



Summer Institute on International Affairs 2014

“Education”

Week 3
Wednesday, July 9
4:00 - 8:00 PM

DUE DATES

Program Description

Education in California has been in the national spotlight in recent months as the court ruling on the case Vergara vs California has ended teacher tenure in California, making it easier to fire tenured teachers who have become “ineffective”. However, the state still struggles to keep students in the classroom as an estimated 20% of students grades K-6 were guilty of truancy. Further, California public schools have also dealt with budget cuts of up to 5.8 billion in the last few years. Inequality in funding for public schools still persists as schools in lower income districts tend to do far worse than their counterparts in more affluent areas.

California is also among the forty-five states in the US to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), an education reform aimed at standardizing mathematics and English in schools across the US. The CCSS is being hailed by its supporters as a means to halt the decline of US educational performance in comparison to other developed nations around the world. Countries such as Poland and South Korea have far surpassed the US in mathematics and critical reading in recent years, as shown in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a test given to designated fifteen year old teens in sixty-three participating countries. The Common Core is supposed to be judged against the standards of top schools around the world so that US students may be prepared for a professional life at a level similar to those of their global counterparts. However, states are facing some pushback as transitioning to the CCSS has been less than smooth.

Required Reading #1:

Why Other Countries Teach Better: Three Reasons Students Do Better Overseas

The Editorial Board
New York Times
December 17, 2013

Millions of laid-off American factory workers were the first to realize that they were competing against job seekers around the globe with comparable skills but far smaller paychecks. But a similar fate also awaits workers who aspire to high-skilled, high-paying jobs in engineering and technical fields unless this country learns to prepare them to compete for the challenging work that the new global economy requires.

The American work force has some of the weakest mathematical and problem-solving skills in the developed world. In a survey by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a global policy organization, adults in the United States scored far below average and better than only two of 12 other developed comparison countries, Italy and Spain. Worse still, the United States is losing ground in worker training to countries in Europe and Asia whose schools are not just superior to ours but getting steadily better.

The lessons from those high-performing countries can no longer be ignored by the United States if it hopes to remain competitive.

Finland: Teacher Training

Though it dropped several rankings in last year's tests, Finland has for years been in the highest global ranks in literacy and mathematical skills. The reason dates to the postwar period, when Finns first began to consider creating comprehensive schools that would provide [a quality, high-level education](#) for poor and wealthy alike. These schools stand out in several ways, providing daily hot meals; health and dental services; psychological counseling; and an array of services for families and children in need. None of the services are means tested. Moreover, all high school students must take [one of the most rigorous required curriculums in the world](#), including physics, chemistry, biology, philosophy, music and at least two foreign languages.

But the most important effort has been in the training of teachers, where the country leads most of the world, including the United States, thanks to a national decision made in 1979. The country decided to move preparation out of teachers' colleges and into the universities, where it became more rigorous. By professionalizing the teacher corps and raising its value in society, the Finns have made teaching the country's most popular occupation for the young. These programs recruit from the top quarter of the graduating high school class, demonstrating that such training has a prestige lacking in the United States. In 2010, for example, 6,600 applicants competed for 660 available primary school preparation slots in the eight Finnish universities that educate teachers.

The teacher training system in this country is abysmal by comparison. [A recent report by the National Council on Teacher Quality](#) called teacher preparation programs "an industry of mediocrity," rating only 10 percent of more than 1,200 of them as high quality. Most have low or no academic standards for entry. [Admission requirements for teaching programs at the State University of New York](#) were raised in September, but only a handful of other states have taken similar steps.

Finnish teachers are not drawn to the profession by money; they earn only slightly more than the national average salary. But their salaries go up by about a third in the first 15 years, several percentage points higher than those of their American counterparts. Finland also requires stronger academic credentials for its junior high and high school teachers and rewards them with higher salaries.

Canada: School funding

Canada also has a more rigorous and selective teacher preparation system than the United States, but the most striking difference between the countries is how they pay for their schools.

American school districts rely far too heavily on property taxes, which means districts in wealthy areas bring in more money than those in poor ones. State tax money to make up the gap usually falls far short of the need in districts where poverty and other challenges are greatest.

Americans tend to see such inequalities as the natural order of things. Canadians do not. In recent decades, for example, three of Canada's largest and best-performing provinces — Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario — have each addressed the inequity issue by moving to province-level funding formulas. [As a recent report by the Center for American Progress notes](#), these formulas allow the provinces to determine how much money each district will receive, based on each district's size and needs. The systems even out the tax base and help ensure that resources are distributed equitably, not clustered in wealthy districts.

These were not boutique experiments. The Ontario system has more than two million public school students — more than in 45 American states and the District of Columbia. But the contrast to the American system could not be more clear. Ontario, for example, strives to eliminate or at least minimize the funding inequality that would otherwise exist between poor and wealthy districts. In most American states, however, the wealthiest, highest-spending districts spend about twice as much per pupil as the lowest-spending districts, according to [a federal advisory commission report](#). In some states, including California, the ratio is more than three to one.

This has left 40 percent of American public school students in districts of “concentrated student poverty,” the commission's report said.

Shanghai: Fighting Elitism

China's educational system was largely destroyed during Mao Zedong's “cultural revolution,” which devalued intellectual pursuits and demonized academics. Since shortly after Mao's death in 1976, the country has been rebuilding its education system at lightning speed, led by Shanghai, the nation's largest and most internationalized city. Shanghai, of course, has powerful tools at its disposal, including the might of the authoritarian state and the nation's centuries-old reverence for scholarship and education. It has had little difficulty advancing a potent succession of reforms that allowed it [to achieve universal enrollment rapidly](#). The real proof is that its students were first in the world in math, science and literacy on last year's international exams.

One of its strengths is that the city has mainly moved away from an elitist system in which greater resources and elite instructors were given to favored schools, and toward a more egalitarian, neighborhood attendance system in which students of diverse backgrounds and abilities are educated under the same roof. The city has focused on bringing the once-shunned children of migrant workers into the school system. In the words of the O.E.C.D, Shanghai has embraced the notion that migrant children are also “our children” — meaning that city's future depends in part on them and that they, too, should be included in the educational process. Shanghai has taken several approaches to repairing the disparity between strong schools and weak ones, as measured by infrastructure and educational quality. Some poor schools were closed, reorganized, or merged with higher-level schools. Money was transferred to poor, rural schools to construct new buildings or update old ones. Teachers were transferred from cities to rural areas and vice versa. Stronger urban schools were paired with rural schools with the aim

of improving teaching methods. And under a more recent strategy, strong schools took over the administration of weak ones. The Chinese are betting that the ethos, management style and teaching used in the strong schools will be transferable.

America's stature as an economic power is being threatened by societies above us and below us on the achievement scale. Wealthy nations with high-performing schools are consolidating their advantages and working hard to improve. At the same time, less-wealthy countries like Chile, Brazil, Indonesia and Peru, have made what the [O.E.C.D. describes](#) as "impressive gains catching up from very low levels of performance." In other words, if things remain as they are, countries that lag behind us will one day overtake us.

The United States can either learn from its competitors abroad — and finally summon the will to make necessary policy changes — or fall further and further behind. The good news is that this country has an impressive history of school improvement, as reflected in the early-20th-century compulsory school movement and the postwar expansion, which broadened access to college. Similar levels of focus and effort will be needed to move forward again.

Source:

The Editorial Board. "Why Other Countries Teach Better." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 17 Dec. 2013. Web. 01 July 2014.

Required Reading #2:

American Schools vs. the World: Expensive, Unequal, Bad at Math

Julia Ryan
The Atlantic
December 3, 2013

The U.S. education system is mediocre compared to the rest of the world, according to an [international ranking](#) of OECD countries.

More than half a million 15-year-olds around the world took the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2012. The test, which is administered every three years and focuses largely on math, but includes minor sections in science and reading, is often used as a snapshot of the global state of education. The results, published today, show the U.S. trailing behind educational powerhouses like Korea and Finland.

Not much has changed since 2000, when the U.S. scored along the OECD average in every subject: This year, the U.S. scores below average in math and ranks 17th among the 34 OECD countries. It scores close to the OECD average in science and reading and ranks 21st in science and 17th in reading.

Here are some other takeaways from the report:

America Is Struggling at Math

The U.S. scored below the PISA math mean and ranks 26th out of the 34 OECD countries. The U.S. math score is not statistically different than the following countries: Norway, Portugal, Italy, Spain, Russian Federation, Slovak Republic, Lithuania, Sweden, and Hungary.

On average, 13 percent of students scored at the highest or second highest level on the PISA test, making them “top performers.” Fifty-five percent of students in Shanghai-China were considered top performers, while only nine percent of American students were.

One in four U.S. students did not reach the PISA baseline level 2 of mathematics proficiency. At this level, “students begin to demonstrate the skills that will enable them to participate effectively and productively in life,” according to the PISA report.

Even the top students in the United States are behind: This year, the PISA report offered regional scores for Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Florida. Massachusetts, which is a [high-achieving U.S. state](#) and which averaged above the national PISA score, is still two years of formal schooling behind Shanghai.

America Spends a Lot of Money Per Student

The U.S. ranks fifth in spending per student. Only Austria, Luxembourg, Norway, and Switzerland spend more per student. To put this in context: the Slovak Republic, which scores similarly to the U.S., spends \$53,000 per student. The U.S. spends \$115,000. The PISA report notes that, among OECD countries, “higher expenditure on education is not highly predictive of better mathematics scores in PISA.”

Socio-Economic Class Plays a Larger Role in the U.S. Than in Other Countries

Fifteen percent of the American score variation is explained by socio-economic differences between students. Less than 10 percent of score variation in Finland, Hong Kong, Japan, and Norway is due to socio-economic differences.

The U.S. also has a lower than average number of “resilient students,” which PISA defines as “students who are among the 25 percent most socio-economically disadvantaged students but perform much better than would be predicted by their socio-economic class.” On average, seven percent of students are considered resilient. Thirteen percent of students in Korea, Hong Kong, Macao-China, Shanghai-China, Singapore, and Vietnam are “resilient.”

The Countries That Are Doing Well

Parts of China, Singapore, Japan, Korea, and Liechtenstein topped the rankings for math, reading, and science. Finland, which is often pointed to as an example of an excellent school system, continued to perform well. However, the country dropped 2.8 points in math, 1.7 points in reading, and three points in science in “annualized changes in score points,” which are the “average annual change in PISA score points since the country’s earliest participation in PISA.”

The biggest annualized score improvements came from Brazil, Tunisia, Mexico, Turkey, and Portugal. Italy, Poland, and Germany also showed gains since 2003.

How seriously should we take these dismal findings? Educators around the world have called for [tempered reactions](#) to the PISA scores and questioned the [usefulness of the tests](#). Nevertheless, this year's report—and the United States' poor math results—may be worth paying attention to for at least one reason. A [2011 study found](#) that PISA scores are an economic indicator: rising scores are a good sign that a country's economy will grow as well.

Source:

Ryan, Julia. "American Schools vs. the World: Expensive, Unequal, Bad at Math." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 03 Dec. 2013. Web. 29 June 2014.

Required Reading #3:

Education Gap Grows Between Rich and Poor, Studies Show

Sabrina Tavernise
New York Times
February 9, 2012

WASHINGTON — Education was historically considered a great equalizer in American society, capable of lifting less advantaged children and improving their chances for success as adults. But a body of recently published scholarship suggests that the achievement gap between rich and poor children is widening, a development that threatens to dilute education's leveling effects.

It is a well-known fact that children from affluent families tend to do better in school. Yet the income divide has received far less attention from policy makers and government officials than gaps in student accomplishment by race.

Now, in analyses of long-term data published in recent months, researchers are finding that while the achievement gap between white and black students has narrowed significantly over the past few decades, the gap between rich and poor students has grown substantially during the same period.

"We have moved from a society in the 1950s and 1960s, in which race was more consequential than family income, to one today in which family income appears more determinative of educational success than race," said Sean F. Reardon, a Stanford University sociologist. Professor Reardon is the author of [a study that found that the gap in standardized test scores between affluent and low-income students had grown](#) by about 40 percent since the 1960s, and is now double the testing gap between blacks and whites.

In [another study, by researchers from the University of Michigan](#), the imbalance between rich and poor children in college completion — the single most important predictor of success in the work force — has grown by about 50 percent since the late 1980s.

The changes are tectonic, a result of social and economic processes unfolding over many decades. The data from most of these studies end in 2007 and 2008, before the recession's full impact was felt. Researchers said that based on experiences during past recessions, the recent downturn was likely to have aggravated the trend.

"With income declines more severe in the lower brackets, there's a good chance the recession may have widened the gap," Professor Reardon said. In the study he led, researchers analyzed 12 sets of standardized test scores starting in 1960 and ending in 2007. He compared children

from families in the 90th percentile of income — the equivalent of around \$160,000 in 2008, when the study was conducted — and children from the 10th percentile, \$17,500 in 2008. By the end of that period, the achievement gap by income had grown by 40 percent, he said, while the gap between white and black students, regardless of income, had shrunk substantially.

Both studies were first published last fall in a book of research, [“Whither Opportunity?”](#) compiled by the Russell Sage Foundation, a research center for social sciences, and the Spencer Foundation, which focuses on education. Their conclusions, while familiar to a small core of social sciences scholars, are now catching the attention of a broader audience, in part because [income inequality](#) has been a central theme this election season.

The connection between income inequality among parents and the social mobility of their children has been a focus of President Obama as well as some of the Republican presidential candidates.

One reason for the growing gap in achievement, researchers say, could be that wealthy parents invest more time and money than ever before in their children (in weekend sports, ballet, music lessons, math tutors, and in overall involvement in their children’s schools), while lower-income families, which are now more likely than ever to be headed by a single parent, are increasingly stretched for time and resources. This has been particularly true as more parents try to position their children for college, which has become ever more essential for success in today’s economy.

[A study](#) by Sabino Kornrich, a researcher at the Center for Advanced Studies at the Juan March Institute in Madrid, and Frank F. Furstenberg, scheduled to appear in the journal *Demography* this year, found that in 1972, Americans at the upper end of the income spectrum were spending five times as much per child as low-income families. By 2007 that gap had grown to nine to one; spending by upper-income families more than doubled, while spending by low-income families grew by 20 percent.

“The pattern of privileged families today is intensive cultivation,” said Dr. Furstenberg, a professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania.

The gap is also growing in college. The University of Michigan study, by Susan M. Dynarski and Martha J. Bailey, looked at two generations of students, those born from 1961 to 1964 and those born from 1979 to 1982. By 1989, about one-third of the high-income students in the first generation had finished college; by 2007, more than half of the second generation had done so. By contrast, only 9 percent of the low-income students in the second generation had completed college by 2007, up only slightly from a 5 percent college completion rate by the first generation in 1989.

James J. Heckman, an economist at the University of Chicago, argues that parenting matters as much as, if not more than, income in forming a child’s cognitive ability and personality, particularly in the years before children start school.

“Early life conditions and how children are stimulated play a very important role,” he said. “The danger is we will revert back to the mindset of the war on poverty, when poverty was just a matter of income, and giving families more would improve the prospects of their children. If people conclude that, it’s a mistake.”

Meredith Phillips, an associate professor of public policy and sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles, used survey data to show that affluent children spend 1,300 more hours than low-income children before age 6 in places other than their homes, their day care centers, or schools (anywhere from museums to shopping malls). By the time high-income children start school, they have spent about 400 hours more than poor children in literacy activities, she found.

Charles Murray, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute whose book, "Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010," was published Jan. 31, described income inequality as "more of a symptom than a cause."

The growing gap between the better educated and the less educated, he argued, has formed a kind of cultural divide that has its roots in natural social forces, like the tendency of educated people to marry other educated people, as well as in the social policies of the 1960s, like welfare and other government programs, which he contended provided incentives for staying single.

"When the economy recovers, you'll still see all these problems persisting for reasons that have nothing to do with money and everything to do with culture," he said.

There are no easy answers, in part because the problem is so complex, said Douglas J. Besharov, a fellow at the Atlantic Council. Blaming the problem on the richest of the rich ignores an equally important driver, he said: two-earner household wealth, which has lifted the upper middle class ever further from less educated Americans, who tend to be single parents.

The problem is a puzzle, he said. "No one has the slightest idea what will work. The cupboard is bare."

Source:

Tavernise, Sabrina. "Poor Dropping Further Behind Rich in School." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 09 Feb. 2012. Web. 01 July 2014.

Required Reading #4:

Best and Brightest

The Economist
August 17, 2013

Review Of "The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way," By Amanda Ripley. *Simon and Schuster*:

BAMA Companies has been making pies and biscuits in Oklahoma since the 1920s. But the company is struggling to find Okies with the skills to fill even its most basic factory jobs. Such posts require workers to think critically, yet graduates of local schools are often unable to read or do simple maths. This is why the company recently decided to open a new factory in Poland—its first in Europe. "We hear that educated people are plentiful," explains Paula Marshall, Bama's boss.

Poland has made some dramatic gains in education in the past decade. Before 2000 half of the country's rural adults had finished only primary school. Yet international rankings now put the country's students well ahead of America's in science and maths (the strongest predictor of future earnings), even as the country spends far less per pupil. What is Poland doing right? And

what is America doing wrong? Amanda Ripley, an American journalist, seeks to answer such questions in “The Smartest Kids in the World”, her fine new book about the schools that are working around the globe.

Though America’s grim education results come in for special drubbing in this book, the country is not alone in failing to teach its children how to think critically. This, at least, is the view of Andreas Schleicher, the “educational scientist” behind what is known as the Program for International Student Assessment, or the PISA test. If most exams quantify students’ ability to memorise material, this one aims to assess their effectiveness at problem-solving. Since 2000 it has been administered to millions of teenagers in more than 40 countries, with surprising results. Pupils in Finland, Korea, Japan and Canada consistently score much higher than their peers in Germany, Britain, America and France. The usual explanations for these achievements, such as wealth, privilege and race, do not apply.

To understand what is happening in these classrooms, Ms Ripley follows three American teenagers who spend a year as foreign-exchange students in Finland, Poland and South Korea. Their wide-eyed observations make for compelling reading. In each country, the Americans are startled by how hard their new peers work and how seriously they take their studies. Maths classes tend to be more sophisticated, with lessons that show the often fascinating ways that geometry, trigonometry and calculus work together in the real world. Students forego calculators, having learned how to manipulate numbers in their heads. Classrooms tend to be understated, free of the high-tech gadgetry of their schools back home. And teachers in every subject exhibit the authority of professionals held in high regard.

Ms Ripley credits Poland’s swift turnaround to Miroslaw Handke, the former minister of education. When he entered the post in 1997, Poland’s economy was growing but Poles seemed destined for the low-skilled jobs that other Europeans did not want. So he launched an epic programme of school reforms, with a new core curriculum and standardised tests. Yet his most effective change was also his wooliest: he expected the best work from all of his pupils. He decided to keep all Polish children in the same schools until they were 16, delaying the moment when some would have entered vocational tracks. Poland’s swift rise in PISA rankings is largely the result of the high scores of these supposedly non-academic children.

This is a lesson Ms Ripley sees throughout her tour of “the smart-kid countries”. Children succeed in classrooms where they are expected to succeed. Schools work best when they operate with a clarity of mission: as places to help students master complex academic material (not as sites dedicated to excellence in sport, she hastens to add). When teachers demand rigorous work, students often rise to the occasion, whereas tracking students at different cognitive levels tends to “diminish learning and boost inequality”. Low expectations are often duly rewarded.

In Helsinki Ms Ripley visits a school in a bleak part of town, where classrooms are full of refugee immigrants. “I don’t want to think about their backgrounds too much,” says their teacher, wary of letting sympathy cloud his judgment of his students’ work. “It’s your brain that counts”. She marvels at how refreshing this view is when compared with that of teachers in America, where academic mediocrity is often blamed on backgrounds and neighbourhoods. And she laments the “perverse sort of compassion” that prevents American teachers from failing bad students, not least because this sets these youths up to fail in a worse way later on.

Not every story of academic success is a happy one. In South Korea Ms Ripley finds a “culture of educational masochism”, where pupils study at all hours in the hope of securing a precious spot in one of the country’s three prestigious universities. The country may have one of the highest school-graduation rates in the world, but children appear miserable. Even so, South

Korea offers some good lessons for how quickly a country can change its fate. Largely illiterate in the 1950s, it is now an “extreme meritocracy”.

America’s classrooms do not fare well in this book. Against these examples of academic achievement, the country’s expensive mistakes look all the more foolish. For example, unlike the schools in Finland, which channel more resources to the neediest kids, America funds its schools through property taxes, ensuring the most disadvantaged students are warehoused together in the worst schools.

Ms Ripley packs a startling amount of insight in this slim book. She notes that Finland, Poland and South Korea all experienced moments of crisis—economic and existential—before they buckled down and changed their stories. America, she observes, may soon reach a similar moment. She cites the World Economic Forum’s most recent ranking of global competitiveness, which placed America seventh, marking its third consecutive year of decline. Meanwhile Finland, that small, remote Nordic country with few resources, has been steadily moving up this ladder, and now sits comfortably in third place.

Sources:

"Best and Brightest." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper, 17 Aug. 2013. Web. 01 July 2014.

Required Reading #5:

Core Confusion

The Economist
December 5, 2013

ARNE DUNCAN, America’s education secretary drew complaints this month when he spoke of critics of the [Common Core](#) curriculum, a new set of educational standards all but a few states have adopted, [this way](#):

It’s fascinating to me that some of the pushback is coming from, sort of, white suburban moms who—all of a sudden—their child isn’t as brilliant as they thought they were and their school isn’t quite as good as they thought they were, and that’s pretty scary...

Mr. Duncan’s attack on “white suburban moms” raised hackles and he [apologised](#) a few days later for what he called his “clumsy phrasing”. But Mr. Duncan [stood by](#) his contention that the dramatically lower test results in states that have introduced the new tests over the past two years represent “a more realistic assessment of students’ knowledge and skills” than previous exams and that “every demographic group has room for improvement”.

Criticism of the new Common Core tests has come from every direction, and is leading some states to [delay](#) their implementation. Commentators on the right [reject federal meddling](#) in public education. Those on the left worry that the assessments are [developmentally inappropriate](#). Other critics point out that the exams are not well-matched to the standards they are meant to be measuring students against. This [analysis](#) of seven sample questions found on the website of New York’s education department details the trouble. Educational publishing companies like Pearson, our part owner, have tens of millions of dollars at stake in producing the revamped exams, yet [demonstrate surprising incompetence](#) in this and [other](#) projects. As I [wrote](#) in this space last spring, many students in New York were not adequately prepared for the material they encountered on the tests. Yet these exams carry high stakes for everyone involved: for

students seeking promotion to the next grade and for teachers, principals and schools being evaluated on the data points they generate.

But leave aside for a moment the unsettling issues surrounding assessments. Looking at the standards themselves, there is reason to cheer. As a Brooklyn elementary-school principal said at a forum on standardised testing this week, the Common Core “has value” but “has been totally tainted because of the testing.” Consider the [old standards in New York](#) for high-school civics. By commencement, according to the old regime, students should be able to:

- analyze how the values of a nation and international organizations affect the guarantee of human rights and make provisions for human needs
- consider the nature and evolution of constitutional democracies throughout the world
- compare various political systems with that of the United States in terms of ideology, structure, function, institutions, decision-making processes, citizenship roles, and political culture
- identify and analyze advantages and disadvantages of various governmental systems

Nothing much to quarrel with right off the bat. But take a moment to notice how specific, and therefore limited, these goals are. Or how impossibly audacious they are. It would be wonderful if every high-school graduate could parse international human-rights conventions and detail the development of democracies around the world, but each of these bullet points hides several dozen doctoral dissertations in comparative government and international relations while leaving vast content areas untouched. It is easy to find the flaw here: the concern with laying out what students should *know* as opposed to what they ought to be able to *do*.

Here the Common Core holds up a lot better. Contrast the old standards with some of the [nine elements](#) of the social-studies standards for grades 11 and 12 articulated in the Common Core:

- Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in *Federalist* No. 10).
- Evaluate authors’ differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors’ claims, reasoning, and evidence.
- Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

These standards ask students to read analytically and critically. They develop students’ abilities to navigate a challenging text like the Federalist Papers, to weigh various sources in arriving at a reasoned conclusion, to conduct meaningful research. They even cultivate a crucial sense of scholarly modesty: recognising the uncertainties that lurk in the lacunae. These are the tools college professors would be ecstatic to see in their first-year students, and they are practices high-school teachers should be excited to employ with their juniors and seniors.

Yet doubts about Common Core [implementation](#) and assessment remain. How can critical reading and research skills be assessed on a standardised exam? Absent a portfolio of student work, it would be very difficult to judge how well a student has mastered these standards. The Brooklyn principal said on Tuesday that last spring's English exams asked students confusing questions about "petty details" of "very boring texts" and "were not aligned to the Common Core in any way." Given the [weak](#) rollout of the new exams, there is little reason to expect the Common Core curriculum to bring the promised benefits.

Source:

"Core Confusion." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper, 05 Dec. 2013. Web. 01 July 2014.

Required Reading #6:

Nuclear Core

The Economist
January 16, 2014

THIS year anyone with any interest in education will find it hard to ignore the growing, and often nonsensical, [row](#) over the [common-core standards](#), due to be fully introduced in the 2014-15 school year. As anxiety has grown over the introduction of these new performance measures, critics from both the left and right have piled in to attack them. These complaints range from [fair critiques](#) over some botched implementations, [hysterical nonsense](#) and [downright lies](#). And as the year progresses, parts of the right will continue to wage a campaign against the common core, hoping to gain influence and even to move forward a more radical agenda.

A bit of background is useful to fully appreciate this particular row in all its glory, and in particular how it is possible for a fairly innocuous bit of bipartisan policymaking to become such a punchbag for some on both the left and the right.

The new standards were released in June 2010 and say what all students, from kindergarten through high school, should know in mathematics and English at the end of each year. The nation's governors and education commissioners created them so that all children had a clear set of expectations, and a prescription for the skills they were expected to master at different ages, from learning how to read to drawing a bar graph.

In the past, states set their own standards on their own and these were often terribly low. The new standards, which 45 states and the District of Columbia have signed up for, are set high. This will help tackle the problem that American children are falling behind in [international comparisons](#). This means that states, schools and children will see a drop in student scores, which has many [up in arms](#). But the case for having one set of high standards is clear: students will have realistic expectations about their performance throughout their career and will know exactly what to do in order to do well. Also there will be no nasty shocks later in life when second chances may be difficult to come by. Moreover, early adopters of the common core, Tennessee and Washington, DC, are seeing enormous gains in [career and college readiness](#).

Although the standards have quite a wide base of support, the politics in an election year are tricky. Many right-wing groups have seen the core standards as an opportunity to stir up some anxiety about big-government meddling, as if expectations for what students should know upon graduation tramples the toes of state and parental freedoms. Indeed the lie that these standards are imposed by the federal government finds its best evidence in the campaign the right is

waging for states to pull out of them. States may, indeed, decide to do so. But conservatives pushing for states to abandon the standards have yet to be convincing. Only the Republican governors in Indiana and Pennsylvania have put the standards on hold. To help defang critics, Massachusetts decided to delay assessing the standards until 2015. More states may follow. Parts of the far right are also trying to use the core as a rallying cry for conservative ideas about education, as *Politico* [recently reported](#). One group, FreedomWorks, has a campaign for educational freedom that starts with eliminating the common core and then pushes to use state money for any form of schooling (presumably this includes religious education). A march on Washington is planned for later in the year.

All this activity on the right is leaving the core's opponents on the left somewhat confused. Some are opposed to any kind of testing, believing that standardised tests are not only stressful, but also crude measurements of a child's abilities. Unions have fought hard against attempts to introduce greater accountability, and there is a reasonable amount of anxiety that teachers will be evaluated according to how well students do on these new tests. Seventeen states are asking schools [to implement](#) new teacher evaluations. Although some on the left would like to see the common core have its wings clipped, even Diane Ravitch, an influential left-wing policy analyst, told *Politico* she would be "very concerned" if the core became a vehicle to promote vouchers and charters.

In the hands of bloggers on the left and right, routine school issues are being turned into monstrous nightmares. "[Chicago School Rations Bathroom Visits to Help Prepare for Common Core Tests](#)", "[Common Core again threatens to make little kids pee their pants](#)". The tests make "[little kids vomit, pee their pants](#)". It will also "[kill literature](#)", and is a "[leftist indoctrination plot](#)". Many more horror stories will unfold about the common core this year. And you never know, one or two of them may even be true. None of them will mean that the standards should be scrapped or that anyone should rush to hit the pause button on assessments. Forewarned is forearmed.

Source:

"Nuclear Core." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper, 16 Jan. 2014. Web. 01 July 2014.

Optional Readings:

Vergara V. California Lawsuit Targeting Teacher Tenure Could Revolutionize U.S. Public Education, For Better And Worse

James Crotty

Forbes

March 31, 2014

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/jamesmarshallcrotty/2014/03/31/vergara-v-california-lawsuit-targeting-teacher-tenure-could-revolutionize-u-s-public-education-for-better-and-worse/>

An overview of the Vergara case.

How did Shanghai's Schools Get So Good?

Joshua Keating

Foreign Policy

May 14, 2013

http://ideas.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/05/14/how_did_shanghais_schools_get_so_good

An article illustrating the reforms undertaken in Shanghai, China and how they helped transform the education system with centralized planning and a push for equity.

What do DC and Tennessee Have in Common?

Get2Core

<http://get2core.org/national/blog/2013/11/15/what-do-dc-and-tennessee-have-common>

Some positive signs in the implementation of Common Core with early adopters of the reform in DC and Tennessee.

Multimedia:

VIDEO

The Whitehouse

July 29, 2010

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/07/29/president-obama-education-status-quo-morally-inexcusable>

President Barack Obama stressing the need for a highly educated workforce to keep the US economy strong. He also lays out his “Race to the Top” initiative encouraging states to reform their education programs with federal grant money as an incentive.

Other Nations Outclass US on Education

CBS Evening News

September 14, 2010

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/other-nations-outclass-us-on-education/>

A report on the stagnation of education in the US compared to other developed countries.

GRAPHICS

Snapshot of Performance in Reading, Mathematics, and Science

OECD-PISA

2012

http://cdn.theatlantic.com/newsroom/img/posts/pisa-2012-results-overview%20graph%201_larger.jpg

The results of the 2012 PISA tests delivered by the OECD.

School District Ranking – Global Report Card

George H.W. Bush institute

2009

<http://globalreportcard.org/map.html>

An interactive report card comparing each US school district to other districts, States, and Nations.