Devon Ziminski

**Altering Education Reforms: Are More Tests the Answer?**

Are YOU college and career ready?

Yes… maybe…. No?

What does it even mean to be “college and career ready?” That you can implement the quadratic formula when necessary? Create and deliver an effective presentation? Wash and fold your own laundry?

In today’s dynamic and evolving world, it’s hard to define what skills, knowledge, and insights are necessary for those pursuing higher education or entering the workforce. Nonetheless, the Common Core State Standards try to do just that.

By aiming to make every student “college and career” ready, the Core standards marginalize the thousands of concepts, insights, and skill sets found across all careers and academic disciplines that simply cannot be compressed into an A or B answer.

The Common Core, launched in June 2009 as a bipartisan partnership between the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, has been a point of constant contention in recent years.

Although the Common Core is undoubtedly one of the most significant education initiatives in decades, 62% of Americans have never heard of the Common Core, and most of those who say they know about it neither understand nor embrace it.

The Common Core aims to raise the level of academic standards across all school districts and prepare students for success in college and career. Proponents of the Core believe that the standards will increase American competiveness and better prepare students to participate in the global environment.

Nevertheless, among the third of Americans who had heard of the Common Core, only four of 10 said the standards can help make education in the U.S. more competitive globally; a majority said the standards will make the U.S. less competitive or have no effect.

Americans are not being brash in their doubts; time and time again we have seen that tests are not raising the standards for America’s children. As evidenced through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) debacle, where 80% of school districts across the nation were denoted as “below standards,” I can only imagine the percentage of schools that will not perform up to par under the Common Core, whose standards are more rigorous and challenging than the NCLB standards.

My own father, a 30 year veteran high school teacher in a suburban New Jersey school district, has expressed his disdain with the bureaucratic implementation of the Common Core in his high school.

Valuable time he can spend teaching and creating impactful lessons is now spent filling out unnecessarily complex paperwork for the Common Core. He also must teach precise topics that link to specific Common Core assessment guidelines. Many of the creative liberties he exercises to create dynamic lessons and to teach integrative concepts have been curtailed by the mandated assessment focus.

Standardized tests are seen as a way to promote maximum learning by systematically monitoring the progress of students and school districts against predetermined standards; however, the recent accountability policies have not proven to be effective in raising the standards for America’s students, teachers, administrators, and school districts.

The efficacy, or lack thereof, of the practice has been noted by the public; only 22% of Americans think increased testing helps improve local school performance.

The standardized method of teaching students one-dimensional topics worked in the 19th century when all students were going into industrialized jobs; however, in today’s world, this one-size-fits-all strategy will not suffice.

American students are diverse in countless ways; students come from different backgrounds, have different abilities, and learn in different ways. It is completely irrational to assume that all students across the nation will absorb information and regurgitate it in the same manner.

Americans value schools that teach 21st century skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. In the implementation of recent reforms, many policymakers and administrators have overlooked the importance of innovative thinking.

The United States has the highest scores on what the World Education Foundation calls “National Innovation Capacity.” America’s competitive advantage stems from our ability to create and commercialize new products and processes.

America has consistently won more Nobel Peace Prizes than Japan because our culture advocates collaboration and peer-review. This peer-review challenges scholars to create the most efficient and accredited work. American competitiveness, innovation, and creativity are not linked to test scores but to an integrative educational system that encourages questioning and critical thinking; it would prove detrimental to our society to quell our innate desire for creation and innovation in favor of monotonous assessments.

American education policymakers must turn away from standards-based reforms and endorse a dramatic shift from top-down accountability policies to bottom-up reforms that begin within the classroom.

Enacting reformative change will prove challenging, but change is vital to the reinvigoration of the American education system. There are a plethora of existing educational innovations that can be explored as alternatives to testing, and the movement toward a more personalized framework may be one of the best options.

Personalized learning combats the increase of mandated standardized testing as it directly involves the students and teachers, working together to create a dynamic and rewarding learning environment. Personalized learning is an approach that is individualized by design and thus varies from person to person. A personalized framework, whether implemented through small learning communities, blended learning, digital learning, or a pyramid of intervention approach offers potential for tangible education reform.

These reforms, whether adopted at a state or federal level, must be supported by each school district they affect; they cannot be haphazardly implemented. A major overhaul in the mindset of administrators must occur. Teachers must be willing to endure additional training and implement new learning strategies in their classrooms. With the dedication and determination of all educational stakeholders, creating effective educational innovation reform is a true possibility.

A recent Gallup poll noted that 81% of Americans believe that it is extremely or very important that the government address the issue of education in the next year; it is the nation’s duty to challenge the assessment trend in education reform and to address the possibility and potential within 21st century educational innovations.

*Common Core statistics provided by the 45th Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools 2013 (*[*http://pdkintl.org/noindex/GP2013\_PDKGallupPoll-EMB.pdf*](http://pdkintl.org/noindex/GP2013_PDKGallupPoll-EMB.pdf)*)*