



# The Common Core State Standards and Intellectual Freedom

## Implications for Libraries

**Loretta M. Gaffney**, Adjunct Professor and Postdoctoral Fellow  
at the Department of Information Studies at the  
University of California, Los Angeles.

**T**he Common Core State Standards are a single set of codified, grade-by-grade K-12 educational standards in both English/language arts (ELA) and math that were intended to replace previous state K-12 standards and align them with one another. The National Governors' Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) developed Common Core in consultation with educational testing companies and with funding from the Bill Gates Foundation. While Common Core has enjoyed bipartisan support from Democrats and Republicans, opposition to Common Core has also generated strange bedfellows, mingling groups that would ordinarily clash, such as the Tea Party and teachers' union locals.<sup>1</sup> Disparate challenges to Common Core are best understood not as individual curricular challenges, but as moving pieces in a larger social movement context.

Critics of Common Core tend to fall into three categories.<sup>2</sup> The first two are conservative groups who emphasize different issues yet participate in overlapping social movements: social conservatives and economic conservatives. Social conservatives are mainly concerned with issues like religious freedom, parental rights, and traditional "family" values. Economic conservatives want lower taxes, fiscal responsibility, and less government, including limited or even no federal control over public education. The third group comprises progressive educators and their allies. These allies include leftist academics, some teachers' unions, liberal parent activists, and education advocacy groups.

Both conservatives and progressives believe that Common Core will be disastrous to American education.<sup>3</sup> In addition, both conservatives and progressives have used opposition to Common Core as a way to mobilize activists for public education reform.

Anti-Common Core activism might seem to represent a rare opportunity to forge common ground between

traditional political enemies. However, the heart of the Common Core battle is not simply about whether to implement it, but about the proper role of public education in American life. There is no doubt that defending intellectual freedom, promoting diversity, and collaborating with teachers is important. However, librarians will be able to do none of those things without a



robust system of public education. Rather than either defending or attacking the content of Common Core, librarians need to reconsider their roles in the context of current challenges and threats to public education. While we fight conservative attacks on literature and curricula, there are also several points at which concerns about Common Core, particularly its threats to privacy, bridge political boundaries. No response to anti-Common Core activism should proceed without a careful examination of where the critique is coming from and its overall social and political context.

### History and Background

The stated purpose of Common Core was to prod schools to greater heights of student achievement. Responding to complaints that contemporary students lack adequate preparation for college and the workplace, supporters of a “common core” of educational standards believed uniform expectations would help states improve student performance. As the Common Core Initiative states, “high standards that are consistent across states provide teachers, parents, and students with a set of clear expectations to ensure that all students have the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life upon graduation from high school, regardless of where they live.”<sup>4</sup> By conforming to uniform measures of college readiness, the authors of the Common Core Initiative believed that it would help states eliminate disparate outcomes and streamline academic expectations from state to state. In addition, the authors argued that consistent standards across state lines would make teacher training and compiling student data more efficient. They believed Common Core would encourage collaboration between states on assessments and curricula, and provide clearer guidelines for teacher education curricula.<sup>5</sup>

The federal government is barred by law and by custom from determining state and local school curricula. Thus Common Core had to be the result of a state-led effort in order to be legitimate. In some ways, this was the case: the NGA and the CCSSO are not federal agencies. These organizations are composed of elected state officials who are supposed to directly represent their states’ constituencies. Yet after the NGA and the CCSSO recommended creating Common Core, their representatives had little input into Common Core content. Rather, “experts” from private testing corporations and educational technology companies were responsible for the bulk of Common Core content.<sup>6</sup> In addition, funding of Common Core was underwritten in large measure by the Bill

Gates Foundation, which donated money to the federal Department of Education earmarked for that purpose.<sup>7</sup>

Common Core’s legitimacy also depended on the states voluntarily adopting common standards. As individual states adopted Common Core, it was hoped they would maintain consistency between one another without ceding control over public education to the federal government. However, once Common Core was finished, the Department of Education pushed states to adopt it by offering economic incentives. To compete for funding from Race to the Top, a program created by the Obama administration, states were required to adopt Common Core (or state standards congruent with Common Core) if they wished to remain in the running.<sup>8</sup>

With such incentives on offer, it is not surprising that all but five states initially agreed to adopt Common Core. Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia rejected both the ELA and the math standards, while Minnesota rejected only the math standards. The other forty-five states adopted Common Core, some of them (like Kentucky) even before they were publicly released.<sup>9</sup> After the contents were made available, some states claimed they would not have adopted them had they known what Common Core required. Meanwhile, activists urged their representatives to push state legislation that would either reject Common Core entirely, or delay or defund its implementation.<sup>10</sup> While Indiana, Oklahoma, and South Carolina successfully voted to roll back Common Core, others, like Mississippi and New York, opted simply to review or delay Common Core implementation and assessment. Such “softer” legislation is becoming more common after the defeat of anti-Common Core bills in Arizona, West Virginia, and South Dakota, with states becoming more likely to “take a second look at their standards than to get rid of what they have.”<sup>11</sup>

With so many attacks on the Common Core in the news, it can be easy to overlook the arguments in favor of Common Core. Supporters usually argue that the standards promote educational equity. Without uniform standards from state to state, they argue, some students will be shortchanged in their preparation for college and the workforce.<sup>12</sup> When critics complain that this uniformity will tie the hands of teachers, Common Core defenders are quick to make a distinction between standards and curricula. Standards, they argue, are goals and expectations rather than instructions: “Teachers know best about what works in the classroom. That is why these standards establish what students need to learn, but do not dictate how teachers should teach.”<sup>13</sup> This freedom to interpret the Common Core may be overstated, however, given



that regular assessments will determine, to some degree, what is covered in classrooms. The role, for example, of the lists of “exemplar texts” in the appendices of the ELA standards remains unclear. While Common Core defenders point out that these books are not required, but merely a sample of the kinds of books that fulfill ELA standards, critics insist that the lists will play a determinative role when testing comes into play.

As for which organizations support Common Core, this too has a complex answer, because some of the groups that initially welcomed Common Core are now having second thoughts. Teachers’ unions and professional organizations are key examples of the continually shifting public assessment of Common Core. While the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) continues to be listed on the Common Core website amongst the supporters of the standards, AFT president Randi Weingarten predicted that implementing Common Core was likely to be “worse than [the implementation of] Obama Care.”<sup>14</sup> In addition, the CTU (Chicago Teachers’ Union) has come out against the standards.<sup>15</sup> As for professional organizations, they tend to hedge their bets, and thus their support for Common Core ranges from lukewarm to nonexistent. For instance, the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) supports Common Core only the degree that they support rather than impede teacher autonomy in the classroom.<sup>16</sup>

Unsurprisingly, educational technology and testing companies are strongly in favor of Common Core; in fact, recent trade journal articles cite Common Core as a harbinger of an economic “boom” (and boon) to the educational technology and testing industries.<sup>17</sup> Prominent politicians from both parties, like Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton, support Common Core, but far-right Republicans like Ted Cruz generally oppose Common Core. It is clear that Common Core is increasingly becoming a wedge issue between ultra-conservative Tea Partiers and more mainstream Republicans.<sup>18</sup> The data sets that will be generated from Common Core assessments appeal to corporate interests, who see this



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information as a useful adjunct to their growth and development.<sup>19</sup>

At the risk of over-simplification, the supporters and defenders of Common Core tend to fall into line behind their position on the testing and assessment status quo post-No Child Left Behind. Those who are invested in the current testing regime believe that Common Core will help public education work to its fullest potential. These supporters tend to be invested in testing and standards as a way to achieve higher student performance and/or see educational standards as a growth industry through which they may profit. Yet critics of Common Core, whether on the left or the right, tend to see public education as fundamentally flawed and in need of reform, though they disagree on what the alternatives should look like. A closer look reveals that conservative anti-Common Core activists take an adversarial stance toward public education and academic free-

dom, while their progressive counterparts champion full funding of public education as the key to participating in democratic life. Though their goals are diverse, different conservative constituencies oppose Common Core within the context of a larger conservative assault on public education. Conversely, progressive educators and their allies attack Common Core because they want to protect and expand public education, not dismantle it.

### Conservative vs. Progressive Critiques of Common Core

Many anti-Common Core activists embrace elements of both social and economic conservatism. Indeed, since the 1960s, social and economic conservatives have often managed to set aside their differences and fight together for shared causes like backing Republican candidates for public office.<sup>20</sup> However, from 2009 on, the upstart Tea Party movement has proven that this union of social and economic conservatives can succeed in pushing the Republican Party even further to the right.<sup>21</sup> Common Core has proven effective in mobilizing different Tea Party constituencies and uniting them behind an explicitly economic *and* social conservative agenda for public education.



Anti-Common Core activism can be divided into two general categories: objections to the structure, form, or process of Common Core and its implementation, and objections to the content of the standards themselves. Objections to the structure, form, or process of Common Core are usually part of larger conservative protests against federal involvement in public education. Some protesters go several steps further to accuse the Obama administration of a Common Core-fueled conspiracy to take over public schools.<sup>22</sup> Conservative anti-Common Core activists object to federal influence because they believe local control of schools will give parents and community members a way to make sure their values are reflected in local schools. In contrast, progressives believe local control will allow teacher autonomy and better resource allocation to disadvantaged schools. Meanwhile, many on both sides object to the process of creating and adopting the standards, believing the role of the federal Department of Education to have been coercive and illegitimate.

Objections to the content of Common Core itself are usually heirs to previous (and continuing) culture wars between the left and the right over race, gender, and sexuality. The ELA standards draw the most fire because both the “Exemplar Texts” and the 50 percent “informational texts” requirement offer specific content that fuels curricular challenges. Activists charge individual books and the Exemplar List list itself with immorality, pornography, anti-religious sentiment, being *too* multicultural, and leaving important classics out.<sup>23</sup> As for the emphasis on informational reading, conservative activists believe it shortchanges classic literature,<sup>24</sup> panders to teenaged readers, and can be more easily manipulated to indoctrinate students in left-wing viewpoints.<sup>25</sup> Some progressives also object to Common Core content, along with parents with allegiances to neither political camp find Common Core-related curricula to be uninspired or insufficient.<sup>26</sup>

While others would not go that far, many object to the “one size fits all” approach of a common standards base regardless of ideology. However, conservative anti-Common Core activists object to federal influence because they believe local control of schools offers better accountability to parents and community members. In contrast, progressives believe local control will allow teacher autonomy and better resource allocation to disadvantaged schools.

It is most useful to see the social conservatives, sometimes referred to as either the religious right or “pro family” activists, as a subset and an ally of the Tea Party, which purports to focus solely on economic issues.

The Tea Party’s main critique of Common Core is that it amounts to federal overreach into educational decisions that should be the province of states and individual school districts.<sup>27</sup> The conservative religious activists within the Tea Party would agree, but add to this argument their objections about the contents of the standards themselves. Whether affiliated with the Tea Party or not, social conservatives attack Common Core as being insufficiently rigorous, a type of liberal or socialist indoctrination that contains immoral, even pornographic literature recommendations.<sup>28</sup> Thus both types of conservatives object to the *process*, but social conservatives also object to the *content* of Common Core. However, Tea Party activists who are primarily economic conservatives are quite willing to accommodate critiques of Common Core content in the service of their attack on public education.

Progressives and left-wing educators and activists often share conservatives’ concerns about the *process* of Common Core, albeit for different reasons. Some of them also object to the *content* of Common Core, but they are concerned with diversity and pedagogical issues rather than morality. Yet the main focus of their activism are the educational outcomes of Common Core, which they believe contribute to a broader, systemic attack on public education. Progressives argue that Common Core will not only result in excessive standardized testing, but that such testing will be used to further marginalize, defund, and even close schools that lack sufficient resources.<sup>29</sup> In the context of schools struggling to meet the basic educational needs of their students, a new testing regime that relies on electronic submissions and records databases will prove difficult if not impossible for such schools to maintain. In contrast to their conservative counterparts, anti-Common Core progressives are concerned with promoting equal access to public education, protecting intellectual and academic freedom, and celebrating diversity and multiculturalism.

### Common Ground Against Common Core

Despite radical differences in their worldviews, conservatives and progressives are united on several critiques of Common Core. The first is that the Common Core threatens local autonomy and control over school curricula. The second is that Common Core will lead to excessive testing and the invasion of student and family privacy. The third is that Common Core costs too much money and will squander valuable resources. However, conservatives are more likely to launch these critiques because they want to promote parental and private control



of public education. Progressives launch them because they want to make public education more inclusive and equitable, and to protect the professional autonomy of teachers.

Both conservatives and progressives object to the costs of implementing and sustaining Common Core. Among the costs associated with Common Core are replacing textbooks and teaching materials, re-training teachers, and upgrading bandwidth or purchasing additional computers in order to comply with computerized testing requirements. The Common Core will also involve considerable ongoing operational costs, which the Common Core authors neglected to factor into their analysis.<sup>30</sup> Each side believes that Common Core will cost too much money, but for different reasons. Conservatives want to eliminate wasteful government programs and lower taxes, while progressives believe Common Core levies a harsh financial burden onto the schools that can least afford it.

Progressive educators and their allies believe that the CCSS will be too unwieldy and costly for disadvantaged schools to manage. The result will be further draining of resources from the schools that most need them, making free public education for every student a more and more remote possibility. For progressives, Common Core implementation (particularly the infrastructure necessary to accommodate the mandatory electronic assessments) will demand more funding and disproportionately hurt struggling schools, who have more pressing needs for those resources. Thus the schools who are least equipped to shoulder costs will suffer the most, and money that could have been used on more substantial improvements and infrastructure will be thrown away.<sup>31</sup>

Conservatives agree that Common Core is a waste of money, but they also believe public education itself is a waste of money. They would rather redirect resources from public schools to charter schools, institute vouchers to use public funds for private education, and dismantle or at least weaken teachers' unions, which they believe defend teachers' interests at the expense of students'.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the school choice movement accompanies wider attacks on the public sector, particularly in its mistrust of professional educators, who are variously characterized as either remote elites or as lazy workers who don't deserve their publicly subsidized pensions.<sup>33</sup>

Economic conservatives see private markets in education as a way for the best schools prove their mettle by



TELLINGLY, SOME CRITICS REFER TO COMMON CORE AS "OBAMA CORE."

attracting more parents and offering families more choices. They argue that Common Core eliminates healthy competition between schools, thereby narrowing the educational consumer market for parents. As a result, conservative critics argue that the overall quality of education will suffer because schools will have no incentive to improve themselves. Anything that seems to eliminate competition is seen as a

threat to the quality of education; competition between schools is believed to be good for student outcomes and academic rigor.<sup>34</sup> Social conservatives, on the other hand, are more likely to see sinister aims in Common Core itself. They believe Common Core is being used as a bludgeon against local and parental control of curricula in order to promote liberal agendas to unsuspecting youth.<sup>35</sup>

Rejecting the claim that Common Core is a state-driven enterprise, conservative critics accuse the Obama administration of using Common Core to achieve federal control over public education. They believe that the federal government subverted Constitutional restrictions and worked around the rules to establish what amounts to a national curriculum.<sup>36</sup> Tellingly, some critics refer to Common Core as "Obama Core," a moniker no doubt intended as a reference to the Affordable Care Act's nickname, "Obama Care," also much maligned by the right.<sup>78</sup> In addition, social conservatives see the Obama Administration (and even the mainstream Republican party) as antithetical to their values and hostile to religion, while economic conservatives argue that federal programs perpetuate mediocrity and waste taxpayers' money.

Meanwhile, progressive critics are more concerned about private corporate interests in Common Core than they are in federal involvement. Because the authors of Common Core were mostly representatives from educational testing corporations, progressive critics argue that Common Core cannot possibly be legitimate, given that these same corporations will directly profit from them.<sup>38</sup> They will be able to create textbooks, digital media, and other teaching materials that align with the Common Core they created, as well as being able to market their help in managing assessment data. Conservative critics are also critical of corporate profit, but mainly because they see the testing and technology industries as pawns of the federal government. As Phyllis Schlafly asserts, "of course, tests are important to measure performance. But Common Core tests are a big



money-making industry and are used by the Obama administration to control the content of curriculum.”<sup>39</sup>

In sum, economic conservatives resist free public education because they see it as inefficient and incapable of excellence; social conservatives attack it as liberal indoctrination tool. Both would just as soon reject the system.

### The ELA and the Politics of Reading

Though criticisms of the math standards are not insignificant, the vast majority of conservative anti-Common Core activism targets the ELA standards. Perhaps this is because literary study has a more explicit ideological component: what we read and why we read it raise central questions of educational policy. The focus on the ELA standards may also be because literary study is linked with strong beliefs about reading, what it does to children, and why it plays a central role in education. While both conservatives and progressives believe that reading promotes particular values, they disagree on which values should be imparted to students and young readers. In addition, conservative critics tend to see books as pedagogical instruments, vehicles that directly transport ideas from author to reader in order to accomplish an educational task. They believe that we can predict the effects of reading on young readers, and that teachers and parents can influence youth behavior by controlling their reading.<sup>40</sup>

The ongoing battle over the literary canon—or what “classics” should be assigned in schools and recommended to young readers—heats up when cultural values come into conflict with one another.<sup>41</sup> Conservative attacks on the Common Core stem from a more general theory of cultural decline, a decline variously blamed on liberal activists, an increasingly permissive and coarse culture, attacks on the “traditional” family, and the rejection of merit in favor of diversity.<sup>42</sup> Citing the 1960s as the beginning of a steady downturn in the quality of education, conservative activists attack the CCSS as both a symbol and an indicator of this decline, citing “the assignment of easier, shorter, and contemporary texts—often in the name of multiculturalism” as a factor in the downward slide of American education.<sup>43</sup>

In the case of Common Core, though no books are explicitly required, the lists of “Exemplar Texts” have drawn criticism from conservatives. They focus most of their ire on relatively recent additions to the literary canon such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*.<sup>44</sup> Conservative activists believe the inclusion of these titles sacrifices literary quality and morality for a misguided attempt at diversity and inclusion. Their protests draw momentum

and resources from other conservative activist campaigns against award-winning literature, multiculturalism, “liberal” or secular values, and pornography.

Award-winning literature is more often challenged because critics believe awards to be “stamps of approval” certifying their content as unobjectionable and safe.<sup>45</sup> Like the Newbery and Caldecott Medal winners, Common Core books labeled “exemplary” become targets of censorship because they do not meet an implied standard of unimpeachable excellence. Even those who object to Common Core respect its role as a creator and maintainer of the literary canon. This canon, they believe, should be uncontroversial and free of objectionable content. Assigned literature should also be “educational,” which for some implies a moral imperative or didactic purpose for reading it. Thus, for conservative critics of Common Core, objectionable content becomes even *more* objectionable when it is labeled “exemplary” and intended for educational purposes.

Battles over the literary canon are about politics as much (or even more) than they are about aesthetic quality, but charging assigned texts with being of inferior quality can shield more obviously political (and less publicly palatable) objections to multicultural literature. When librarians and educators attempt to counter such challenges with evidence of the literary quality of a work, critics may attack the standards for judging that quality to be worthless, unimportant, biased, or even deliberately misleading. These attacks are rooted in racism and sexism, but also in models of reading that understand books as instruments that get particular educational jobs done. If an assigned book is controversial, then why not substitute a book without objectionable content that fulfills the same educational objective?<sup>46</sup> Challenges to contemporary multicultural literature also occur because critics see it as taking up curricular space better occupied by the “time-tested classics”—classics invariably (and not coincidentally) authored by white men.<sup>47</sup>

This backlash against multiculturalism draws from older conservative battles over so-called “cultural literacy” and pornography. During the late 1980s, public intellectuals such as E. D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom bemoaned the loss of young Americans’ cultural literacy—a loss they blamed on the abandonment of the “traditional” canon in favor of women writers, contemporary writers and writers of color.<sup>48</sup> They branded the educational trend toward multiculturalism as a faddish, “politically correct” movement that besmirched the quality of American education with leftist politics. For



them, as for contemporary conservative activists, openness and diversity automatically equaled lower quality.<sup>49</sup>

Today's conservatives compound these charges of multicultural mediocrity with the charge of "pornography." Such accusations were common in the pro-family movement of the 1990s and the 2000s. Pro family activists used the term to oppose sexually explicit material in schools and libraries, but also to attack GLBTQ materials they believed to be unsuitable for youth.<sup>50</sup> Branding multicultural literature as "pornographic" certainly casts its literary merit into question. It also ties anti-Common Core activism more directly to larger campaigns that marshal anti-pornography forces against public and school library policies that protect intellectual freedom.

Conservative critics not only attack multicultural literature, but also argue that Common Core does not emphasize enough literature in the first place. They take issue with the "informational reading" component of the ELA standards, which designates 50 percent of curricular reading to be nonfiction from "content-rich" areas.<sup>51</sup> Defenders of the informational reading requirement argue that students must read and master such texts in order to prepare for college and the workforce. Common Core authors also submit that this 50 percent applies to readings across all subject areas, not simply English.<sup>52</sup> However, critics point out that not all subject areas are going to be assessed; only English and language arts will be tested, so only English teachers will be responsible for this content. Thus, English teachers would be responsible for subjects they were not trained to teach, and instruction and evaluation would likely suffer.<sup>53</sup>

Meanwhile, with valuable curricular space given over to informational reading instead of classic literature, conservative critics argue that students' ability to analyze literature and understand literary references will decline. They believe less literary study will stunt student analytic ability, make them lack cultural reference points, and diminish their English language proficiency. The absence of a cursive writing requirement in the elementary grades is sometimes cited as another harbinger of educational decline.<sup>54</sup>

Conservatives also see informational reading as a tool of liberal propaganda, believing the selection of nonfiction content to be more vulnerable to ideological manipulation. Such vulnerability takes on a more ominous connotation if one believes Common Core is an instrument of federal control. This attack on biased "information" represents an interesting shift from the conservative textbook protests of the 1980s, particularly the hubbub over the Impressions series. Impressions textbooks were anthologies of selected stories, poems, and

literary nonfiction that activists believed were part of a "secular humanist" or anti-Christian agenda. The stories, they believed, consisted of propaganda rather than fact. They accused the series of promoting non-traditional gender roles, New Age spirituality, contingent value judgments, and criticism and questioning of the United States. Activists believed Impressions' fictional and fanciful qualities encouraged a liberal slant on the facts.<sup>55</sup>

For contemporary anti-Common Core activists, it is nonfiction reading that is more open to manipulation, and fiction (or at least, classic fiction) that is free from ideology. They object to topics like evolution and climate being presented as factual rather than as controversial, which they believe will confuse students at best and indoctrinate them into liberal viewpoints at worst.<sup>56</sup> Critics also object to including topics that are deemed relevant to students' lives. They believe teachers will pander to teenagers, selecting topics that are either not complex or serious enough, or too political. Citing suggested topics for informational reading that include "computer geeks, fast food, teenage marketing, and the working poor," activists argue that they are insufficiently complex to provoke analysis.<sup>57</sup> Such critiques reveal their own ideological bias as well as posit that topics of interest to teenagers could not possibly be complex or worthy of curricular time.

In addition to assuming student naiveté, many conservatives also seem to believe that teachers are not intelligent or savvy enough to detect Common Core biases, thus becoming victims of federal government manipulation. Educators are variously characterized as either dupes or as liberal elites with no regard for parental rights and community values. Such characterizations are congruent with earlier challenges to public schools and libraries. During the 1990s and 2000s, conservative library activists such as Family Friendly Libraries and the American Family Association argued that their public institutions had been taken over by professionals who marched to the orders of "private" organizations such as the ALA and teachers' unions. Activists were exhorted to "take back" their libraries and schools from elites, liberals, and private interests, thereby remaking the public in their own image.<sup>58</sup>

While battles over curricular content are obvious threats to intellectual freedom, challenges to pedagogies or teaching methodologies have been more likely to fly under the radar. However, it is here that the goals of conservative activists clash most glaringly with the aims of progressive educators. Conservative critics of Common Core distinguish between what they call "explicit instruction" or "direct instruction" with "reform instruction." Reform instruction serves as an



umbrella term for any pedagogy believed to be inferior or politically motivated, including constructivism, inquiry-based education, and “minimal guidance” approaches to education. Critics believe encouraging students to ask questions and brainstorm answers outside of the confines of accepted knowledge robs them of a solid problem-solving foundation. Teaching “basic skills” versus critical thinking is part of an ongoing debate in American education, as least as far as conservatives are concerned. Most teachers of reading, for example, favor a combination of direct instruction and inquiry-based pedagogies, but conservative activists believe these methods to be opposed to one another.<sup>59</sup> This is partially a result of conservative discomfort with the company that inquiry-based pedagogies keep. They believe “opening up” the curriculum lets in all manner of undesirable subject matter, such as multiculturalism and homosexuality, leading to student indoctrination in the name of tolerance.<sup>60</sup>

Challenges to multicultural literature often target the pedagogies and educational philosophies that underpin how books are selected and how they are taught. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, conservative critics argued that opening the literary canon to underrepresented voices constituted a lack of respect for timeless values. Later, pro family groups reclaimed values like “intellectual freedom” and “tolerance” for their own agendas, arguing that the inclusion of GLBTQ materials in libraries and schools constituted an assault on religious freedom.<sup>61</sup> Anti-Common Core activism takes its cue from both of these earlier battles. Not only does it cast pedagogies emphasizing tolerance and inclusion as not rigorous, but it also characterizes them as ideological attacks on “true” tolerance of conservative viewpoints and religious beliefs. Critical thinking is a concept that remains up for grabs. Common Core defenders believe the standards do promote critical thinking, while critics object to their “empty skill sets” and characterize them as pushing propaganda rather than encouraging authentic critical thinking.

If critiques of the ELA standards have a familiar ring, it is likely because they are the heirs to older arguments about the nature of children’s education. Given that parents, teachers and even politicians have quarreled over the question of what children should read throughout American history, any standards’ content would be subject to public scrutiny and argument. In the case of anti-Common Core activism, conservatives of different stripes have joined forces to attack Common Core as the culmination of their fears in other, more long-running battles over American education. They raise serious questions

about reading with which teachers and librarians—whatever their views on Common Core—must grapple.

### Librarians, Intellectual Freedom, and Common Core

As proponents of intellectual freedom, librarians are in a bit of bind when it comes to Common Core. There is little doubt that objections to Common Core content have resulted (and will result) in more challenges to books and curricula, particularly multicultural literature. This seems to suggest that librarians should defend Common Core itself along with the challenged material(s) in question. There is also the link between Common Core criticism and conservative activists, a group that has historically been hostile to diversity in library collections (particularly GLBTQ materials, tax increases to support public libraries, and unfiltered access to the internet).<sup>62</sup> Given this past, it is tempting to see attacks on Common Core as part and parcel of similar attacks on libraries and librarianship.

In addition, school librarians have been generally embraced Common Core because it helps them to advance their curricular objectives and further promote the value of the school library.<sup>63</sup> Librarians’ professional literature suggests that libraries can meet the demand for Common Core nonfiction readings by suggesting texts and sharing bibliographies. Librarians can also help teachers navigate Common Core by promoting the school library as an information clearinghouse for better understanding the new standards. In addition, many of the pedagogical objectives of Common Core, particularly those that rely on “short research projects,” are quite congruent with the AASL’s own *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner*.<sup>64</sup> If librarians can show that Common Core need libraries in order to be fully functional, then perhaps Common Core could be a lifeline of professional salvation for school librarians, who continuously struggle to make a case for the value of their work in a time of budget crisis and austerity.

Yet in a climate increasingly hostile to public education, claiming that school libraries (and librarians) are indispensable to implementing Common Core might be seen as something of a stretch. Large urban school districts such as Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) cut budgetary corners by removing school librarians from the library and even closing school libraries themselves.<sup>65</sup> Clearly, no matter how congruent libraries are with the goals of Common Core and the needs of teachers, school libraries still risk being seen as “extras” in the eyes of administrators, politicians, and the general public. Even the surfeit of studies that tie the presence of strong school libraries and





MLS-degreed school librarians to better student performance on standardized tests have not stopped school districts from cutting back on support for libraries.<sup>66</sup>

Certainly, attacks on public schools have been a constant throughout succeeding incarnations of conservative activism. Historically, conservatives have targeted the content of curricula or the books on library shelves they deem offensive. In the current political era of the Tea Party, we are likely to see more attacks on public schools and libraries made in the name of smaller government, lower taxes, and fiscal responsibility. Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's 2011 attacks on public sector collective bargaining are only one example of how a disempowered labor force can enable policies that gut public education. In any case, defending curricular content cannot be the only way that teachers and librarians promote intellectual freedom in schools. Common Core activism certainly triggers additional book challenges and censorship battles, but they are part of a larger war over American education. Librarians and the ALA must consider challenges to Common Core within the complex political landscape that shapes public education controversies. We must look at the bigger picture of educational inequality and be able to situate our work in the context of national arguments over Common Core and public education.

## Notes

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