Journal of Urban Mathematics Education
July 2010, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 9–18

COMMENTARY

The Common Core State Standards Initiative: A Critical Response

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> So make no mistake: Our future is on the line. The nation that out-educates us today is going to out-compete us tomorrow. To continue to cede our leadership in education is to cede our position in the world.
>
> – President Barack Obama, The White House, 2010

> Billions of new competitors are challenging America's economic leadership.
>
> – U.S. Department of Education, 2006

> Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world.… What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.
>
> – National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983

Some things change slowly. I start my response to the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) with the preceding quotes to suggest that the U.S. government's proclamations today on maintaining and extending its "once unchallenged preeminence" are consistent with its past positions. I contend that the CCSSI is part of a larger agenda shaping U. S. education, economy, international relations, and domestic policy whose purpose is to serve U.S. supremacy. My intent in this commentary is to critique the CCSSI from this perspective and examine its effects on the mathematics education of urban U.S. students—primarily, low-income and working-class African American and Latina/o youth. Because I live and work in Chicago and am involved in grassroots movements to strengthen democratic public education, and because U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan came directly from Chicago to Washington, DC, I have much on-the-ground experience with his policies.[1]

Some refer to the 20th century as the "American Century" and desire that the 21st century be a repeat. This desire is captured in the words of an influential, conservative think tank: "At present the United States faces no global [military]

[1] Although I use Chicago as an example throughout, I acknowledge the unique differences that exist within and across urban environments in the United States.

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rival. America's grand strategy should aim to preserve and extend this advantageous position as far into the future as possible" (Project for a New American Century, 2000, p. i). This drive for U.S. dominance—military, economic, scientific, and political—directly relates to education, including the CCSSI.

Other things, however, have changed—a lot. Although the year 1983 was a period of severe economic dislocation—the year that *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) was published—today's crisis is dissimilar on several levels and also deeper (Foster & Magdoff, 2009). In the education arena, the current era is marked by privatization, exemplified by huge increases in charter schools; mayoral takeovers of school systems; gutting of democratic school practices; attacks on teacher and school-employee unions; performance-based measures (i.e., standardized test scores) to evaluate schools, administrators, teachers, and students; massive cuts in public education funding at the pre-K–20 level; and choice and voucher programs (Brown, Gutstein, & Lipman, 2009; Compton & Weiner, 2007; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Pedroni, 2007). These changes strongly influence the education and lives of urban youth.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative

The CCSSI is an initiative of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGACBP) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The standards include those in college readiness, English, and mathematics. The goal is for all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories to adopt the common standards so that students will "graduate high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs" (NGACBP/CCSSO, 2010). As of May 2010, two territories, the District of Columbia, and all but two states, Texas and Alaska, have joined. The standards are supposed to be coherent, clear, consistent, rigorous, aligned with college expectations, research based, and informed by standards in high-performing states and countries "so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society" (NGACBP/CCSSO, 2010).

There have been criticisms on specific aspects of the CCSSI's mathematics standards. One is *A Plea for Critical Revisions to the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics*,[2] and another is from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM, 2010). Both concur on certain points (e.g., that the CCSSI's view of kindergarten children's place value knowledge is inappropriate for their development); but I do not analyze the CCSSI content standards here. There may be good or bad aspects of specific content standards, but, as Michael

[2] *A Plea for Critical Revisions* is a blogspot.com petition circulating on the Internet; see http://commoncorematheducatorsrespond.blogspot.com/2010/03/test-number-3.html.

Apple (1992) critically advised the mathematics education research community years ago regarding the NCTM's 1989 *Standards* (NCTM, 1989), there are bigger and more important questions that should be asked: Whom do standards benefit? What is the purpose of standards, of mathematics education? What *should* be the purposes? What is our role? Without putting standards in broader sociopolitical contexts, especially in our current volatile world, we can neither understand them nor know how to respond to them.

The Larger Sociopolitical Context

The CCSSI is central to the President Obama–Secretary Duncan education agenda, which includes, among other initiatives, the *Race to the Top* (RTTP) grant program. In RTTP, states compete for grants, and one selection criterion is whether they adopt common standards (e.g., the CCSSI). To be awarded grants, states need to track students' test scores, focus on "producing" excellent teachers and principals (i.e., those whose students score high on tests), tie teacher evaluations to students' scores, expand charter schools, improve the most low-performing schools, and promote mayoral takeover of school districts. States that focused on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education are awarded extra points in the grant competition. By May 2010, 40 states had applied for RTTP funding, 16 states were finalists, and 2 states, Delaware and Tennessee, were first-round winners.

Beyond RTTP, mathematics education figures prominently elsewhere in the Obama–Duncan education agenda, including in the *Educate to Innovate* campaign, intended to complement RTTP. The following is a statement from the Obama White House announcing the campaign:

> President Obama has launched an "Educate to Innovate" campaign to improve the participation and performance of America's students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). This campaign will include efforts not only from the Federal Government but also from leading companies, foundations, non-profits, and science and engineering societies to work with young people across America to excel in science and math. (The White House, 2009)

The Educate to Innovate press release contained the usual statements about U.S. students doing poorly on international assessments and stated the campaign's goals:

- Increase STEM literacy so that all students can learn deeply and think critically in science, math, engineering, and technology.
- Move American students from the middle of the pack to top in the next decade.
- Expand STEM education and career opportunities for underrepresented groups, including women and girls. (The White House, 2009)

Nothing is new here, including the paltry stand on equity. In fact, *A Nation at Risk* begins: "All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 1). Of course, the experiences of most urban youth are nothing like either pronouncement, and weak or superficial calls for expanding access are a far cry from the fundamental transformation of society that a social justice perspective demands.

The George W. Bush and Obama Education Agenda

I argue that *Educate to Innovate*, RTTP, and the CCSSI are all straightforward continuations of the Georgia W. Bush administration's education agenda, and that little difference exists between the collective goals of the Obama–Duncan education initiatives and the Bush administration's *American Competitiveness Initiative* (ACI). This is particularly true for STEM education (e.g., the National Mathematics Advisory Panel [NMAP, 2008)] was part of the ACI and its recommendations surely influenced the CCSSI). Like the current administration's initiatives, the ACI emphasized that U.S. students should help reclaim the nation's leading global position. The Domestic Policy Council (2006) under then-President Bush declared:

> In the years to come, the United States will face increased economic competition from a number of countries around the world. We will have to work harder to maintain our competitive edge. By laying the foundation today for expanded scientific and technological excellence, we will continue to lead the world tomorrow in inquiry, invention, and innovation. (p. 23)

President Obama's launch of *Educate to Innovate* is similar:

> Whether it's improving our health or harnessing clean energy, protecting our security or succeeding in the global economy, our future depends on reaffirming America's role as the world's engine of scientific discovery and technological innovation. And that leadership tomorrow depends on how we educate our students today, especially in math, science, technology, and engineering.... And that's why my administration has set a clear goal: to move from the middle to the top of the pack in science and math education over the next decade. (The White House, 2009)

The ACI's premise was that innovating technologically, strengthening STEM education, and upgrading the skills and knowledge of U.S. students and workforce would heal the ailing, second-rate U.S. economy. The framing of the ACI was that U.S. economic problems affected us all, and therefore, all would benefit from the cure. President Obama's dire warning that "*our* future is on the

line" (emphasis added) suggests that all will suffer if we do not educate to innovate and "mak[e] sure our students are prepared for success in a competitive 21st century economy and workplace" (The White House, 2010, ¶ 4).

Education for Productivity—For Whose Benefit?

The political and neoliberal ideological assumptions embedded in the economic policies of the Obama administration and previous ones dating back at least to Reagan's are that the wealth that goes to the wealthiest, whether through tax cuts for the rich (the Reagan and W. Bush administrations) or through bailing out major U.S. banks, will eventually "trickle down" and benefit the rest of us. These economic suppositions influence U.S. education policy, which has been strongly influenced by several recent reports, such as *Tough Choices or Tough Times* (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007). Like the ACI, this report suggested that the U.S. people as a whole will suffer unless we transform our educational system; it also stated that capital has no allegiance to the United States and will flow anywhere to maximize profit:

> If we continue on our current course, and the number of nations outpacing us in the education race continues to grow at its current rate, the American standard of living will steadily fall relative to those nations, rich and poor, that are doing a better job. If the gap gets to a certain—but unknowable—point, the world's investors will conclude that they can get a greater return on their funds elsewhere, and it will be almost impossible to reverse course. Although it is possible to construct a scenario for improving our standard of living, the clear and present danger is that it will fall for most Americans. (p. 8)

However, this argument misleadingly suggests that the U.S. standard of living will improve—for "most"—if we fix what is broken. In fact, U.S. productivity overall has increased over the past 45 years, but simultaneously, income and wealth polarization *within* the U.S. population has grown. Dew-Becker and Gordon (2005) documented that from 1966 to 2001, "*Nobody below the 90th* [income] *percentile received the average rate of productivity growth*" (p. 58; emphasis in original). Where did the gains go? They answer: "*Only the top 10 percent of the income distribution enjoyed a growth rate of real wage and salary income equal to or above the average rate of economy-wide productivity growth*" (Abstract; emphasis in original). Since 2001, the gap between rich and poor has widened. Edward Wolff (2010), an economist well known for studying both income and wealth inequality, wrote, "All in all, the 2000s witnessed a moderate increase in income inequality, a small rise in wealth inequality, and a significant jump in non-home wealth inequality" (pp. 12–13).

Exacerbating Inequality for Urban Students—Issues of Race and Class

Thus, educating to innovate by focusing on STEM education may improve U.S. productivity, but if the past is prelude, the gains will benefit only the wealthiest and not the majority of urban youth of color in public schools. In fact, current education policies can further marginalize these youth in other ways. Concretely, this agenda *already* has done so for these students in Chicago under Duncan's leadership (although we in Chicago recognize that Chicago public schools policy was much bigger than Duncan alone).

First, de-democratizing public education and increasing educational privatization in RTTP (charter schools, mayoral takeover, school choice, evaluations tied to test scores, school turnarounds) are tied to neoliberal ideologies that promote the primacy of the market in all spheres, bottom-line "performance indicators" as the only viable metric of all activities, parents as educational consumers in a "free" educational market, erosion of the public good including resources and funding, and deregulation. Our experience in Chicago is with Mayor Dailey's *Renaissance 2010* plan to close neighborhood public schools and open charter and contract ones (Lipman & Haines, 2007)—but these policies echo from Los Angeles, to Philadelphia, to St. Louis, and elsewhere.

In Chicago, as the Board of Education closes schools, low-income students and communities of color experience dislocation (from school to school), displacement (massive gentrification and destruction of public housing), spikes in violence (as students cross neighborhood and gang lines), and profound disrespect for community wisdom and democracy (Brown, Gutstein, & Lipman, 2009). The Board proposes school closings, and community members and school personnel learn about them through the media. The Board then holds hearings that Board members rarely attend, while community members, school alumni, parents, teachers, and students pour out their hearts for increased resources and for their schools, often longtime anchors in economically devastated, deindustrialized, and disinvested neighborhoods.

A common perspective on school closings in low-income African American and Latina/o communities is: "It's a done deal." Evidence? At a 2009 Board meeting, I heard a teacher ask if any Board member (all mayoral appointees) had read the testimony gathered from hundreds of people at public hearings on the 16 schools to be closed. Not one member had read the testimony, yet all voted unanimously to close/turn-around all 16 schools. Also, one contract-school operator posted on its website teaching positions for a school eventually turned over to it (I saved the postings), but the application closing date was *before* the Board even voted! This shredding of democracy does—and will—affect those with least power in society. What people experience in Chicago public schools bodes badly for the nation.

Additionally, the U.S. economy does need a stratum of STEM professionals,

but a stratified labor force reflects inequity onto education. Chicago has elite public high schools, which less than 10% of Chicago's students attend. These are disproportionately white, Asian, and middle and upper income. The vast majority of students attend under-resourced, heavily segregated, and disproportionately low-income neighborhood high schools. Though these have a smattering of advanced courses, they are for the most part not college-preparatory schools, and experience dropout rates of 50% or more and mean ACT scores around 15 (Illinois State Board of Education, 2009–2010; Swanson, 2008). No neighborhood high school has a majority of students at or above state standards, and the school-to-prison pipeline is enacted through discipline policies and disproportionate suspensions of African American male students (Karp, 2009). The "mis-education" of students of color, as Woodson (1933/1990) named it, is obvious in Chicago. When resources—new buildings, the most academically qualified teachers, smaller classes, scholarships, enrichment programs, extra-curricular research opportunities, world-class technology and equipment, university partnerships, and more—are concentrated on high-performing students being groomed to boost the flagging U.S. economy, we not only have the shredding of democracy but also of equity and social justice. Despite weak rhetoric to the contrary, nothing in the CCSSI, RTTP, or *Educate to Innovate* turns this situation on its head and transfers the necessary massive resources to benefit the majority in urban schools. In fact, given that the U.S. Department of Labor projects that in 2018 more than half of all jobs will require no more than "short" or "moderate" on-the-job training (e.g., truck drivers, secretaries, salespeople, wait staff)—and not college (Lacey & Wright, 2009)—capital and government have little incentive to demand that neighborhood public schools have college-preparatory STEM programs.

Despite this stratification, urban schools have some advanced offerings, albeit few. For one, there are certainly government officials who care about access and opportunity. But beyond this, to legitimate selective, exclusionary programs, one has to create the illusion of equal opportunity. Furthermore, brilliance emerges despite adverse conditions, and few in positions of power are so ideological that they would reject someone who can fight through the barriers and potentially help alleviate the crisis. But even this can subvert others who work as hard but, for whatever reasons, do not make it through the sieves. As Conforti (1992) pointed out, "each instance of success by individual black people undermines racial discrimination as an explanation of the lack of success on the part of other black individuals" (p. 235).

Some Closing Remarks

There is a profound disconnect between the economic and education crises facing urban U.S. communities and the CCSSI. As Martin (2008) pointed out in

critiquing the NMAP, "*race* is conspicuously absent in the National Mathematics Advisory Panel's final report despite a review of 16,000 research publications and policy reports and testimony from 110 individuals" (p. 389; emphasis in original); the same is true for the CCSSI mathematics standards. In them, like Bush's National Mathematics Advisory Panel, race, racialization, racism, equity, African Americans, and Latinas/os do not exist. The lives and voices of people and scholars of color are "conspicuously absent." There is also no mention of class or gender. It is as if one could develop a common core of standards and ignore these issues. Yet institutional and structural racism and political economy loom large in the experiences of urban youth, both within and outside the mathematics classroom.

So what is our role? For guidance, I turn to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous 1967 Riverside Church speech against the Vietnam War:

> I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered…. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, "This is not just."…. A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, "This way of settling differences is not just." This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. (as cited in Washington, 1986, pp. 240–241)

Dr. King's radical words call us to certain tasks. I believe that readers of the *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education* are committed to racial justice, like Dr. King, yet he spoke plainly that opposing racism was necessary but insufficient—one should also stand against "extreme materialism," the "glaring contrast of poverty and wealth," and against war and a military budget of nearly $1 trillion versus $50-plus billion for education. We have to go beyond mathematics education for urban students because the "giant triplets" are inextricably related. Mathematics educators and teachers can raise and link these issues in all our work; push the boundaries on the accepted, narrow discourses of "standards," curriculum, and pedagogy; and find a place in struggles against education privatization, urban displacement, climate destruction, and whatever else in concert with students, par-

ents, community members, and citizens of the world.

Finally, Dr. King did not specifically advocate ending capitalism—but had he lived longer perhaps he would have because the seeds of its rejection were in his words and trajectory. A revolution in values, to reclaim spiritual life, demands a deeper understanding of the roots and systematic nature of our present crisis, and a vision of society that, as Dr. King said, puts people and nature before profit. Call it socialism, like millions across the planet, or call it what you will—our present order is fundamentally flawed, and our responsibility is to create a new one. I close with words from Amilcar Cabral (1973), leader of the independence struggle of Guinea-Bissau against almost 500 years of vicious colonialism: "[Join] the difficult but inspiring struggle for the liberation of peoples and humankind and against oppression of all kinds in the interest of a better life in a world of peace, security, and progress" (p. 15).

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge ongoing conversations with Danny Martin about race, racism, and mathematics education and Pauline Lipman about political economy—both have helped and pushed my thinking in these areas.

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