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## Replacing Common Core: Choices and Trade-Offs

By Joseph L. Bast and Joy Pullmann

The coerced adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by 46 states across the United States, often without public input, has generated tremendous controversy, concern, and efforts to repeal the standards.<sup>1</sup> Researchers and activists working with The Heartland

Institute have supported this opposition from its earliest days with articles in *School Reform News*, policy briefs, booklets, testimony, and more. We continue to believe adoption of CCSS was a mistake, illegally imposed by the federal government, and should be ended.<sup>2</sup>

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If a state repeals its CCSS, what should replace them? State elected officials face several choices, among them:

1. Return to pre-existing state standards and tests,
2. Create new state standards and tests that do not largely rephrase or simply imitate CCSS,
3. Adopt the standards or tests of other states, such as Indiana, Massachusetts, and New York, which were highly regarded before they adopted CCSS.
4. Allow schools to choose the tests they administer, including among their options ACT, SAT, and pre-existing state tests.

Each of these choices faces trade-offs, described below.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Terrence O. Moore, *The Story-Killers: A Common-Sense Case Against the Common Core* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, October 30, 2013); Kristin Lombard, ed., *Common Ground on Common Core* (Resounding Books, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Joy Pullmann, *The Common Core: A Poor Choice For States* (Chicago, IL: The Heartland Institute, 2013), <https://www.heartland.org/policy-documents/common-core-poor-choice-states>.

## ***1. Return to pre-existing state standards and assessments***

The first option is simply to return to pre-existing state standards and tests. A continuously updated list of the assessment systems in the 50 states is available from the Education Commission of the States.<sup>3</sup>

Before CCSS, most state standards and/or their testing programs were lax, often deliberately dumbed down to meet the proficiency targets of No Child Left Behind. Poor academic

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performance was hidden behind inflated reports of student achievement that often far exceeded the achievement estimates produced by the “gold standard” National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

The inadequacy of past state standards and tests doesn’t necessarily argue against returning to those state standards in every case. Allowing

states to establish their own standards and assessment regimes is in keeping with the American tradition of state and local responsibility for K–12 education. A decentralized system is more likely to reflect regional and local concerns and values, lead to more innovation and improvement over time, and produce fewer rewards for “rent-seeking” behavior by special-interest groups.

In some cases, the state standards before CCSS were sufficiently robust. In others, the standards and tests can remain unchanged but cut-scores can be raised to make state test results more consistent with NAEP.

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## ***2. Create new state standards***

Replacing CCSS with new state standards is another option. Done correctly, this offers the transparency and opportunities for discussion and debate that CCSS bypassed in the course of its adoption. Local parents, elected officials, and civic and business leaders can inspect and debate what should be taught to their students and not be told simply to trust “experts” who may not share their values or goals.

As previously noted, pre-existing state standards and tests were often inadequate, so new standards need to be more rigorous and cut-scores set higher to more closely approximate the standards of NAEP. With No Child Left Behind now replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act, there are fewer incentives to dumb-down state standards.

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<sup>3</sup> Education Commission of the States, “State Legislation: Assessment,” <http://b5.caspio.com/dp.asp?AppKey=b7f93000695b3d0d5abb4b68bd14&id=a0y70000000Cb1ZAAS>.

This choice can be time-consuming and costly, and it raises the risk that new tests will either resemble the pre-CCSS tests by being “dumbed down” and too easy to pass, or resemble CCSS with only a different name, maybe different recommended readings, and a few questions changed. Experience with so-called Common Core replacements in states such as Indiana and Oklahoma shows state bureaucrats are prone to give deceptive representations about replacing Common Core while really just continuing to enforce it and promulgate it in school districts. Parents and the general public are right to be outraged when politicians say they are replacing CCSS but in fact are just relabeling it.

### ***3. Adopt the standards or tests of other states***

A third option is adopting the standards or tests of high-achieving states. Massachusetts, for example, before it adopted CCSS, had highly regarded standards and tests.

While some standards and tests might need few or no changes, others will need to be revised to meet the needs and demands specific to the state. Many states lack the expertise to do this themselves, or to do it without falling into the traps described earlier. Additionally, standards and tests are

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good only if teachers are capable of using them well. In states that have boosted student performance using standards, such as Massachusetts, policymakers raised the academic content of teacher training and standards for licensing tests.

We see two paths for adopting the systems of other states. The simplest is outsourcing this function to the state that has the system of interest. This won’t work if that state has abandoned its standards and tests and is no longer administering them. A more complicated but possibly more satisfactory alternative is to work with the testing vendor to revise the standards and testing of the other state without having to build it anew.

The costs of this alternative will likely exceed those of the first option but could lead to a significantly improved system of standards and assessments. We believe improvements may be worth the higher cost.

### ***4. Allow schools to choose the tests they administer***

The fourth alternative is for states to allow schools to choose the tests they administer, including among their options ACT, SAT, and pre-existing state tests. For example, the Florida legislature is considering bill, SB 1360, under which “school districts could abandon the state’s key standardized test and give students the ACT or SAT exams instead. ... The measure ... would

keep the Florida Standards Assessments, or FSA, as the default test for Florida students but would end the exam’s monopoly on education accountability.”<sup>4</sup>

This option has a number of clear advantages over the others. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent designing and fine-tuning existing achievement tests. Rather than attempt to replicate or improve on those tests, this option “free rides” on that investment. Allowing schools to choose among tests creates increased competition among test providers, which in turn promotes higher quality, lower costs, and greater transparency. Several existing private tests are not aligned with CCSS and therefore are free of some of the problems that afflict CCSS conception and design.

This option would require that researchers statistically translate the results of multiple tests into a common measure of achievement in order for parents and taxpayers to evaluate the performance of individual schools and to know if their investment in public education is being spent wisely. We believe this option would accomplish public interest and research goals as well as help protect parental rights in education. We examine this option, which we believe is the best of the four considered, in greater detail below.

### ***Keeping an Eye on Testing Vendors***

In choosing any of the alternatives outlined above, states need to continually evaluate the vendors behind the scenes who are providing the tests. It is important to guard against surreptitious “improvements” that would bring unwanted CCSS items into the testing systems. It should be borne in mind that most of the testing vendors also support CCSS standards and testing for some of their other clients.

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The homeschooling sector of K–12 education is probably the most concerned about avoiding CCSS. Some of their support organizations have been scrutinizing what standards and assessments remain “uninfected” by the new standards. A good example is *The Homeschool Resource Roadmap*, which maintains

a list of tests aligned and not aligned with CCSS.<sup>5</sup>

A great concern for homeschoolers (and for the authors) is the fact that many vendors are abandoning support for their non-aligned tests and not planning to upgrade them for future years. Some vendors of non-aligned tests also provide services to schools and systems that use CCSS, raising the risk that updated non-aligned tests will gradually adopt the bad aspects of CCSS. For

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<sup>4</sup> Leslie Postal, “Make ACT, SAT, other national tests alternatives to FSA, new bill says,” *Orlando Sentinel*, January 7, 2016. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/education/school-zone/os-florida-testing-bill-act-sat-fsa-post.html>.

<sup>5</sup> *The Homeschool Resource Road Map*, “Common Core Project: Standardized Tests,” last updated February 20, 2016, <http://hsroadmap.org/standardized-tests/>. This source reports ACT tests are aligned with CCSS, but this is a matter of some contention, as is explained later in this essay.

this reason, it would be ideal to find vendors of high reputation who would not offer any services to schools and systems that use CCSS.

### ***Replacing CCSS with ACT Tests?***

In 2014, David V. Anderson reported on previous research he conducted showing ACT test results tracked the results of the NAEP test, even though ACT tests were designed to predict student success in college with less emphasis on the mastery of academic subjects.<sup>6</sup> While NAEP is administered only to a random sample of students constituting a very small percentage of students nationwide, millions of students every year take ACT and ACT Aspire tests for grades 3 to 12. Perhaps ACT tests could provide what CCSS proponents say they want – a rigorous national assessment – but without CCSS’s baggage? Dr. Anderson wrote:

We think ACT standards and its testing programs can provide Americans with much of what they desire for education standards. ACT is a non-profit, private organization relatively immune to federal pressure, yet it has such well-regarded content standards and testing programs that it can help satisfy the desire to have a set of standards that are simultaneously national, reputable, and voluntary. K–12 standards and tests developed by other non-governmental organizations can play similar roles. For example, the non-profit College Board, the for-profit Pearson Education, and others are expanding their activities in these areas.<sup>7</sup>

Note Dr. Anderson didn’t recommend *only* ACT tests, but other “K–12 standards and tests developed by other non-governmental organizations” as well. The ACT tests seemed the most promising choice due to how close their results were to NAEP scores.

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Since 2014, concerns have arisen that the ACT tests, like SAT and The Iowa Tests, have been aligned with CCSS. One source of this concern is that ACT was actually the basis or foundation of CCSS. Dr. Anderson acknowledged this in 2014 but explained why this is not a reason to oppose ACT:

ACT was a model for the developers of Common Core, but those in control of Common Core decided to institute limitations antithetical to ACT’s standards. Math and reading were both dumbed down, and a ridiculous restriction on states augmenting Common Core standards limited such improvements by requiring Common Core constitute at least 85 percent of such a state’s expanded requirements. ACT is rapidly expanding its K–12 testing programs to include all grade levels from 3rd to 12th. States that want to get away from the troubles of Common Core will easily be able to do so by using ACT.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> David V. Anderson, *Replacing Common Core with Proven Standards of Excellence* (Chicago, IL: The Heartland Institute, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

This history suggests ACT's tests ought not be damned or made suspect by their role in the creation of CCSS. The advertised purpose of CCSS was to graduate students who were "college and career ready," so starting with ACT made good sense. What happened next – when the advocates and ideologues who led the CCSS effort dumbed-down the original ACT tests, added new content that tracked their "progressive" ideology, and made CCSS the only set of standards and tests allowed by public schools – is what should be exposed and condemned.

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But ACT is not guiltless in all this. ACT has fueled concern by telling CCSS advocates it is aligned with the new standards while telling CCSS critics it is not. Without condoning this

duplicity, we can nevertheless understand it: ACT is under tremendous pressure to use its reputation to uplift Common Core while not allowing Common Core's tarnished reputation to harm ACT.

Anderson believes ACT is attempting to remain true to its primary objective – predicting the college success of students – while adding some questions to its tests that reflect CCSS.<sup>9</sup> This signals to teachers and schools that they should teach as CCSS dictates while likely actually measuring non-CCSS indicators that better reflect the likelihood a student will do well in college. In other words, ACT is being both a political actor and an academic evaluator.

Preliminary research by Anderson<sup>10</sup> suggests ACT still closely tracks NAEP, which would not be the case if the test had been significantly changed. If states move to replace CCSS with ACT, they should focus on the "college readiness" scores within ACT and ACT Aspire – the "test within the test" – and disregard the CCSS-aligned test results. And they should meet with ACT officials and monitor what they say and how they change the test over time to ensure it does not become "CCSS-lite" or worse.

Unfortunately, using ACT gives state departments of education and school districts the cover they need to continue using CCSS no matter what the state legislature defines for standards. For lawmakers who do not want CCSS, the important question is whether using ACT tests would keep Common Core in the public schools they oversee. ACT tests may be high-quality, but adopting them doesn't take CCSS out of the classroom.

## ***ACT and Bias***

Using ACT tests leaves unaddressed one final concern: liberal or "progressive" bias. The tests reflect the views of college professors on what they believe "college-ready" students should

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<sup>9</sup> David V. Anderson, correspondence with the authors.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

know. This is increasingly not the same as what parents, elected officials, or civic leaders believe should be taught in K–12 schools.

ACT tests knowledge and skill items that are in typical K–12 curricula, and ACT adds and removes questions every few years based on longitudinal studies of students who took the ACT in 11th grade and then took the entry-level course in the same subject in college. Questions that correlate well with student achievement in college are kept and those that don't are dropped. The cut-scores are also adjusted to fit the criterion that the students who get a score on the ACT above the cut-score level will have a 50% probability of obtaining a grade of B in the entry-level course. College professors have indirect influence if they are lax in their grading or if they have a curriculum for the entry-level course that is inconsistent with the student's last high school course in that subject.

Academia is increasingly dominated by progressive ideology and fads, such as “sustainability” and “social justice.”<sup>11</sup> The leftward ideological movement of academics in the United States in recent decades has been well-documented. “During the past quarter-century, academia has seen a nearly 20-percent jump in the number of professors who identify as liberal. That increase has created a lopsided ideological spread in higher education, with liberal professors now outpacing their conservative counterparts by a ratio of roughly 5 to 1.”<sup>12</sup> There is evidence that liberal professors impose their ideology on students.<sup>13</sup>

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Victor Davis Hanson, a distinguished author and historian with the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, wrote recently,

In fact, today's [college] campuses mimic ideological boot camps. Tenured professors seek to indoctrinate young people in certain preconceived progressive political agendas. Environmental studies classes are not very open to debating the “settled science” of man-caused, carbon-induced global warming – or the need for immediate and massive government intervention to address it. Grade-conscious and indebted students make the necessary ideological adjustments.<sup>14</sup>

To the degree ACT tests predict a student's later success in college, they convey to administrators and parents the values and biases of college professors, not some abstract standard

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Wood and Rachelle Peterson, “Sustainability: Higher Education's New Fundamentalism,” National Association of Scholars, March 25, 2015, [https://www.nas.org/articles/sustainability\\_higher\\_educations\\_new\\_fundamentalism1](https://www.nas.org/articles/sustainability_higher_educations_new_fundamentalism1).

<sup>12</sup> Natalie Johnson, “Liberal Professors Outnumber Conservative Faculty 5 to 1. Academics Explain Why This Matters,” *The Daily Signal*, January 14, 2016, <http://dailysignal.com/2016/01/14/liberal-professors-outnumber-conservative-faculty-5-to-1-academics-explain-why-this-matters/>.

<sup>13</sup> David Horowitz, *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (Regnery Publishing, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, “Indoctrination, Not Education,” *Washington Times*, February 3, 2016, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/feb/3/victor-davis-hanson-indoctrination-not-education-o/>.

of truth or skill. College professors are increasingly out-of-step with parents and civic and business leaders. Parents who worry about exposing their children to moral relativism, radical environmentalism, and other forms of “political correctness” have good reason not to support the adoption of ACT tests, at least not as the only test with consequences that students must take.

### ***Industry-Recognized Credentials***

Alongside ACT, SAT, and most other nationally normed achievement tests are a growing number of industry-recognized credentials signifying completion of coursework or tests showing mastery of work-related skills.<sup>15</sup> These credentials are most often awarded in the so-called STEM subjects: science, technology, engineering, and math. They often are awarded in high school and

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are most valuable to students who do not plan to go on to college. Florida, Kansas, and Wisconsin provide financial incentives to schools to recognize students who earn industry-recognized credentials.

Industry-recognized credentials are a good alternative to allowing ideologically motivated college professors to decide what K–12 students should know, and they reflect an understanding that not all children need to or should go to college. But they are hardly a complete answer to the standards debate. K–12 schooling should be aimed at producing educated citizens, not just good workers, and vocational education can be an excuse for lower high school graduation requirements and not offering challenging curricula.

Another problem with industry-recognized credentials is that they often are accompanied by calls for government subsidies into so-labeled programs, expanding the government cartel over credentials instead of competing with it. Better than expanding the government’s control over credentials is *ending* the government’s monopoly of credentials and letting the marketplace decide. State standards should have to compete with industry standards. One good model is Mozilla’s Open Badge Infrastructure (OBI) initiative. As Mozilla describes it on its website,

**A digital badge is an online representation of a skill you’ve earned.** Open Badges take that concept one step further, and allows you to verify your skills, interests and achievements through credible organizations. And because the system is based on an open standard, you can combine multiple badges from different issuers to tell the complete story of your achievements – both online and off. Display your badges wherever you want them on the web, and share them for employment, education or lifelong learning.<sup>16</sup>

OBI allows individuals or organizations to create their own networks of credentials and prerequisites, and privately “endorse” completers, as well as giving them a transcript that can be put on LinkedIn and other social networking sites.

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that ACT is not entirely focused on college preparation. Its WorkKeys test is an example of this. A number of states use it in their 11<sup>th</sup> grade ACT testing.

<sup>16</sup> Mozilla, “About,” website, <http://openbadges.org/about/>.



## ***Where to Go From Here?***

Stepping back from the uncertainty and controversy surrounding ACT and other tests, we urge parents, educators, and elected officials to keep in mind that standardized achievement tests are helpful in public and private education to inform parents and other stakeholders about the performance levels of their schools.

Standardized achievement tests are helpful in public and private education to inform parents and other stakeholders about the performance levels of their schools.

Standardized achievement tests provide valuable consumer information, without which the quality of K–12 schooling will continue to suffer and degrade.

Parents and other stakeholders of education often seek more flexibility at the local level. We think it entirely appropriate for school districts, individual public and private schools, and parents who homeschool to have options when choosing standards and assessment tests. With more and more parents being allowed to choose the schools their children attend,<sup>17</sup> good local information is increasingly necessary. Tests should be privately designed and testing vendors ought to be transparent about their strengths, weaknesses, and biases, and compete for the business of schools and parents. That choice and competition will lead to higher quality tests as well as higher quality schools.

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<sup>17</sup> Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, *The ABCs of School Choice*, January 25, 2016, <http://www.edchoice.org/research/the-abcs-of-school-choice/>.