



Common Core Dilemma: Who Owns our Schools? By Mercedes K. Schneider

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Abstract

This review of Common Core Dilemma: Who Owns Our Schools? explores the complicated development of the Common Core State Standards in the US as detailed by Mercedes K. Schneider. This book articulates the entangled background leading up to the current educational reform as well as discloses those who lobbied, funded, established, and facilitated the deeply flawed agenda of the No Child Left Behind legislation. Schneider's account is interesting, accessible, and important for all public education stakeholders.

Keywords: *Common Core State Standards, assessment, education reform, public education, funding, No Child Left Behind*

On December 10, 2015 United States President, Barak Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act into law, which is the latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This national education law comes eight years after the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law was supposed to be rewritten. On the heels of this controversial federal law, Mercedes K. Schneider's newest book, *Common Core Dilemma: Who Owns Our Schools?* analyzes the complicated background leading up to the current educational reform in the USA. Schneider's straightforward and extensive account is an important read for all education stakeholders. Her text discloses those who lobbied, funded, established, and facilitated the deeply flawed agenda of NCLB. With ever-increasing corporate interests driving public education reform around the world, Schneider's book can be seen as providing both context and caution.

The question of who owns America's schools is complex to say the least. Schneider attempts to answer just that in both a coherent and candid way. Chapter 1 begins by providing the framework of federal public education law and introducing the climate out of which NCLB became both a necessary and inevitable reform. What began in 1965 as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to assist schools educating children in poverty has become a method of standards-based control positioned upon high-stakes assessments.

The children of the United States continuously performed poorly on narrow and biased state assessments, which according the federal government necessitated a common set of national standards. Schneider lays out this progression in Chapters 2 and 3, where she begins to introduce leading individuals and businesses that took interest in the development of the Common

Core. One of the founding fathers and owners of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is the National Governors Association (NGA). The NGA created Achieve Inc., a nonprofit standards and assessment ‘clearinghouse’ to evaluate the public school systems in the U.S. Achieve’s report of state standards claimed to utilize international standards as models, however Schneider reveals that only Japanese standards were available at the time of the report. The final message served not only the universal standards movement but also indicated the need for assessments to measure them.

In Chapter 4, Schneider explains that the Education Trust and Fordham Institute along with Achieve are responsible for the idea of CCSS. Schneider continues to build upon her argument that those making crucial decisions in education reform have little to no experience in the field. This convoluted web of acronyms, individuals, groups, and businesses is enough to make one’s head spin. Schneider has a practical way of writing and continuously summarizing the facts to make this text accessible to all readers.

In 2008, NGA and Achieve produced a report, “Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. students Receive a World-Class Education.” Through a neoliberal lens this report clearly identified the need for a single set of K-12 standards:

The primary gist of the report is the now-too-familiar panic line that American education needs a test-driven overhaul in order to keep up globally. The underlying message is: “We need to see what other nations are doing because we think we can isolate what causes them to score higher than us on international tests. Then, we can pay attention to select issues, the ones that the experts named in this report perceive as those that produce higher test scores and graduation rates. By emulating select qualities, we are trying to beat other nations in the international tests, which will prove our superiority and therefore translate into national economic security.” (p. 71)

Throughout the book, Schneider continuously pulls at the common thread of competition both between and among corporations, politicians, students, teachers, schools, and educational systems in general. Chapter 5 further explores the Common Core Memorandum of Understanding (CCSS MOU), which was an agreement signed by governors and state superintendents as a model for the creation of CCSS.

In 2009, NGA reported that 51 states and territories signed the CCSS MOU. In Chapter 6 Schneider examines the backgrounds and roles of the developers of CCSS: Achieve Inc., ACT (American College Testing company), and the College Board company (known for its Advanced Placement (AP) and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)). Interestingly, teachers were never named as CCSS developers and in fact educators were only superficially part of the review process.

In Chapter 7 Schneider reviews five flawed surveys conducted by national-level, education-related organizations. She argues that the manipulated data served as a means to foster public acceptance and promote CCSS, declaring that teachers and administrators embraced the standards. Schneider deliberately acknowledges her limitations as she attempts to explain the many facets and contributing factors to the creation of the CCSS. A great advantage of Schneider’s writing style is her skill as a teacher who regularly checks for her readers’ understanding, reviewing and breaking down complicated ideas.

The legal owners of the Common Core are the NGA and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). Schneider takes a look into the copyright, terms of use, and public license of the CCSS in Chapter 8. “The coercive, high-stakes nature of CCSS makes the details

of its license a mirror into both the profit motives and the utter lack of accountability that the NGA and CCSSO escape via their exclusive control over CCSS” (p. 138). Schneider explains and critiques the technical, convoluted language of these documents in meaningful ways that the reader can readily understand.

Promoting the Common Core Standards and Assessments would require a great deal of funding and those leading this reform could not ask the federal government for money in fear of public backlash as this was to be a state-led initiative. The solution to this problem “lay in the test-driven-reform-minded philanthropy” (p.129). Billionaire Bill Gates and his wife, Melinda were asked to provide millions to back the development of the CCSS, to which they accepted. In Chapter 9 Schneider details the involvement and influence Bill Gates had in the creation and adoption of the standards and their necessary assessments. In a particularly interesting stance, Schneider explains that as co-chair of the National Council of State Legislatures, Gates addressed the legislators, and she provides excerpts from his speech,

The state-led Common Core State Standards Initiative is developing clear, rigorous common standards that match the best in the world...This is encouraging—but identifying common standards is not enough. *We’ll know we’ve succeeded when the curriculum and the tests are aligned to these standards.* (emphasis mine, p. 144)

Perhaps the most perplexing part of Gates’ announcement is that the CCSS had yet to be created when he spoke to the legislators. Schneider further explains Gates’ involvement with several other organizations as a speaker, member, and benefactor like the NGA (received \$25.8 million between May 2002 and June 2014), CCSSO (\$84.6 million since May 2002), and American Federation of Teachers (\$11.3 million).

Chapter 10 outlines the specific ways in which the United States Federal Government gained control of a national set of standards and assessments. The previously mentioned CCSS MOU that states and territories signed, defined the role that the federal government would play; chiefly through financial support. In order for states to obtain federal Race to the Top (RTTP) funds they would have to abide by “Four Assurances of the ARRA” (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) the first of which states, “Adopt internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace” (p. 164). Adopting Common Core State Standards certainly met this criterion. Schneider emphasizes the calculated process that the federal government pursued to ensure that they were not overreaching their control in terms of obtaining and providing financial support to the states.

The final chapter is a comprehensive review of the international education powerhouse, Pearson. Schneider begins with their history from a construction company in 1844 to the acquisition company focusing on publishing, international media, and education that it is today. Between 2009 and 2011 Pearson Charitable Foundation paid the CCSSO \$540,000, quite a conflict of interest. As one of two CCSS assessment consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) awarded Pearson the contract (\$240 million per year) to develop the PARCC test despite, as Schneider points out, their well-established history of testing errors. As developers of this test, they inevitably gain the credibility to supplement it through standards-aligned curriculum and professional development. Schneider discusses the parallels and differences between the United State’s CCSS and the United Kingdom’s version loosely called the reformed General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs). One of the most strik-

ing contrasts is that the UK “reformed GCSEs” are not bound to high-stakes tests. Schneider expands,

I find it ironic that the United Kingdom has a national curriculum, a concept forbidden in the United States for fear that the federal government would use it to override state and local autonomy, and yet, the UK government is showing no interest in using its national curriculum as a means to panicking the UK public into some international competition dependent upon high-stakes testing outcomes. The United Kingdom is not trying to “become” 21st-century world power. Meanwhile the United States *is* a 21st-century world power, and its USDOE is micromanaging state education “autonomy” in the name of “racing to the top” (emphasis in original). (p. 186)

The power that this company has over American education is astounding and Schneider highlights some of their most egregious offenses in this chapter.

Finally, Schneider wraps her text up with a four-page conclusion titled, *So What Have We Learned Here?* The book overwhelmingly supports her main argument that “CCSS is designed to fail” (p. 193). Schneider provides a brief overview of eight lessons to take from her text, like wrapping this big mess that is CCSS with a pretty little bow.

Although this undertaking was no easy task, Schneider explains the facts in an accessible way. The countless individuals and organizations that had their hands in the development of CCSS can be perplexing to the reader. Fortunately, Schneider provides a glossary of key individuals, organizations, and terms that I found to be quite helpful in navigating this text.

While *Common Core Dilemma: Who Owns Our Schools* is an informative book for all, it is especially important for educators. Schneider’s detailed progression of events that led to the development and adoption of the CCSS is historical and cautionary. The activism that Schneider promotes throughout her book is clearly evident and inspiring.

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