eight, they have to do with the quality of education, and the pursuit of educational quality isn't what's driving the present education reform farce.

An illustration: As I write, my wife is in the kitchen. She calls me for lunch. The small television suspended under the kitchen cabinets is tuned to CNN, and Time cover girl Michelle Rhee is being interviewed.

"On international tests," she says, "the U.S. ranks 27th from the top."

Michelle Rhee, three-year teacher, education reactionary, mainstream media star, fired authoritarian head of a school system being investigated for cheating on standardized tests, is given a national platform to misinform. She doesn't explain that, at the insistence of policymakers, and unlike other countries, America tests every kid — the mentally disabled, the sick, the hungry, the homeless, the transient, the troubled, those for whom English is a second language. That done, the scores are lumped together. She doesn't even hint that when the scores of the disadvantaged aren't counted, American students are at the top.

If Michelle Rhee doesn't know that, she shouldn't be on CNN. If she knows it but fails to point it out, she shouldn't be on CNN.

It's hard not to compare Rhee with Jennifer, a friend of my oldest son. He wrote me recently:

*...I asked Jenn if she was ready for school.*

*"I'm waiting for an email from my principal to find out if I can get into my classroom a week early."*

*"Why a whole week?"*

*"To get my room ready."*

*She teaches second graders. I ask her why she loves that grade. She laughs and says, "Because they haven't learned to roll their eyes yet."*

*But I know it's much more than that. Her sister was down from Ohio for Jenn's birthday, and when she asked her what she wanted, Jenn said she needed 18 sets of colored pencils, 18 boxes of #2 pencils, 18 boxes of crayons, construction paper, name tags and so on — \$346 dollars total.*

*She's been doing this for 25 years. I'm sure she makes less than I do, but they could probably cut her salary 25 or 30% and she'd still want to get into her room early."*

Rhee gets \$50,000 a pop plus first-class travel and accommodations for putting in an appearance to tell her audiences what's wrong with the Jennifers in America's schools, and what clubs should be swung or held over their heads to scare them into shaping up.

Future historians (if there are any) are going to shake their heads in disbelief. They'll wonder how, in a single generation, the world's oldest democracy dismantled its engine — free, public, locally controlled, democratic education.

If they dig into the secretive process that produced the Common Core State Standards, most of their questions will be answered

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