

The Common Core Can Be Great for Gifted Students ... But That's Not Guaranteed

By Jonathan Plucker
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The implementation of the Common Core State Standards is having a profound impact on American education, and many advocates are worried about how the Core will impact gifted students. As one colleague recently told me, "We've heard this all before, that these big reforms will only bring good things to gifted students.' Yet it never seems to work out that way."

That's a fair assessment of the impact of education reform on gifted education over the past few decades, but there is reason for optimism with the Common Core. In this post, I review some of the reasons why the Core could be very good for gifted learners, and I also offer some cautions about things we, as advocates, need to do to ensure that our best and brightest get these benefits.

Let's start with the positives. First and foremost, the creation of more rigorous, internationally-competitive standards is a big plus for gifted students, especially given the very weak, inconsistent standards across several states before the arrival of the Core. In the pre-CCSS era, it was not uncommon for some state assessments to have over 50% of students scoring in the advanced range. These "low bar" standards and assessments made a mockery of promoting educational excellence, and replacing them with more realistic frameworks will provide a much more honest sense of how our advanced students perform academically. In a similar vein, one researcher noted that the previous lack of common standards leads to situations in which students from very different high schools all are "4.0 students" but have totally different levels of preparation; yet these students all arrive at his university with similar expectations for the level of challenge and subsequent outcomes. Common expectations via the standards and assessments could address these disparities.

Second, having a well-articulated system of standards could be a boon to academic acceleration, given that the curricular and learning expectations would be carefully delineated regardless of where one lives. In a highly mobile society, this is not a minor concern as students and their families move from district-to-district and state-to-state. When I was a classroom teacher, an often-voiced frustration of parents was that their children were considered gifted in some school districts but not in others. A well-integrated set of curriculum standards and assessments could minimize these issues.

Third, having high quality assessments tied to the Core could be tremendous for gifted students, in that adaptive assessments could remove the ceiling effects that are found on most state tests, allowing educators to pinpoint a student's level of achievement, leading the way to decisions about appropriate instructional adjustments.

Fourth, the patchwork of state and local policies and practices in gifted education makes advocacy very difficult; having a curricular framework and high-quality assessment data that crosses most state lines should greatly assist advocacy for educational excellence – rather than adapt advocacy efforts to 50 different state contexts, gifted education proponents can adapt to one general set of standards.

Opportunities and Challenges

However, even in best case scenarios, there is considerable work to be done. We need to see these standards as a starting point, and there are several areas in which gifted education professionals can work within their schools and districts to direct the needed improvements.

Meeting the needs of gifted students within the CCSS framework requires that most teachers be able to differentiate instruction successfully for students of different ability and performance levels. We need to ensure that adequate resources and professional development are being provided to teachers to help them develop and refine their ability to differentiate successfully. Educators of the gifted have extensive expertise and experience with “differentiating up” to meet the intellectual needs of talented students, providing a great leadership opportunity as districts and schools across the country wrestle with improving differentiation.

The existing standards may be underdeveloped. For example, the math standards currently end at Algebra 2 – hardly an advanced level for students who are mathematically talented. Educators of the gifted and advocates for gifted children are uniquely qualified to help build on the current standards and encourage state policymakers to devote the necessary resources to facilitate these efforts.

Implementing adaptive testing is a good first-step, as is creating assessment systems that help us estimate annual student growth. But there is evidence that the two major CCSS-aligned assessments have limited adaptability and may suffer from ceiling effects. But these are fixable problems once the assessment framework is in place. In the meantime, we can help develop formative assessments that can be used to assess student mastery of – *and progress beyond* – the CCSS. Given that the assessments may have a more lasting impact on student learning than the standards themselves, aggressively improving the assessments with the needs of advanced students in mind will go a long way toward ensuring the gifted students can thrive in a CCSS-dominated education system.

Finally, we continue to hear anecdotal (but mounting) evidence of educational leaders noting that the Common Core makes gifted education programs, ability grouping, acceleration, and other interventions for advanced students unnecessary. As absurd as these assertions are to those of us who work with high-ability learners, a couple potential strategies come to mind.

First, ask these critics how they plan to serve students who can already meet the standards. Yes, the Core is “more rigorous,” but even the developers acknowledge that *the CCSS are meant to serve as the starting point, not the end goal*. For example, within [the English-language arts standards](#), the developers note, “The Standards do not define the nature of advanced work for students who meet the Standards prior to the end of high school. ... The Standards set grade-specific standards but do not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are ... well above grade-level expectations.” Similar comments can be found within the mathematics standards.

Second, no matter how high the standards, some students will master and then exceed them. Indeed, the CCSS are not the first set of rigorous standards. Several states had rigorous standards pre-CCSS. For example, Indiana was often rated as having among the highest quality, most rigorous math standards in the country. Did Indiana drop all ability grouping, acceleration, and gifted education programs in math? Of course not. As noted above, the Common Core was designed to reflect grade-level standards. Suggesting that new, grade-level standards allows us to jettison grouping, acceleration, and enrichment for high-ability students is about as logical as eliminating driver’s education programs because we lowered the speed limit. The argument just doesn’t make any sense.

The Common Core and the related assessments can be a good thing for gifted students, but we have to be clear on what the Core is and what it is not. It *is* a clearly articulated set of grade-level standards in certain content areas that may provide some curricular consistency across district and state lines and can serve as a foundation for a comprehensive set of rigorous curricula. But it *is not* a clearly articulated set of differentiated content and instructional strategies designed to meet the needs of academically talented students. By encouraging our educational leaders and policymakers to address the Core’s limitations, we can realize the potential benefits for our high-ability children.

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