

Bill Gates: Commend Common Core

Bill Gates 6:47 a.m. EST February 12, 2014

We need education reform and this is the best way to fix school for our kids.



(Photo: Don Emmert, AFP/Getty Images)

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Last month, Melinda and I published our foundation's [annual letter](http://annualletter.gatesfoundation.org/) (<http://annualletter.gatesfoundation.org/>), about myths that block progress for the poorest. We focus on myths about global issues, like the myth that foreign aid is a big waste, but when it comes to domestic issues we're in the grip of mythology, too. And these myths aren't just wrong; they're harmful, because they can lead people to fight against the best solutions to our biggest problems.

Take the example of America's schools. Right now, [45 states](http://stateimpact.npr.org/florida/tag/common-core/) (<http://stateimpact.npr.org/florida/tag/common-core/>) are implementing new academic standards, known as the Common Core, which will improve education for millions of students. Unfortunately, conversation about the standards is shrouded in myths.

I want to explain why Common Core is among the most important education ideas in years.

The standards are just that: [standards](http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards) (<http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards>), similar to those that have guided teachers in all states for years, except these standards are inspired by a simple and powerful idea: Every American student should leave high school with the knowledge and skills to succeed in college and in the job market.

Today, [80% of students](http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED509650.pdf) (<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED509650.pdf>) say they expect to go to college while only [40% of adults](http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/?level=nation&mode=map&state=0&submeasure=239) (<http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/?level=nation&mode=map&state=0&submeasure=239>) have an associate's degree or higher. Clearly, the old standards didn't help them achieve their goals. Common Core was created to fix that. And at least 75% of teachers support them, according to several surveys.

Common Core also has the benefit of consistency. Americans move [more than 10 times](https://www.census.gov/hhes/migration/about/cal-mig-exp.html) (<https://www.census.gov/hhes/migration/about/cal-mig-exp.html>) over the course of a lifetime. Inconsistent standards like the ones we've had until now punish students who have to switch schools. Either they're expected to know material they've never been taught, or they're re-taught material they already know. But with standards that are not only high enough but also consistent, students will be able to move without falling behind.

Since the standards mark a big change, it makes sense that parents, teachers and students are asking questions. But in the back-and-forth, dangerous misconceptions are starting to crystalize.

Myth: Common Core was created without involving parents, teachers or state and local governments.

In fact, the [standards](http://www.corestandards.org/resources/frequently-asked-questions) (<http://www.corestandards.org/resources/frequently-asked-questions>) were sponsored by organizations made up of governors and school officials. The [major teacher unions and 48 states](http://www.ccsso.org/News_and_Events/Press_Releases/NATIONAL_GOVERNORS_ASSOCIATION_AND_STATE_EDUCATION_CHIEFS_LAUNCH_CC) (http://www.ccsso.org/News_and_Events/Press_Releases/NATIONAL_GOVERNORS_ASSOCIATION_AND_STATE_EDUCATION_CHIEFS_LAUNCH_CC) sent teams, including teachers, to participate. The Gates Foundation helped fund this process because we believe that stronger standards will help more students live up to their potential. More than 10,000 members of the general public commented on the standards during drafting. Each of the 45 states that have adopted them used the same process used to adopt previous standards.

Myth: Common Core State Standards means students will have to take even more high-stakes tests.

Common Core won't necessarily add to the number of annual state tests students take. States will introduce new math and language arts tests based on the standards to [replace tests](http://www.corestandards.org/resources/frequently-asked-questions) (<http://www.corestandards.org/resources/frequently-asked-questions>) they give now. Most states are taking a cautious

approach to implementing the new tests, giving teachers and students time to adapt before scores lead to serious consequences. What's more, unlike some of today's tests, the new tests will help teachers and students improve by providing an ongoing diagnosis of whether students are mastering what they need to know for success after graduation.

Myth: Common Core standards will limit teachers' creativity and flexibility.

These are standards, just like the ones schools have always had; they are not a curriculum. They are a blueprint of what students need to know, but they have nothing to say about how teachers teach that information. It's still up to local educators to select the curriculum.

In fact, the standards will give teachers more choices. When every state had its own standards, innovators making new educational software or cutting-edge lesson plans had to make many versions to reach all students. Now, consistent standards will allow more competition and innovation to help teachers do their best work.

Americans want students to get the best education possible. We want schools to prepare children to become good citizens and members of a prosperous American economy. The Common Core standards were carefully conceived with these two goals in mind. It would be a shame if myths and misunderstandings got in the way.

Bill Gates co-chairs the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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