

Is Common Core Racist? Check Out The Results

By Sandra Stotsky*

The December 2015 re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act required all states that wanted Title I money to help school districts with low-income students to develop and submit a four-year plan, under the control of the state's education department. All state plans had to be "peer reviewed" by people chosen by the U.S. Department of Education and approved by the U.S. Secretary of Education. The bill, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act, did not require or even suggest that these four-year state education plans be approved by a state's elected legislators or by the elected local school board members in the state.

Interestingly, no state's attorney general is on record as declaring the plan submitted by its state's education department illegal or unconstitutional. No state attorney general pointed out that the federal government has no constitutional authority over a state's education policies.

The federal government can require a state to be accountable via an audit for the funding it provides states for K-12 public education, mostly through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and other programs established by the federal Department of Education. (However, most of the money for K-12 — about 90 percent — comes from local and state funds provided by taxpayers in a state.) An audit enables the U.S. Department of Education to ensure that the funds Congress appropriates for K-12 education are used in the categories approved by the House and Senate appropriations committees. Audits were used for funds allotted under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act until about 2001, when the act was reauthorized by a bill called No Child Left Behind. Audits tied to disbursements of federal funds comport with common sense, but the U.S. Department of Education has no legal or statutory authority to impose educational policies or practices on states or school districts.

Above all, the federal government's education agency has no authority to tell states what to do about opt-outs — meaning parents who don't want their children to participate in federally recognized standardized tests, usually because of an objection to Common Core. Nor do state agencies have legal authority to implement statewide opt-out policies devised by their staff. But it seems that most state education bureaucrats don't know that. They seem to think that they can determine the opt-out policy for all local school districts in a state. Why doesn't a governor's legal counsel or a state attorney general tell the state board of education or commissioner of education that only locally elected school boards can determine opt-out policies for their district? Moreover, only locally elected school boards can determine the consequences for opted-out students in their school district. Parents don't need to request opt-out "rights." They already have them.

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As bizarre as is this lack of constitutional or legal knowledge in agencies in the administrative branch of government, it is even more bizarre that governors seem to have allowed their state education departments to build racist standards into their state plans and require tests aligned to those racist standards. How do we know that Common Core-aligned standards and tests are racist? We need look no further than our “Nation’s Report Cards” and the growing gaps in scores between higher- and lower-scoring groups of students.

As one example, let’s look at the “at or above proficient” percentages for African-Americans and Hispanics in Massachusetts in both Reading and Mathematics from 2011 to 2017 — years that encompass the increasing substitution of Common Core’s standards for the state’s own pre-Common Core standards. After the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted Common Core in July 2010, the state’s education department phased in the Common Core standards. So scores in the every-odd-year National Assessment of Educational Progress tests (often called the “Nation’s Report Card”) during years 2011 and 2013 reflect a time when Bay State students were taught chiefly according to the state’s pre-Common Core standards. Scores in the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests in years 2015 and 2017 reflect a time when Bay State students were taught chiefly according to the state’s Common Core-aligned standards. (By the 2015-2016 school year, all public school students in Massachusetts were supposed to be taught only to the state’s new Common Core-aligned standards, which had already been introduced previously.) All test items in 2015 and 2017 were based on Common Core’s standards, regardless of the name of the test.

Here are the percentages of African-American and Hispanic students who were at or above proficient on grade 8 National Assessment of Educational Progress tests for Reading from 2011 to 2017 in Massachusetts:

In Table 1 are the percentages of African-American and Hispanic students who were at or above proficient on grade 8 National Assessment of Educational Progress tests for Reading from 2011 to 2017 in Massachusetts:

Table 1. Percentage of Grade 8 Massachusetts students scoring at or above proficient level on NAEP Reading test by ethnic group, 2011–2017

Year	African-American	Hispanic
2011	20	18
2013	24	20
2015	18	17
2017	18	17

In Table 2 are the percentages of African-American and Hispanic students who were at or above proficient on grade 8 National Assessment of Educational Progress tests for Math from 2011 to 2017 in Massachusetts:

Table 2. Percentage of Grade 8 Massachusetts students scoring at or above proficient level on NAEP Mathematics test by ethnic group, 2011–2017

Year	African-American	Hispanic
2011	26	21
2013	28	28
2015	22	24
2017	22	24

As shown by these numbers, these African-American and Hispanic students on average had significantly higher scores on the NAEP tests in 2011 and 2013 in both Reading and Mathematics when their classroom teachers taught chiefly to the state’s own pre-Common Core standards. They had significantly lower scores in 2015 and 2017 in both subjects when their classroom teachers taught chiefly to the state’s Common Core-aligned standards. (The trend line in Math for Hispanic students over the four NAEP test years is not as clear as it is in Reading.)

But surely the National Assessment Governing Board, which is in charge of the National Assessment of Educational Progress test, isn’t trying to make black and Hispanic students do worse than they were doing before? Perhaps. Nevertheless, we know that intentions don’t matter to individual students. Disparate impact does.

What makes a set of standards racist? Do the following evidence-based assertions about the Common Core-aligned standards in Massachusetts allow us to use that adjective?

1. They expect less of all students than they should or could, according to international requirements and the judgment of subject matter experts. This conclusion is suggested by the decline or plateau in NAEP scores in recent years.
2. They expect less of low-performing groups than knowledge-based standards do, as the Bay State’s “at or above proficient” scores for its two major low-performing groups suggest.
3. They enable large numbers of students to pass. This is shown by the total number of students in Massachusetts who were at or above Basic from 2011 to 2017. In 2011, 84 percent of all students in the Bay State were at or above Basic in

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Reading. In Math, 86 percent were. In 2017, 83 percent of all students in the Bay State were at or above Basic in Reading. In Math, 81 percent were. Did the students improve? Or, as often happens, were cut-off scores lowered just to make the results look better than they are?

4. The gaps between “disadvantaged” students and other students have increased. For example, in Massachusetts the spread between African-Americans and Hispanics on one end and Asian-Americans on the other widened from 2011 to 2017. In 2011, 61 percent of Asians and Pacific Islanders were at or above proficient in Reading and 72 percent were at or above proficient in Mathematics. In 2017, 64 percent were at or above proficient in Reading and 73 percent were in Mathematics. So as Asian-Americans’ scores went up, African-Americans’ and Hispanics’ scores went down.

Common Core-aligned standards and tests seem to have negatively affected the low-performing groups in Massachusetts. And that seems predictable, given the lower standards of Common Core.

So if one expects less from everyone, and even less from disadvantaged groups, why isn’t that racism?

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