Washington Post, "The Answer Sheet" blog by Valerie Strauss.

Posted October 22, 2015:

A big problem with the Common Core that keeps getting ignored

By Marion Brady

The role of the Common Core State Standards in attempting to improve schooling has prompted countless editorials, op-eds, and letters to editors. Opinion about them has split political parties, faculties, and friendships, and even created an unusual progressive-conservative alliance in opposition.

Defenders of the standards have had considerable success convincing the public that those who reject them do so because they oppose education reform, are poorly informed, are under union thumbs, or don't want to face the fact that their kids aren't as smart as they thought they were.

I oppose the standards, and none of those apply to me.

My primary concern isn't with the quality of the standards themselves. I don't like how they were created and rammed into place, but what's done is done. I think they're part of an elaborate ideology-driven scheme to privatize public schooling, but that fad will probably have to run its course. It's appalling that the life chances of millions of kids and their teachers hinge on the scores of tests that can't evaluate original thought, but that will continue as long as most people think "educating" means "delivering information."

I oppose the Common Core State Standards primarily for a thus-far ignored consequence of their adoption.

My objection begins with the superficiality of the standards' stated aim—to prepare the young "for college and careers." The bottom-line reason societies educate their young isn't to support the world of work, a particular economic system, or the educational status quo. As H.G. Wells pointed out, civilization is a race between education and catastrophe. Societies—at least the thoughtful ones—educate to survive.

Change—environmental, demographic, technological, institutional, and so on—is inevitable, continuous, and unpredictable. To survive, societies must either control changes or adapt to them, both of which require new knowledge. New knowledge is created by the discovery of relationships between parts of reality not previously thought to be related. For example, as infants, we discover a relationship between crying and getting attention. Most adults discover a relationship between personal autonomy and job satisfaction. Societies discover (or don't) a relationship between differing societal cognitive systems and misunderstanding and conflict.

Maximizing the relationship discovery process—not mentally storing secondhand information—is Education Job One.

Reality is complex, which makes the 1893 core curriculum appealing. Specialized study—breaking knowledge apart and creating a school subject to study each part—has a long and impressive history of yielding benefits. But ignoring reality's holistic, systemically integrated nature and the seamless way our minds make sense of it comes at a huge, even deadly cost. We're poorly equipped to make sense of the big picture, the trends of the era, and the unintended consequences of our actions because *we literally can't imagine possible, probable, and preferable futures*.

We can't imagine alternative futures because they're products of complex dynamic, systemic interactions, and a curriculum that compartmentalizes knowledge—as the core curriculum does—blocks the basic relating process that imagining requires.

The Common Core State Standards didn't just stop the effort in the 1980s to explore the knowledge-integrating potential of General Systems Theory as it developed during World War II. It locked the fragmented 1893 curriculum—the curriculum I believe is the major reason academic performance has flat-lined for decades—in even more rigid place.

If we care about the future, the core curriculum can't take us where we need to go. Don't take my word for it. I'm merely saying what well-known and respected scholars have been saying for many years.

###

Note: My email address is mbrady2222@gmail.com. I invite criticism, dialogue, and inspection of a course of study my brother and I have assembled for adolescents to help them build (with a little teacher help) a comprehensive, systemically integrated mental model of reality. It's simple, but it can't be taught in the usual sense of the word—as "delivered information." To be adequately understood and become a permanent tool for making sense and creating new knowledge, *each learner has to build a mental model of reality for herself or himself*. The course is free, and can be downloaded at http://www.marionbrady.com/CIR.asp

For those unable or unwilling to abandon the comfort of traditional school subjects, here are links to two familiar ones—American history and world history—that use systems theory as the basic organizer. They're also free, along with provision for users to communicate to improve them.