

## Colleagues

---

Volume 10

Issue 1 *Wildly Exciting Education*

Article 8

---

1-30-2013

# The Wildly (yawn!) Exciting Common Core Standards (CCS): Déjà vu (all over again)

Roger Wilson

*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues>

---

### Recommended Citation

Wilson, Roger (2013) "The Wildly (yawn!) Exciting Common Core Standards (CCS): Déjà vu (all over again)," *Colleagues*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol10/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colleagues by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).



# The Wildly (yawn!) Exciting Common Core Standards (CCS): Déjà vu (all over again)

By Roger Wilson, GVSU Faculty

## Introduction

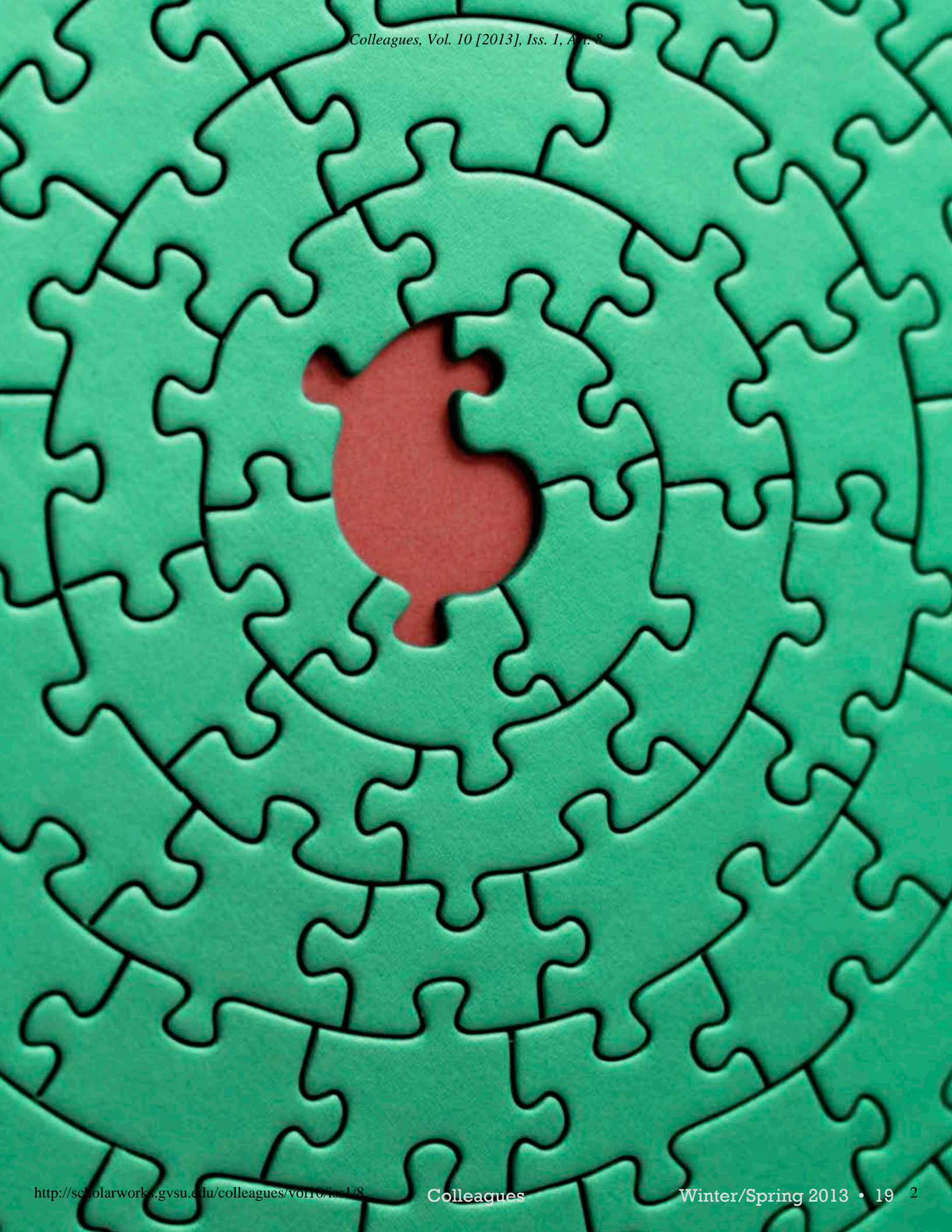
All but one state has signed on to the Common Core Standards (CCS), and their departments of education and educators nationwide have been involved in revamping the state curricula, translating those CCS into state standards. But to what end? This article offers a brief historical overview of the standards movement as it relates to the development of the CCS, and then turns its attention to the rather shaky research basis for their creation. If it seems like *déjà vu*, maybe it is because we have been here before.

In my courses, I typically emphasize the significance of the 1983 document from President Reagan's education commission entitled "A Nation at Risk" (NCEE, 1983). It was a scathing report on the state of American (high school) education—"the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people." Harsh in its criticism, the document was also sprinkled with 1980's cold war rhetoric—"If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." Reinforcing the sentiment of a self-inflicted condition, one passage that acquired considerable media attention claimed that "We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament" (NCEE, 1983). Needless to

say, in the minds of critics, such a narrative only served to reinforce the view of an American educational system in crises, and thus in need of a structural overhaul. But claims that the educational sky was falling were not unique to this commission.

U.S. history is filled with educational reports passing critical judgment on the schools of the day and their apparent failure to adequately address some perceived social or economic need. Policy and curricular revisions inevitably followed. That is why it was a bit surprising that the NEA's executive committee chose to reassure that organization's members that the commission's charges were "just another passing fad that would fade like the morning haze" (Toppo, 2008). They were as wrong in their assessment of the potential impact of that report as they could possibly be. Now, nearly 30 years later, the American educational landscape looks the way it does largely *because* of that report, and the motivations that it inspired. The commission's report was yet another example of the functionalist tendency of modern society and its use of the educational system as the cure for whatever ails it. In short, the application of some curricular and dispositional treatment on the nation's youth in the belief that the problem will be ameliorated in due course (Wilson, 2010). Our unwavering faith in the power of schools' abilities to cognitively and attitudinally reconstruct members of our society and thus







enhance our communal well-being without also addressing the underlying race and class-based (structural) issues (e.g., AP, 2012) remains unrealistic and misguided.

## Background To CCS

In 2012, little has changed. The concern over economic competitiveness continues and the achievement gap between social classes as well as the majority and minority segments of society has been renewed. The response this time is the Common Core Standards (CCS). It has been a long, but steady progression since that 1983 “Risk” report. In 1989, President George H. W. Bush met with the National Business Roundtable leaders to sketch out the components of a high quality educational system. That was followed by his call for the nation’s first education summit since the Great Depression where the country’s corporate leadership engaged the governors in anticipation of support for state reform initiatives that included the idea of national goals (Mathis, 2010; NYSED, n.d.). Since then, the field of education has been witness to Bush’s Goals 2000 which President Clinton also added to; a second education summit called by IBM CEO Louis V. Gerstner Jr., in 1996 where national standards and performance assessment (i.e., standardized testing) were pursued, but agreement could not be reached; the creation at that second summit of Achieve Inc., a clearinghouse of shared information for a coalition of 29 states; the addition of education meetings at the National Governors’ Association (NGA) annual conferences where Achieve research and proposals were presented, and speakers such as Microsoft’s Bill Gates railed away at the state of US education (Wilson, 2005); and Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush eagerly embracing the standards movement in their own states while governors and then carrying forward that focus once they attained the White House which resulted in standardized testing in grades 4, 7 and 11 being instituted under Clinton, and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation with its focus upon standards and high stakes testing under Bush.

Both Clinton and Bush used state access to federal Title I funds as the carrot (or stick, depending upon your perspective) to secure “voluntary” state adoption of their educational visions. And over the past four years, President

Obama and his Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have decried the shortcomings of NCLB while unveiling its cousin, Race to the Top (RTTT). Taking a page from both Clinton and Bush, this administration borrowed from their predecessors’ implementation strategies by declaring that access to RTTT’s second round of funding could only apply to states who had signed on to the Common Core Standards.

In 2002, the states were in fiscal difficulty due, in part, to the economic recession that often follows a heightened economic expansion, which is what occurred in the late 1990s during the second term of President Clinton’s administration. Governors and state legislatures of both political stripes, starved for revenue, were willing to sign on to President Bush’s NCLB because of the offer of funding support for K12 that accompanied it. And with K12 costs accounting for 25%-30% of many state budgets, NCLB was seen as a potential economic lifeline. Nine years later in 2010 and 2011, similar economic woes were still presenting at the state level. With stimulus monies having dried up and state budgets once more suffering under the strain of lower revenues, RTTT’s offer of funding for participation also appeared attractive. Students of education will recall that it is the 10th Amendment that indirectly assigns responsibility to the states for K12 education. The end run around that amendment by successive presidents whose administrations have dangled fiscal incentives before the states has been creative, if not startling.

## Development Of CCS

The speed of development of the common core standards has been dramatic. Achieve, the corporation founded by the NGA, was commissioned in April 2009 to draft the new common core standards in Reading and Mathematics with delivery of those draft content standards due by the summer of that year, and grade-by-grade standards by year’s end (Mathis, 2010, p. 5). Achieve workgroups, with reportedly none but one member a K12 educator, worked in private without public consultation. They consisted primarily of employees of Achieve, the testing companies (ACT and the College Board) and pro-accountability groups such as the Hoover Institute (Mathis, 2010). The first public release of the standards occurred in March,

2010 with final recommendations out in June, 2010.

There were some exchanges with state departments of education prior to the public release, but the fast-track approach raised serious questions as to adequate time for input and assessment from impacted parties.

The second round of RTTT applications was due in the fall of 2010. Secretary of Education Duncan had informed

implementation of these standards leaves one to wonder if CCS is not really “back to the basics” in disguise, if not on steroids.

## What The Research Says

Driving much of the call for educational reform over the past few decades has been two major concerns: (a) that America is losing its economic and academic/intellectual

*“... the research does not support the notion that possessing a national curriculum and thus national standards means that countries necessarily perform better on international testing.”*

states in July, 2009 that “in order to successfully compete for the \$4.35B RTTT [pool of] funds, [they would have to] develop and adopt common standards that [were] internationally benchmarked” (Zhao, 2009, p. 46). After the final release of the CCS in June, 2010, the Obama administration set August, 2010 as the deadline for state applicants to accept the standards as a condition of their RTTT application (Mathis, 2010). All but Virginia did.

## Some Developmental Issues

It is interesting to note that the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) had initial reservations about the standards, but ended up endorsing them. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), on the other hand, declined to take a general stand (Mathis, 2010). Criticisms still abound about the emphasis upon non-fiction versus fiction text for reading, the focus upon technical writing, and the general concern that the standards are disproportionately of a lower cognitive order (Mathis, 2010) possibly for reasons of easier standardized assessment. The seeming focus upon what are often referred to as “foundational” knowledge and skills should raise some concerns. Preparing K12 students to be “college ready” or “career ready,” while a worthy goal, seems to have acquired a particular characterization in the CCS. That standardized national testing will eventually follow the

pre-eminence; and (b) that 21st century jobs require a different set of knowledge and intellectual skills. The CCS are intended to address these concerns and help restore America to its rightful place. And, it is not simply a matter of their content, but also the need for their adoption to be national in scope. The only problem is that the research does not support either the concerns or the remedy.

First, the research does not support the notion that possessing a national curriculum and thus national standards means that countries necessarily perform better on international testing (e.g., PISA, TIMSS). While 8 of the top 10 performing nations on the 2007 TIMSS had centralized education systems (i.e., national curricula), so did 9 of the bottom 10 (Kohn, 2010). The relative success of decentralized education (i.e., state curricula) might best be summed up in the cases of Australia and Canada. Both tend to perform quite well on PISA and TIMSS (outperforming most countries with centralized education systems). For example, in the 2009 PISA results, Canada ranked 6th in its overall reading scale (out of 65 countries), 10th in Math, and 8th in Science. Australia was 9th in reading, 15th in Math and 10th in Science (OECD, 2010, p. 8). Both of these countries academically outperformed many, and in some instances most, of their economic competitors in Europe.

Secondly, the data also does not support the idea that countries that perform better on international assessments necessarily have better performing economies or that their workforces are more globally competitive either. While America's education system is decentralized and its ranking atop the World Economic Forum's (WEF) global competitiveness chart (i.e., innovation) has indeed slipped each year since 2009 (not unexpected given the circumstances), it typically remained number one during the lead up to the CCS and the outcries about its so-called declining educational status (Mathis, 2010). Furthermore, while Canada and Australia may be ranked higher than America on PISA and TIMSS assessments, they certainly are not on the competitiveness ranking. The US outperformed each despite its supposed fall from grace academically.

The claims of a relationship between ranking on international education assessments and a country's economic performance lack credibility. Interestingly, Canada's place on the World Economic Forum's global competitiveness chart has also slipped since 2009 in step with that of the United States. While the U.S. has seen its ranking go from 4th in 2010 to 7th in 2012, Canada's has likewise declined from 10th to 14th. Could it simply be that as America's largest trading partner as well as its geographic proximity, Canada's economy is so integrated that divorced from the supposed correlation with educational standards and international assessment performance, as goes America's economic fortunes, so goes Canada's?

One might make the same general argument for Germany and the rest of Europe. Like America, educational performance has nothing to do with their current economic plight. It is also interesting to note that in the WEF's 2011-12 Global Competitiveness Report, the decline of America's ranking did not find the quality of the nation's education system as a major factor. "In addition to the macroeconomic vulnerabilities that continue to build, some aspects of the United States' institutional environment continue to raise concern among business leaders,

particularly related to low public trust in politicians and concerns about government inefficiency" (WEF, 2011).

Finally, a comment about the "skills deficiency" of American workers and the need for a different set in order to compete for employment in the 21st century. This is typically referred to as the "human capital fix." The research does not necessarily bear out that deficiency either. We are increasingly being indoctrinated into the belief that absent a 4-year college education, a person's economic future is likely to be bleak. Charts abound as to lifetime wage projections between college and non-college credentialed citizens. Furthermore, with the often general nature of many undergraduate degrees, the belief in the necessity of graduate education has even begun to take hold. But the International Money Fund (IMF) points out that "It is common in the economic literature—though neither factually nor politically correct—to refer to people with high educational attainment as 'high-skilled' and those with lower educational attainment as 'low-skilled' " (IMF, 2011). Additionally, Rothstein (2008) reports that the "Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that, for the next decade, only 22 percent of job vacancies will require a college degree or more. Forty percent will require only one month or less of on-the-job training, and could be filled by high school graduates or, in many cases, by dropouts — retail salespersons and waiters and waitresses, for example." And a Manufacturing Institute employer survey conducted in 2011 found that "the top skill deficiency among manufacturing workers was 'inadequate problem-solving skills.' [while] No. 3 on the list was 'inadequate basic employability skills (attendance timeliness, work ethic, etc.)' " (Kiviat, 2012). The results of this survey were complemented by a 2012 Manpower survey where just over one-quarter of employers expressed concerns about the workers' lack of so-called "soft skills." None of this devalues the obvious importance and implications of a college education, but "if the American workforce doesn't show up on time or think outside the box, that may be a problem—but probably not one solved by more math, science, and technical training, the go-to remedies" (Kiviat, 2012).



## Closing Remarks

Improving the educational opportunities for all of society's citizens, irrespective of class, race or gender, so that they can have a reasonable expectation of personal and financial success as they make their way is the worthiest of goals in a democratic society. That the same society not only acknowledges many of its social and economic shortcomings, but also strives to address them is certainly the mark of democratic progress. However, placing such high and unreasonable expectations upon one social institution and its employees is at the same time misguided and largely self-defeating. That the proposed solutions also fail to address the problems reflects just how deeply seeded is the ideology about the role of schools in our society, as well as our refusal to come to terms with policy failures in other spheres. America's economic revitalization rests in a number of areas including education. "The honesty of our capital markets, the accountability of our corporations, our fiscal policy and currency management, our national investment in R&D and infrastructure, and the fair-play of the trading system (or its absence), also influence whether the U.S. economy reaps the gains of Americans' diligence and ingenuity. The singular obsession with schools deflects political attention from policy failures in those other realms" (Rothstein, 2008). Curricular fixes alone are not the answer.

## References

- Associated Press. (2012, October 27). AP poll: Majority harbor prejudice against blacks. Retrieved from <http://usnews.nbcnews.com/news/2012/10/27/14740413-ap-poll-majority-harbor-prejudice-against-blacks>
- International Monetary Fund. (2011, May 5). Global economic crisis. U.S. unemployment: Matching skills to jobs. *IMFSurvey Magazine: IMF Research*. Retrieved from <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/survey/so/2011/res050511a.htm>
- Kiviat, B. (2012, July 25). The Big Jobs Myth: American Workers Aren't Ready for American Jobs. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/07/the-big-jobs-myth-american-workers-arent-ready-for-american-jobs/260169/>
- Kohn, A. (2010, January 14). Debunking the case for national standards: One-size-fits-all mandates and their dangers [expanded version of the article published in Education Week's annual "Quality Counts" issue]. Retrieved from <http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/edweek/national.htm>
- Mathis, W. J. (2010). *The "Common Core" Standards Initiative: An Effective Reform Tool?* Boulder, CO and Tempe, AZ: Education and the Public Interest Center and Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved from <http://epicpolicy.org/publication/common-core-standards>
- National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE). (1983, April). *A nation at risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform*. Washington: United States Department of Education
- NY State Dept. of Education, Office of Cultural Education. (n.d.). *Federal Education Policy And The States, 1945-2009. The George H.W. Bush Years: Education Summit*. Retrieved from the NY State Archives, [http://www.archives.nysed.gov/edpolicy/research/res\\_essay\\_bush\\_ghw\\_edsummit.shtml](http://www.archives.nysed.gov/edpolicy/research/res_essay_bush_ghw_edsummit.shtml)
- OCED. (2010). *Pisa 2009 Results: Executive Summary*. Figure 1 - Comparing Countries And Economies' Performance. doi 10.1787/888932343342. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/46643496.pdf>
- Rothstein, R. (2008). *A nation at risk: Twenty-five years later. Cato Unbound*. Retrieved from <http://www.cato-unbound.org/2008/04/07/richard-rothstein/a-nation-at-risk-twenty-five-years-later/>
- Toppo, G. (2008, April 22). 'Nation at Risk': The best thing or the worst thing for education? *USA Today*. Retrieved from [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-04-22-nation-at-risk\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-04-22-nation-at-risk_N.htm)
- Wilson, R. (2010, Fall). The Relationship Between School And Society, Part I: Functionalist Perspective. *COE Colleagues*, pp. 8-9
- Wilson, R. (2005, Fall). Our Schools Today—Are They, In Fact, Obsolete? *COE Colleagues*, pp. 12, 14.
- World Economic Forum. (2011). *The global competitiveness report, 2011-2012*. Retrieved from <http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-competitiveness-report-2011-2012>
- Zhao, Y. (2009, Fall). Comments On The Common Core Standards Initiative. *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 6 (3), 46-54.

Wilson: The Wildly (yawn!) Exciting Common Core Standards (CCS): Déjà vu

# “Free innovative classroom-ready media available to every teacher and student.”

Combining dynamic and engaging instructional content with professional development support, PBS LearningMedia empowers educators to create media-rich curriculum lessons that meet the needs of 21st century learners. Over 14,000 resources for grades K-16.



**wgvu.pbslearningmedia.org**



**PBS | LearningMedia™**

To learn more about all of WGVU's Educational Programs, visit [wgvu.org/engage](http://wgvu.org/engage) and click on the EDUCATION button.



Produced by WGVU Engage Education sponsored by The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2013



**PNC BANK**