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EDUCATION

## Why We Need Common Core Standards

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Would you undergo heart surgery by a cardiovascular surgeon who had not passed his medical boards? Would your company entrust an accountant who was not a CPA to prepare and certify its federal tax return? These professions require mastery of a common body of knowledge that certifies proficiency. Yet we do not require the same of our young people. This keeps them from successfully competing not only nationally but globally.

One path toward a solution that is gaining prominence is the controversial — Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Adopted as part of the 2010 effort by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State school officers to improve the nation's competitiveness, the internationally benchmarked standards define the knowledge and skills students should gain throughout their K-12 education in order to graduate high school prepared to succeed in entry-level careers, college courses, and workforce training programs.

To date, 45 states are shifting to CCSS for English and math, as the standards are superior to the current ones in most states. By standardizing curricula and assessments, CCSS eases students' moving from state-to-state as their parents need or choose to move for a variety of reasons.

As sensible as CCSS might seem, it has become a political lightning rod, bringing together members of both parties and both ends of the ideological spectrum in opposition to it, despite members of both parties who support it.

On the right, a cadre of political reactionaries and loony libertarians are on a crusade to convince the public that the Common Core is a federal plot, courtesy of President Obama, to nationalize education. This claim is absurd since the federal government contributes only 6 percent of the national budget to education. Fortunately, real, responsible conservatives such as William Bennett and Lamar Alexander (both former secretaries of education) and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, along with scores of educators, support Common Core and recognize its vital importance to improve the nation's competitiveness.

On the left, Common Core's critics comprise major teachers unions, including the National Education Association, home school organizations, the Occupy Solidarity Network, Inc. and many other anti-establishment groups.

Teachers unions are clearly the leading opponents. They complain the curriculum is inflexible and that administrators and parents will blame them if student test scores plummet. Instead, they call for more spending on education. Yet here is no correlation between spending on education and performance. Among countries of the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), only the rich nations of Austria, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Norway spend more per capita than the United States, yet U.S. students score the same as those from the Slovak Republic, which spends less than half per student than we do.

Which brings us to international comparisons. U.S. educational performance among all OECD has been declining steadily, ranking now at 27th out of 34 OECD countries in math, 24th in science and 21st in reading. Is it any surprise then that ACT, a leading college testing organization, found that 75 percent of young people entering college are not adequately prepared for first-year courses?

CCSS specifies what is taught, not how it is taught, thereby giving teachers free rein. As Bill Gates asserts: "It's ludicrous to think that multiplication in Alabama and multiplication in New York are really different." In our highly mobile society workers need skills that are solid, measurable and portable.

Readiness to live and compete in the global economy, to theorize, think critically and apply skills to the real world are indispensable. As Jeb Bush has stated: "There is nothing more critical to our long-term economic security than a wholesale transformation of our education system."

Common Core State Standards are not a magic bullet and certainly no substitute for effective teaching, but they are a powerful, indispensable weapon to reverse the decline in our national competitiveness. Jerry Haar is a professor of business at Florida International University and a senior research fellow at Georgetown University McDonough School of Business.