In the early 1980s, the two of us were young teachers in a school district led by a distinguished superintendent, Richard Doremus. After visiting many exemplary schools and programs, Dr. Doremus compiled his observations into a monograph that he titled “The Yellow School Bus.” The yellow school bus, he said, reminded him of education’s common core mission—to light up children’s worlds with opportunities for learning. Emerging from fog on mountain roads, turning street corners in busy cities, or rolling along endless stretches of open prairie, the yellow school bus was a consistent symbol of schooling that united diverse education systems across the United States. That diversity of systems and structures, unified by a common mission, was good.

Dr. Doremus did not believe in a standardized curriculum. His idea of a good curriculum was to hire the most intelligent, spirited teachers you can find and then support them in their quests to build strong classrooms centered on studying what students care about. Some present-day classroom examples illustrate what he meant.

At Chadwick School in Palos Verdes, California, teacher Cris Lozon’s kindergartners found a hole in the ground during recess one day that intrigued them. “Teacher, please come here,” a student said. “There’s a deep hole in the ground, and we don’t know what it is! It wasn’t there yesterday, but it’s there now” (Lozon, 2012, p. 2). Earlier in the year, the students had experienced holes in the ground, as places in which they planted seeds. Now, as they speculated about what caused the hole, how deep it was, and whether it could be the entrance to an underground cave like those they had discussed in class, this simple hole became a place to select tools for measurement, hypothesize about causes, and collaborate on problem solving.

At a summer program at the Long Island Eastern Enrichment School in New York, middle school teacher Lyndsay McCabe led her students in a lively discussion of book banning. The inquiry began because Ms. McCabe had recommended Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* (Scholastic, 2008), a book the students said they were not allowed to read at their home schools. In talking about the reasons books are often banned, Ms. McCabe reported, “The students assumed that banned books would have ‘bad words’ and violence; they were surprised that books that dealt with racism were sometimes banned, since they saw racism as a real part of history that was not to be covered up” (personal communication, July 2012). They were also surprised that censorship for racial content was more frequent in the North; they had assumed that this would be a more sensitive issue in the South. Students later consulted the librarian and multiple sources and pored over maps and statistics to find data that would answer their questions and confirm or refute patterns they had observed.

These teachers were certainly addressing rigorous curriculum standards for higher-order thinking and 21st century learning. But do such efforts fit into the standardized model that is in danger of becoming more common across the United States today? So much has changed in the last
Diversity is on the verge of extinction—diversity of curriculum, instructional practices, and assessment.

30 years. Diversity is on the verge of extinction—diversity of curriculum, instructional practices, and assessment. We are moving into an era that will link Common Core standards with a Common Core curriculum taught by teachers who will assess student learning through a slate of Common Core exams and be evaluated with a common rubric that uses scores on these exams as measures of teacher quality.

Some think this is progress. We don’t. We think it deflects energy away from opportunities for building a collegial professional culture aimed at real teaching and learning. We think education is facing a crisis. The question is, Can we emerge from this crisis with a renewed focus on real teaching and learning and a wholesale rejection of standardization?

The Homepage of Real Learning
The Common Core standards themselves aren’t the problem. In fact, the standards are aligned with the kind of constructivist teaching and learning observed in the classrooms of Cris Lozon and Lyndsay McCabe. But the Common Core State Standards Initiative goes far beyond the content of the standards themselves. The initiative conflates standards with standardization. For instance, many states are mandating that school districts select standardized student outcome measures and teacher evaluation systems from a pre-established state list. To maximize the likelihood of student success on standardized measures, many districts are requiring teachers to use curriculum materials produced by the same companies that are producing the testing instruments, even predetermining the books students will read on the basis of the list of sample texts that illustrate the standard. The initiative compartmentalizes thinking, privileges profit-making companies, narrows the creativity and professionalism of teachers, and limits meaningful student learning.

The homepage of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (www.corestandards.org) declares the standards to be “robust” and “relevant to the real world.” In our view, robust and relevant learning is determined by what occurs in classrooms among teachers and students, not by standardized curriculum content mandated from above. The homepage of learning isn’t on the Common Core State Standards Initiative website—it is in the minds of individual students, supported by their teachers.

Good teachers set up classrooms rich in opportunities for students to construct integrated knowledge transferable across disciplines. They offer interdisciplinary, authentic investigations that provoke students to confront cognitive challenges in the pursuit of answers to their own questions. They invite students to think about ideas that matter to them and to resolve potential contradictions, and they help students develop the skills and dispositions to think about those ideas at increasingly deep levels.

This kind of classroom activity is tough intellectual work for both teachers and students. It’s demanding—and it’s energizing. The payoff is that it enables students to take ownership of their knowledge (Brooks, 2002, 2011; Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

Is the Common Core State Standards Initiative likely to promote this kind of teaching and learning? If experience is any guide, the answer is no. Martin
Haberman (1991), in his hallmark study of the “pedagogy of poverty,” identifies the prominent instructional practices observed in most high-poverty environments as one-way communication with rote memory activities. Under such a regime, students come to understand school as a place to obey, to repeat what the teacher tells them, and to seek high scores on tests. They do not experience the opportunity to build their repertoire for investigating, inquiring, and refining their understandings of literature, civics, scientific theories, or mathematical reasoning.

In an update of his study, Haberman (2010) found that the instructional methods that he decried in 1991 have not only become standard during the No Child Left Behind era, but have come to be regarded as best instructional practice. Particularly in high-poverty environments, our schools are narrowing, if not entirely eliminating, opportunities for students to develop the skills and dispositions associated with 21st century learning. Curiosity, exploration, perseverance, critical and creative thinking, and complex problem solving are being pushed aside and replaced with test preparation curriculums. The increased standardization promoted by the Common Core State Standards Initiative threatens to bring in more of the same.

The initiative is at least as likely to perpetuate the continuation of bad teaching as to increase good teaching. Excellent teachers, as they always have, will undoubtedly continue to engage in the practices that the Common Core standards endorse: balancing informational and narrative texts, helping students build knowledge within the disciplines, scaffolding complexity of text material, fostering rigorous conversations connected to the content, nurturing students’ abilities to offer evidence in crafting an argument, and building academic vocabulary. But less-skilled administrators and teachers who interpreted the “old” state standards as directives and followed those directives with little thought will likely do the same thing with the “new” standards.

**Meaningful education reform is not something you can mandate, standardize, or easily measure.**

**Real Learning, Committed Culture**

Standards are not new, and they are not bad. They are old, and they are good. It is the Common Core State Standards Initiative that is miscast as the epicenter of education reform.

Meaningful education reform is not something you can mandate, standardize, or easily measure. It requires a collegial culture in which teachers are continually advancing their practice and making adjustments on the basis of their students’ current levels of understandings of literature, civics, scientific theories, or mathematical reasoning.

When we integrate new and compatible instructional practices into present repertoires or eject nonworking instructional practices and replace them with new ones, we are engaging in professional learning. Leadership teams must establish structures for professional learning that foster progress toward ever more effective teaching practices emerging from understandings of learning processes. Some examples of such structures include

- **Professional learning walks**, in which groups of educators move together through the school, taking individual notes in search of broad patterns related to deep questions about curriculum and instructional practices.
- **Tuning protocols**, through which everyone has a voice in the discussion and contributes in a structured way.
- **Lesson studies**, in which teachers come together to plan a research lesson that will be observed and analyzed by a small group of educators and reported on to the larger faculty, so all can benefit (Killion & Hirsh, 2011).

Teachers are the key players in this process, and their voices must be involved so it’s not done to them, but with them.

**Not from Above, But from Within**

As management consultant Meg Wheatley (2009) wrote, “Change doesn’t happen from a leader...
announcing the plan” (p. 25). Our education system can no longer tolerate the tyranny of unfocused, misguided, or reactionary leadership imposed through those outside the profession and promoted by government regulations, funding, and expectations. As education leaders, we need to self-organize and reorganize while listening to and learning from one another.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative is not the solution for what ails education; standardization can never be the solution. In place of the current initiative, we propose using the common standards to support cultures within schools that put teacher professionalism and student learning at the center. The standards themselves can enhance professional conversations about teaching and learning. The power and efficacy of the programs that schools offer students derive from the knowledge constructed in such conversations, and are built on trusting relationships that revolve around the core mission of schooling: to light up children’s worlds with opportunities for learning.

**References**


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