
Democracy & Education

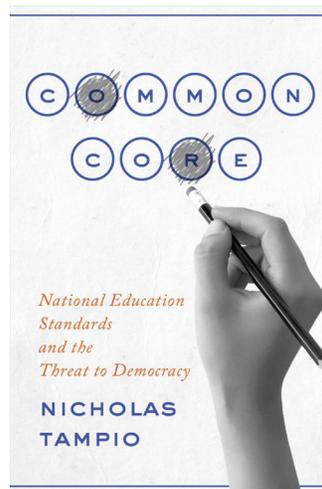
Controversy and the Common Core.

A Book Review of *Common Core: National Education Standards and the Threat to Democracy*

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FOR A DECADE, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have been no stranger to controversy. Tangled in the discourse have been numerous scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and community members. Many of those in favor of the Common Core argue that national standards provide a foundation on which to build equitable opportunities for student success, while those opposed say that they disempower autonomy of local schools, community members, parents, and students themselves. In *Common Core: National Education Standards and the Threat to Democracy*, Tampio (2018) highlights how national standards create barriers for students to operate as citizens in a democratic society. He advocates for a return to localized power and control, which he admits may not be a silver bullet to solve the country's education afflictions but does reflect a governing system that may be equitable, democratic, and reflective of the talents and interests of individual students and communities.

Stemming from his own children's experiences with the CCSS, Tampio (2018), an associate professor of political science at Fordham University, pens this timely piece in which he unpacks the history, philosophy, content, and controversy surrounding the Common Core. Tampio argues that the standards are fundamentally undemocratic insofar as they allow one faction of society to decide what and when all students should learn. Alternatively, he suggests that decentralizing government control over education can empower parents, educators, students, and community members to make decisions that guide public schools. Throughout



the book, Tampio, a Democrat, draws on the words of Diane Ravitch, Jesse H. Rhodes, and John Dewey to bolster his arguments against the CCSS and national education standards more broadly.

In chapter one, Tampio (2018) presents four arguments in favor of national education standards that are prevalent in curricular discourse: the systemic argument, which states that national standards can make the country's education system "run like clockwork" (p. 19);

the equity argument, which argues that national standards can help to close the opportunity gap for historically underserved students; the economic argument, which contends that national standards can prepare students to compete in a global economy; and the democratic capacities argument, which shows how the Common Core can help build students' ability to function in a democratic society, specifically through developing private autonomy. Tampio argues that while each of these arguments contains a grain of truth, the Common Core movement has still disempowered local communities and school boards from making important decisions regarding the education of their own students.

Chapter two lays out four arguments against national education standards. First, Tampio (2018) presents the dangers of factions and the good of participation arguments, which warn that since people in a free society may not agree on the best way to

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educate children, society “ought to create space for many factions to shape education” (p. 31). Moreover, Tampio argues that relying on one faction to create national standards is undemocratic insofar as it allows one small group to dictate how the larger whole should be educated. Next, Tampio presents the entrepreneurial argument, in which he explains how local control of education creates more opportunities for students to develop entrepreneurial skills. Finally, Tampio describes the egalitarian argument, which argues that national education standards can lead to curriculum narrowing, often depriving students of color and students in poverty of classes that may foster creativity and innovation.

Each of the subsequent chapters is devoted to unpacking a specific set of education standards, including the English Language Arts (ELA) & Literacy Standards, Mathematics Standards, Next Generation of Science Standards (NGSS), Advanced Placement U.S. History Standards (APUSH), and National Sexuality Education Standards (NSES). Within each chapter, Tampio covers the history and philosophy behind each of the respective standards. Next, Tampio dissects specific standards within each set, using the purpose, wording, and emphasized skills within the standards to make an argument against them. His argument is characterized by his use of each set of standards to highlight the dangers of centralized curriculum and his subsequent push to increase autonomy for schools and districts.

Perhaps Tampio’s (2018) most prevalent argument against the CCSS is their emphasis on close reading, which he claims is often too confining and rigid for students. For example, ELA Standards frequently ask students to make an argument using text-based evidence, which Tampio argues has more to do with quoting accurately than it has to do with deep thinking. Specifically, Tampio, who considers himself a progressive educator, draws on Dewey’s (1916) argument from *Democracy and Education* to call on policymakers and educators to consider how to personalize education so that every student has an opportunity to develop their own talents and interests to the fullest extent. Tampio states, “From a Deweyan perspective, Common Core close reading teaches children to place their own interests and concerns in a separate compartment of their mind than the one completing the assignment” (p. 54). For Tampio, curriculum and learning should be reflective of students’ own talents and interests.

Regarding mathematics, Tampio (2018) argues that the standards, which call on students to explain their answers via “verbalisms,” often result in students resorting to memorized phrases. Tampio argues that this is especially true when students take the math portion of the SAT. To demonstrate his point, Tampio uses excerpts from the EngageNY curriculum and the math portion of the SAT. His other critique is that the CCSS in math, especially in early grades, progress too slowly. As a result, by the end of high school, students are left with little to no exposure to calculus, which could affect their preparedness should they want to enter the STEM field after graduation.

Tampio (2018) also critiques the science standards’ emphasis on close reading, specifically using the NGSS online assessment, Programme for International Student Success (PISA), explaining that if students have mastered how to decode texts, they should be

able to do well on tests without actually having to know much about the content itself. Tampio’s critique of the history standards is aimed primarily at the curriculum framework for Advanced Placement U.S. History (APUSH), which he again argues requires students to demonstrate close reading skills through their ability to interpret various historical documents. Furthermore, Tampio suggests that, like for most AP courses, the curriculum is explicitly and carefully structured to help students pass a test. Because of the test-heavy nature the APUSH curriculum presents, Tampio feels that students may be missing out on local diversity, which he believes makes the United States more interesting and promising. For the National Sexuality Education Standards (NSES), which Tampio admits have not had as much of an effect on schooling as other standards, Tampio expresses his doubt that a set of sexuality standards would placate all factions of the American political system.

Tampio (2018) concludes the book with a push to consider returning to a system that values local control. He begins by reconstructing ideas from Dewey, creating an argument that aligns with what Dewey (1916) wrote. He argues that more local power creates more vibrant educational environments in which people feel more connected to their community. Furthermore, he argues that the alternative to national standards is to empower *all* stakeholders to decide how to teach all fields of inquiry. Throughout the book, Tampio does not mince words when it comes to his stance on the CCSS and national educational standards as a whole. Although he admits bias, Tampio does well in presenting arguments both for and against national standards. He often hypothesizes what a CCSS supporter might say and subsequently provides a counterargument. His critiques against the CCSS are anchored in the language of the standards themselves. All in all, Tampio’s assessments, though initiated as a result of a personal experience, are undoubtedly worthy of a new conversation around the potential consequences the CCSS have on democracy and the capacity for students to participate in democratic citizenship.

Perhaps missing from Tampio’s (2016) argument is a clearer distinction between his opposition to the CCSS and national education standards more broadly. His largest argument seems to be that national standards create barriers for local autonomy that could benefit students in a more personalized manner. However, when critiquing each set of standards, his primary argument has more to do with the CCSS’ emphasis on close reading. While he is opposed to both the CCSS and national education standards in general, I’m left wondering if he would support an education initiative that is both centralized *and* creates space for local autonomy? Overall, Tampio’s book pushes educators, policymakers, and community members to consider the implications of the CCSS not through a political lens but instead as a democratic citizen. Many of those opposed to the CCSS have typically been associated with conservative politics, while those in favor have been tied to the left. As mentioned previously, Tampio refers to himself as a Democrat; however, his argument against the CCSS could open a bipartisan conversation around a topic that is often so politicized.

References

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Tampio, N. (2018). *Common core: National education standards and the threat to democracy*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.