Common Core and Curriculum

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By educationrealist

> To make the distinction between standards (what students are supposed to learn) and curricula (roughly, how to teach them) really seem to matter, you have to take one of two extreme positions: either that standards have almost no curricular implications or that standards effectively create a de facto curriculum.
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> —Paul Bruno, The CCSS Really Aren't A National Curriculum

Well, yeah. The standards have almost no curricular implications. Duh.

Bruno says I'm not being plausible, but remember this is from a guy who spends a lot of time arguing about science standards, which he wouldn't do unless he thought they mattered, and they don't.

Generally, I agree with Bruno's post, by the way, but I haven't written in a while and I thought, while I'm mulling over a post on the New Jersey piece (really excellent read, btw, I'd give a shot to explaining why none of this matters.

So for starters, what is the difference between standards, curriculum, and teaching methods?

You, the Mike Petrilli lookalike, there in the corner. Or you, Kathleen Porter Magee, always raising your hand first with annoying Hermione-like arrogance, what's that? You want to let other people answer first? You were just asking to pee? Really? No answer from the two who have "Common Core is standards, *not* curriculum" tattoed on your foreheads?

I don't use math text books to teach algebra one, geometry, or algebra II. I resort to them occasionally in pre-calc. Haven't taught trigonometry—I start next week, so I'll report back. I've discussed my use or lack of use before; I have a lot of my own intellectual property wrapped up in my curriculum development. Many teachers use books. But they don't step through the books chapter by chapter, section by section. They use parts of the books, narrowing it down to the content they consider essential. Many teachers, when handed the new text selected by the district after hours upon hours of painful meetings and arguments, simply make copies of their old texts for the kids.

I've read that some English teachers are changing their fiction selections based on the provided Common Core list. So what? They change their selections for all sorts of reasons, and since teachers won't all make the same selections, it's nothing approaching a national curriculum. Look, high school English is pretty basic: we try to turn kids into English lit majors, which is a monumental waste of time and energy. (In other words, English teachers are already the people who don't really give a sh** what their students feel.) For all the bleating about non-fiction vs. fiction, the *curriculum* won't change much, because teachers aren't going to change much. At the end of the day, their kids will still have to write essays on fiction, fabricating opinions and thoughts that they, too, don't give a sh** about.

The Common Core is much more interested in creating analysts than giving all kids the ability to craft a sentence, alas. So the curriculum will be entirely unaffected, with possibly some alterations in the specific books the kids are being forced to pretend to read.

The only curricular impact the standards could have is when they demand *content* that wasn't previously required. This doesn't come up much in English. I mean, I suppose it could if teachers take the exemplars seriously, and expect their second graders to read Sarah, Plain and Tall and discuss whether or not the speaker in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" actually intends to kill himself or is merely contemplating his death. But I'm thinking the parents will squawk.

In math, it comes up frequently, given that the standards operate under the fundamental premise that we math teachers aren't teaching topics because we didn't know we were supposed to. Plus, we really didn't feel like working that hard, you know? And then lots of us don't really understand the topics because we weren't taught this high school level material in college. Remember, most of the people who opine about teacher education haven't really mastered the concept of the credential test.

So their thinking goes something like this: kids aren't ready for college because they don't know algebra. And of course, we teachers are lazy, so unless we have strict external standards on what to teach, we'll just say, "You want three years of math instead of two? Fine, we'll just spread out the same content." Our kids could have learned it all this time, you see, but we don't like hard work. The teachers. The kids are fine with hard work, they've just been waiting impatiently for us teachers to give them the opportunity.

In short, the key to ensuring kids do better in math is *writing down standards* that tell us what to teach. Then make sure we do it and hey, presto.

Oh, yeah, and getting smarter teachers. No one in education reform has ever given a sign of knowing what a credential test is, unless it is to trumpet the news that 98% of ed school candidates pass the licensure test. Well, yeah. That's because since Title II of the 1998 Higher Education Act came around, ed schools required all their applicants to pass at least one section of the test for admission. This has led to a tremendous dearth of black and Hispanic teachers, because they can't pass the tests and get into ed school, as I describe here. The passage rates of the tests are well-documented and aren't anything like 98%.

But I digress.

The ~~idiots well-meaning morons~~ highly paid consultants who shoved Common Core upon us have this weird delusion that defining standards will give a roadmap of what to teach, and provided that the teachers teach, the kids learn. So, as I've written, they've pretty much taken half of high school math and shoved it into middle school.

This leaves algebra I teachers all sorts of time to delve into deeper content, because the kids mastered all the easy stuff:–lines, systems, and basic quadratics–back in seventh grade, along with many pesky geometry facts.

Here, dear readers, is the point: while *curriculum* will be unaffected, *topics* might be. But that won't depend on the curriculum so much as the testing schedule.

Say, for example, you're an algebra I teacher and your state has end of year tests matched to Common Core. Well, that end of year test is going to have some exponential function questions. In the mythical version of Common Core, the students have mastered linear equations, systems, and proportional thinking, and are ready for the next new thing.

In the real world, your kids won't have the foggiest clue how to graph a line, may vaguely remember what slope is, and won't have a clue about systems, and

you're going to have to teach it all again. But again, your test is matched to Common Core standards, so you're going to have to give your kids some vague notion of what an exponential function is. Not much. Look, any kid taking algebra as a freshman isn't going to be great shakes anyway, so it's just a week or two. Just enough to have some sort of clue for the tests.

If your state doesn't have end of year tests, then hell, you boot the exponential functions. Turn them over to geometry, where we never do proofs, largely skip constructions, and....naw, no one will do them in geometry. They simply don't really apply....well, maybe geometric growth? But if not tests, you'll have to worry–will the kids remember it by next year? Probably not. Better to use extra geometry time to reinforce linear and quadratic equations, and proportional thinking, send exponential functions back to Algebra II, where they belong.

Notice how little of this has anything to do with standards, and everything to do with tests. If, as Common Core promises, our high school kids aren't tested freshman and sophomore years, I suspect many math teachers will ignore Common Core entirely. By the end of their junior year, our students need to know through Algebra II. Beyond that, it's up to us. We're math teachers, bitches. That's how we roll.

Think I'm exaggerating? I taught Algebra one my second year as a teacher. My kids *did* have an end of year test. I nonetheless did not teach over half my kids the quadratic formula, or completing the square. My kids did okay, given their low abilities. And that's actual algebra one material, unlike exponential functions. One of the teachers I w

Topics aside, curriculum is really about sequencing,