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An Evaluation of the Common Core

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AN EVALUATION OF THE
COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS INITIATIVE

BY

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of Political Science

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ABSTRACT

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Education reform is currently a controversial issue in the U.S. With 45 states' adoption of the Common Core State Standards in mathematics and English - the first attempt at national standards that reached implementation, public education has become a focal point for the media, educators, and parents. Most criticize the Common Core and advocate its elimination. This thesis, however, looks at the Standards in practice and seeks to use them to address deficiencies in American schools. Using a case study of Schenectady and Niskayuna, a contrast of low- and high-performing schools in the New York State Capital Region, to support media reports and existing scholarly analyses of the CCSS and education improvement, this thesis offers a full evaluation of the Standards. It concludes that, for the Common Core to be successful, improvements to teacher training and support and final exams need to be made. With these alterations and time for the Standards to affect change, the U.S. should see significant gains in student achievement and educational equality. What's left untouched by the Common Core, however, are the issues of poverty and the inequitable distribution of resources, which need to be addressed to maintain the forward trajectory of education reform.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I. Education Reform in the United States

In April of 1983, President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education issued a report that shocked the United States and changed the way that its citizens and government viewed education. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, as this watershed report was titled, caused quite the panic with incendiary its assertions; *A Nation at Risk* suggested, "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."¹ The report called for increased rigor in public education in the United States to bring the country to a renewed level of competitiveness with international rivals. It started the so-called "excellence movement" in education policy.² What the report did not specifically call for, however, was a national curriculum based on a national set of standards. The conservative commission under a conservative presidency called for federal assistance to local and statewide efforts to improve schools, but still supported the autonomy of those bodies in the development of diverse curricula to meet the same goals.

While *A Nation at Risk* did not directly call for national education standards and curricula, it did spark the overwhelming interest in education reform that brought about a restored interest in this model to correct the existing deficiencies in America's public schools.³ After the publication of this report, E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Movement gained significant attention, which has continued into the early 2000s. Hirsch and his Core Knowledge Foundation worked to shed light on specific

¹ National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983), Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html>, Accessed 19 September 2013.

² Maurice R. Berube, *American School Reform: Progressive, Equity, and Excellence Movements, 1883-1993* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), 93.

³ Terrell H. Bell, "Reflections One Decade After *A Nation at Risk*," *Phi Delta Kappa* 74, no. 8 (1993), 596.

problems in the American education system that caused the students' poor performance in comparison with international rivals. His work identified a national curriculum as the solution to this problem. Although he was not the first to suggest this education strategy, he was among the loudest proponents of nationalized education. Hirsch identifies that his approach accounts for both the need for universal standards and local diversity:

“[W]e plan that about 50 percent of the curriculum be devoted to core knowledge activities, with the other 50 percent available to meet the priorities of local teachers or administrators. Having said that, though, I believe that the goal of meeting students' individual needs in the classroom has been greatly misused in American educational theory. [...] Further, regardless of individual temperament, all children have certain common needs. All children should learn how to read. All children should learn how to do math. So where does the individuality come in, in this whole business of learning arithmetic and learning to read?”⁴

Hirsch's beliefs were simple and well-received by many, but they were not without controversy and his movement failed to gain sufficient political clout to affect nationwide education policy.

The movement toward a nationalization of schooling had been present before the 1980s, though. Earlier in the twentieth century, the United States saw more subtle movements to improve education on a nationwide scale. For example, the 1950s saw a federally motivated drive for schools throughout the country to improve standards in math and science education. In the context of the Cold War's space race, this nationalist movement should hardly be surprising. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was an effective national call to improve equity in education. Out of the socially driven Civil Rights Movement and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs came increased involvement of the national government in education, which was previously a strictly state and local concern. Out of this decade and a half came the Supreme Court's famous *Brown v. Board of*

⁴ John O'Neil, "Core Knowledge and Standards: A Conversation with E.D. Hirsch, Jr.," *Educational Leadership* 56, no. 6 (1999): 28-29.

Education decision, in which a branch of the national governing body mandated integration in public schools, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which was the most extensive piece of federal education legislation to date and worked to augment standards and equalize educational opportunities, and Head Start, which targets impoverished, pre-school aged youth to give them the skills required for achievement in elementary education. This era also saw a rise in the popularity of standardization and accountability across the nation from various sectors, including state departments of education. It was not an era of federal usurpation.⁵ Concerns about equity in education continued into the 1970s, with President Nixon's policy recommendations relied heavily on the findings on the Coleman Report, which studied the achievement gap between white students and minorities and determined allocation of resources was not the main factor influencing the discrepancies in academic performance.⁶

The most recent effort to improve America's school system has, in opposition to this established nationalization trend, has been No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the brainchild of President George W. Bush's administration. Its stated purpose was similar to what one sees in any education reform effort and, in many ways, mirrors what one will see are the goals of the Common Core State Standards Initiative. The goals of NCLB included high standards and expectations for all students, a reduced achievement gap, the use of research-based instructional strategies, and others.⁷ Although it was a federal mandate, NCLB relied on state, rather than national, education standards; each state was expected to design appropriate standards and exams that aligned with the statute and to develop a statewide accountability measure to ensure compliance and success.⁸ NCLB is

⁵ Jal Mehta, *The Allure of Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 65-66, 75-76.

⁶ Jal Mehta, *The Allure of Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 68.

⁷ No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 1001 (2002).

⁸ No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 1111(b) (2002).

universally regarded as a failure. The National Education Association regards the policy's enforcement as a "test, label and punish regime."⁹ Further, the powerful teachers' union's president, Dennis Van Roekel, regards the Act a failure of President Bush and attributes the failure to too much testing with too little money to implement and improve: "Such overemphasis on standardized testing, combined with a lack of funding, has forced schools to narrow the curriculum and divert resources from art, music, social studies and physical education to teach to the test."¹⁰ Studies of the effort echo Van Roekel's claim:

It has neither significantly increased academic performance nor significantly reduced achievement gaps, even as measured by standardized exams. In fact, because of its misguided reliance on one-size-fits-all testing, labeling and sanctioning schools, it has undermined many education reform efforts. Many schools, particularly those serving low-income students, have become little more than test-preparation programs.¹¹

With the nation still in the process of healing from the wounds that NCLB inflicted, a new reform effort - the Common Core, for example - will have to acknowledge the failures of NCLB and take a different route to change.

Despite movements toward greater national unity in education, nationalized education has failed to be implemented. Even today, with the Common Core beginning to affect schools across the country, there is little cohesion in accountability and performance across various states.¹² The Common Core State Standards Initiative, in contrast to previous attempts at national standards, has done what these previous efforts have been unable to accomplish: these standards and the various

⁹ National Education Association, "No Child Left Behind cemented as failed education legacy of President Bush: Promising New Direction for Public Education Around the Corner with Obama and Duncan," *NEA Today*, 8 January 2009.

¹⁰ NEA, "No Child Left Behind."

¹¹ Lisa Guisbond, et al., *NCLB's Lost Decade for Educational Progress: What Can We Learn from this Policy Failure?* (Jamaica Plain, MA: Fair Test, 2012), 1.

¹² Kimberly Hefling, "Mixed Bag When States' Scores Compared Globally," *Associated Press*, 24 October 2013.

curricula that reflect them have been adopted and implemented in public schools across the nation: in 45 states, the District of Columbia, and two overseas U.S. territories.¹³

II. The Common Core State Standards Initiative

On June 2, 2010, the National Governors' Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) announced their newest plan, in collaboration with Achieve, Inc., for the enhancement of the quality of education in the United States: the Common Core State Standards Initiative. In response to the persistent concern with regard to the deficiencies in the American education system in the aftermath of *A Nation at Risk*, as noted in the above historical reflection on efforts to create national education standards, policymakers have been enveloped with a desire to renew the preeminence of American students in internationally administered academic tests. The Initiative, which was set into motion with the founding of Achieve, Inc., a bipartisan organization devoted to school reform, in 1996, came out of the National Education Summit of that year. Since its inception, Achieve has been a leader in various efforts that have helped to inform the CCSSI, including the creation of the American Diploma Project, its two key reports: *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts* (2004) and *Closing the Expectations Gap: An Annual 50-State Progress Report on the Alignment of High School Policies with the Demands of College and Work* (2006), and several National Summits on Education. These efforts can be viewed as stepping stones to the ultimate design, adoption, and implementation of the Common Core State Standards Initiative, of which Achieve was a partner in the development along with the NGA and CCSSO.¹⁴

Skipping ahead to CCSS, specifically, Achieve, Inc. offers the following description on the development of this new education policy:

¹³ Common Core State Standards Initiative, "In the States," Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/in-the-states>. Accessed 13 November 2013.

¹⁴ Achieve, Inc., "Our History," Retrieved from <http://www.achieve.org/history-achieve>, Accessed 9 November 2013.

In 2009, 48 states, 2 territories and the District of Columbia signed a memorandum of agreement with the National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), committing to a state-led process - the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI).

Achieve partnered with NGA and CCSSO on the Initiative and a number of Achieve staff and consultants served on the writing and review teams. On June 2, 2010, the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics (CCSS) were released, and since then, over 45 states have adopted the Common Core State Standards and are now working to implement the standards.

Achieve has developed materials to help states, districts, and others understand the organization and content of the standards and the content and evidence base used to support the standards.¹⁵

Fleshed out, leadership in education realized the deficiencies in American schools, as outlined in *A Nation at Risk* and similar studies; in response, they decided to take collaborative action instead of continued reliance on conventional, state and local methods for addressing school reform. The NGA and CCSSO worked with teachers, school administrators, and experts in education to generate the Initiative. It was a truly collaborative effort, with the opportunity for public comment after the first release of a draft for the Standards.¹⁶

Implementation of the Standards in New York State is occurring in stages over the course of five years. For the 2011-2012 school year, assessment in ELA and mathematics was based on the previous system of New York State Learning Standards and Core Curriculum, originally adopted in 1996.¹⁷ The delay in assessment gave time for educators, administrators, and government officials to adjust to the policy shift, but educators in ELA and math were expected to teach one Common Core-aligned unit in each of their classes during this academic year. Then, the 2012-2013 school year saw a full implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) in both subjects

¹⁵ Achieve, Inc., "Achieving the Common Core," Retrieved from <http://achieve.org/achieving-common-core>, Accessed 10 November 2013.

¹⁶ Terrie Rust, "Technology and Engineering Education and the Common Core Standards," *Technology and Engineering Teacher* 72, no. 3 (2012): 32.

¹⁷ NYSED, "Changes to New York State Standards, Curricula, and Assessments: ELA and Mathematics," *EngageNY*, 22 April 2013, 1.

for grades three through eight and students were assessed with Common Core-specific exams in the spring of 2013. At the high school level, the adoption has been most delayed: NYS Regents exams in English and math have been updated to include versions that reflect the rigor of the Common Core, but graduation will only be dependent on the passage of these assessments for students entering the ninth grade in 2013 and later. By the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years, NYS is expected to implement computer-based, Common Core-aligned assessments, which are currently under development by the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness of College and Careers (PARCC), in all subjects.¹⁸

The Common Core State Standards, as they have been adopted in the forty-five states and three territories that have approved the Initiative, are currently designed for English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics in grades kindergarten through twelve. In English Language Arts, the Standards focus on five key areas: reading, writing, speaking and listening, language, and media and technology. The official CCSSI website describes the reading standards as a “staircase of increasing complexity.” Further, “The standards also require the progressive development of reading comprehension so that students advancing through the grades are able to gain more from whatever they read.”¹⁹ The reading standards are the most comprehensive of the ELA requirements. They and encompass classic and modern fiction and complex nonfiction with studied texts at the discretion of districts and individual teachers. They also contain a list of mandated types of texts that must be taught, including foundational U.S. documents, world myths, and Shakespeare. The requirements for writing include logical, persuasive arguments and research. The language section focuses on the expansion of vocabulary in its formal and practical uses in both college and career settings. The last

¹⁸ NYSED, “Changes,” 1-2.

¹⁹ Common Core State Standards Initiative, “Key Points in English Language Arts,” Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/resources/key-points-in-english-language-arts>, Accessed 1 November 2013.

ELA section, media and technology, does not specifically reflect English, but is mandated to be commonly used throughout Common Core subject areas because of its extensive use in modern society.²⁰

In mathematics, the official CCSSI website describes the standards in terms of grade level divisions rather than the specific content areas that can be seen in the ELA requirements. It describes the math requirements for elementary students, in grades kindergarten through fifth, as a solid foundation. Teachers are expected to focus on the basic functions of addition and subtraction, multiplication and division, and different number categories, including whole numbers, negative numbers, decimals, and fractions. Middle school standards are described as transitional and more robust in order to prepare students for the demands of the high school mathematics content. At the high school level, college and career readiness is the primary objective of mathematics education and there is an emphasis on ‘mathematical modeling,’ which is defined as, “[T]he use of mathematics and statistics to analyze empirical situations, understand them better, and improve decisions.”²¹ The emphasis of this official description is a progression of difficulty, so that students are well-prepared for what is to come, and conceptual understanding in addition to procedural skills, which will allow students to be able to apply the knowledge and skills that they learned in high school math class to decision-making in their adult lives. The ever-present role of technology is also included in the mathematics standards.²² Terrie Rust expands this outline of the standards to a specific inclusion of “hands-on learning in geometry, algebra, and probability and statistics”²³ at the middle school level and describes the high school standards, generally, as follows: “The high school

²⁰ Common Core State Standards Initiative, “Key Points in English Language Arts.”

²¹ Common Core State Standards Initiative, “Key Points in Mathematics,” Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/resources/key-points-in-mathematics>, Accessed 1 November 2013.

²² Common Core State Standards Initiative, “Key Points in Mathematics.”

²³ Rust, 33.

standards call on students to practice applying mathematical ways of thinking to real-world issues and challenges; they prepare students to think and reason mathematically.”²⁴

In both areas, the CCSSI provides general guidelines and learning goals, and state governments even provide sample lessons and other materials, but it does not mandate a specific curriculum in any subject area. Instead, individual states, districts, and teachers are at liberty to design and implement their own lessons and topics around the standards, which are strategically tested at the end of the academic year. In theory, this seems like a flexible system, especially in comparison to some of the former alternatives noted in the previous section. However, only data from the use of the CCSSI in the classroom will confirm if the standards are sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of diverse student populations.

III. Literature Review

All of this leads to the central, three-part question of this thesis: I first ask, “Is the Common Core State Standards Initiative a pedagogically appropriate education reform, as applied in New York State Schools?” That is the overarching topic of my research and analysis of the CCSSI. To answer that, however, I look to two sub-questions about specific aspects of the program. The first is, “Are the CCLS practical and do they correct the existing deficiencies in the United States’s education system?” The second, “Can we build on the Standards to continue improving education in the U.S.?” This thesis will affirm that the CCSSI is pedagogically sound in its recent application in New York State. However, this work also acknowledges the inequalities in education that the Standards fail to address, including issues of poverty and school funding, and the reduced political feasibility of maintaining the effort because of the stress that widespread Common Core exam failure

²⁴ Rust, 33.

has caused. The Common Core, however, does enough to maintain the effort with the addition legislation to address the more pervasive problems related to public education.

There is an abundance of works that address issues of education reform in the United States. Some tell the story of education reform from a historical standpoint and recount the various movements through this lens. Maurice R. Berube's *American School Reform* does this. In this, Berube details various movements that occurred between the end of the nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth.²⁵ Jal Mehta also takes this approach in *The Allure of Order* and extensively details various efforts in education reform, including the progressive movement, debates over schooling authority, early accountability movements, and the ultimate era that currently exists: the era of standards and accountability imposed by the top levels of government.²⁶

E.D. Hirsch, Jr., one of the most well-known leaders in education reform, has composed several works that advocate for a national curriculum in the United States, the most well-known of which is *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, which identifies specific topics of knowledge that should be taught in all U.S. schools.²⁷ Hirsch has also produced more current works that aim to criticize the continuing issues in American schools, including *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them*²⁸ in 1996 and *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children*²⁹ in 2006. Other activists present their own alternatives, such as, the founder of StudentsFirst and a powerful voice in education reform. In her book *Radical: Fighting to Put Students First*, Rhee advocates for the elevation of the teaching profession to give

²⁵ Maurice R. Berube, *American School Reform: Progressive, Equity, and Excellence Movements, 1883-1993* (Westwood, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994).

²⁶ Mehta.

²⁷ E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987).

²⁸ E.D. Hirsch, *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996).

²⁹ E.D. Hirsch, *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006).

incentive for good instructors to stay in the classroom. Her plan also includes increased competition through charter schools and voucher options and higher expectations for all students. Her last main area of proposed reform would be the distribution of funding based on need and performance instead of property values.³⁰ Rhee's work puts significant responsibility on teachers for education outcomes. Conversely, Kevin K. Kumashiro advocates for reframing the education debate to shift the blame for failing schools away from the teachers. He sees this as a removal of national attention from deeply rooted societal problems that have a greater negative impact on school quality, such as the issue of poverty.³¹

Jonathan Kozol is another well-known author who focuses on education deficiencies in America. Mainly, he is concerned with solving the persistent inequalities found in U.S. schools. His *Savage Inequalities* is a study of schools with the lowest and highest per capita expenditure on students and criticizes the completely different education experiences that students get because of their race and class.³² Another well-known work of Kozol's is *The Shame of the Nation*. This 2005 book attacks the *de facto* segregation that has grown in America's schools, which leaves minority students in inner-city schools with abysmal conditions and white students in the wealthier, better-resourced suburban schools.³³ These works, and others by Kozol, draw attention to the problems in U.S. schools and the structures that perpetuate them. This is important to the grand scheme of education reform, but it does not target a specific reform effort like this thesis.

Since the NGA and CCSSO began their efforts to construct the Common Core, a branch of scholarship has also arisen to address concerns, propose suggestions and alternatives, and to overtly

³⁰ Michelle Rhee, *Radical: Fighting to Put Students First* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013).

³¹ Kevin K. Kumashiro, *Bad Teacher!: How Blaming Teachers Distorts the Bigger Picture* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012).

³² Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York, NY: Broadway Paperbacks, 1991).

³³ Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2005).

criticize the CCSSI. Some scholars, Lorraine M. McDonnell and M. Stephen Weatherford, for example, have discussed the policy-making of the CCSS and the factors that went into how the policy was shaped. McDonnell and Weatherford have an interesting analysis that reveals various political factors, in addition to research-based educational ones, that influenced the NGA and the CCSSO. These factors include the normative American values of accountability and test-based evidence, as well as professional expertise in education.³⁴ Others, more similarly to my own project, examine the Standards and suggest steps to be taken to maximize the success of the reform effort. This is the case in Andrea Venezia and Laura Jaeger's work. Their "Transitions from High School to College" puts the CCSSI in the context of deficiencies in college and career readiness of American students and prior efforts to address these deficiencies. They determine that the Common Core has a potential for success, but needs to be reinforced with sufficient professional development for educators, student development of non-cognitive skills and knowledge, and supports for students preparing and selecting their best option for postsecondary education.³⁵ This thesis goes beyond the scope of this project, however, and is more practical than theoretical.

IV. Case Study

My project is distinct from these other studies on the Common Core State Standards Initiative. I do not address it from an ideological standpoint like many others. My work is not looking to prove whether diverse state standards or cohesive national ones are consistent with the core values of the United States. Nor do I examine whether it is constitutionally sound for there to be a voluntarily adopted, common, standards-based curriculum in all states. This thesis is also not interested in assessing the Standards in the abstract; I do not scrutinize them as an expert in

³⁴ Lorraine M. McDonnell and M. Stephen Weatherford, "Evidence Use and the Common Core State Standards Movement: From Problem Definition to Policy Adoption", *American Journal of Education* 120, no. 1 (2013), 1-25.

³⁵ Andrea Venezia and Laura Jaeger, "Transitions from High School to College," *The Future of Children* 23, no. 1 (2013), 117-136.

education. Instead, I focus on the Standards themselves, as practically applied in a case study of two high schools in New York State’s capital district.

The high-performing school in my research pool is Niskayuna High School in Niskayuna, New York. Niskayuna is a large, suburban community with a total population of about 21,780 according to data from the 2010 Census. Niskayuna has the highest median household income in the NYS Capital Region and has an extremely low poverty rate compared to the state average. Minorities’ share of the population in this small, suburban area is roughly fifteen percentage points below the state average.³⁶ Specific racial characteristics and socioeconomic information are reported in Table 1 (below).

**Table 1: Comparison of Schenectady and Niskayuna Demographic Information
According to the 2010 Census**

	Schenectady	Niskayuna	NYS
Non-Hispanic White	57.5%	86.1%	65.7%
Black	20.2%	2.7%	15.9%
Hispanic	10.5%	2.5%	17.6%
Asian	3.6%	8.1%	7.3%
Multiracial	6.7%	2.1%	3%
Median Household Income (U.S. Dollars)	\$38,485	\$70,800	\$57,683
Persons Living Below the Poverty Line	22.5%	1.5%	14.9%

³⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, *American Fact Finder: Niskayuna, NY*, Retrieved from http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml, Accessed 2/16/14.

As of 2013, Niskayuna High School (NHS) serves 1,414 students in grades nine through twelve. Fifteen percent of the total student body has been classified as a racial minority and four percent is economically disadvantaged, based on eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunch. *U.S. News* has calculated that Niskayuna has ninety-eight percent proficiency in both English and mathematics and has a College Readiness Index of 29.4 on a scale of 100.0.³⁷ According to the school's official website, it has received numerous distinctions for its students' scholastic achievement. The most recent distinction would be its 2012 status as the highest ranked high school in the NYS capital region by the *U.S. News and World Report*.³⁸ NHS's commitment to academic achievement is reflected in its course offerings, with a total of forty-six honors and eighteen Advanced Placement options in addition to traditional core subject requirements.³⁹

My case study's low-performing school is Schenectady High School (SHS), in Schenectady, New York. Schenectady is a small, urban area with a population of over 66,100, according to estimates from the 2010 Census. Schenectady's poverty rate is about eight percentage points higher than the New York State average. Additionally, the city's minority populations compose a slightly higher percentage of the total population than the state average.⁴⁰ Specific racial characteristics and socioeconomic information are reported in Table 1 (above).

Based on data from the 2013 school year, Schenectady High School's total enrollment is 2,781. It has very high populations of both minority and impoverished students; sixty-five percent of the student body is classified as belonging to a racial minority group, while fifty-nine percent

³⁷ U.S. News, "Niskayuna High School: Overview," *Education: Best High Schools*, Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/new-york/districts/niskayuna-central-school-district/niskayuna-high-school-13920>, Accessed 10/28/13.

³⁸ John W. Rickert, "Distinctions," Retrieved from <http://www.nisk.k12.ny.us/nhs/>, Accessed 9 November 2013.

³⁹ John W. Rickert, "The School and Community," Retrieved from <http://www.nisk.k12.ny.us/nhs/>, Accessed 9 November 2013.

⁴⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, *State & County QuickFacts*, Retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/3665508.html>, Accessed 16 February 2014.

receive either free or reduced-price school lunch, the most common indicator of economic disadvantage. According to calculations by *U.S. News*, eighty-one percent of the students in SHS are proficient in English, while only seventy-one percent are deemed proficient in mathematics. *U.S. News* has also given this school a College Readiness Index of 11.4, a total of eighteen points lower than Niskayuna's index of 29.4.⁴¹ Schenectady High School offers a great variety of advanced course options and programs, which include Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), University in the High School, and Smart Scholars.⁴² However, student performance in AP and IB exams is low. The most recent data from AP exams shows that only fourteen percent of the total student population took at least one AP course and exam. Out of that fourteen percent, only twelve percent of participants passed the exam they took with a score of "3" or higher. Results from the IB certification for Schenectady High School demonstrate a higher student performance: fifteen percent of the student body took at least one IB exam and fifty-six percent of those participants passed their attempted exam.⁴³ Despite the geographic proximity between the two schools, the communities and schools are exceptionally different.

V. Methods and Methodology

The cornerstone of my research has been a survey of teachers conducted in the aforementioned schools. The schools targeted in this case study represent a spectrum of poverty level, which is negatively correlated to achievement level: as demonstrated by the data, as poverty becomes more dominant in a district, the scholastic performance of said district declines. I chose to obtain information from teachers for several reasons. The first is that teachers are the front line in

⁴¹ U.S. News, "Schenectady High School: Overview," *Education: Best High Schools*, Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/new-york/districts/schenectady-city-school-district/schenectady-high-school-14052>, Accessed 28 February 2013.

⁴² Schenectady City Schools, "Academics," Retrieved from http://www.schenectady.k12.ny.us/About_SCSD/Academic/index.htm, Accessed 13 January 2014.

⁴³ U.S. News, "Schenectady."

the application of any new education standards in their schools: they must be the ones to teach material that conforms to the curriculum and they have the greatest influence in bringing student performance to proficiency. Mandates from the state's department of education, or even district administrators, are useful, but they are meaningless without the compliance of those who affect students daily. Policies become reality when they are enforced and teachers are the only people capable of practically enforcing education policy. Thus, my survey questions teachers on their experience with the Common Core. To make the most of teachers in this role, I question teachers on their understanding of the Standards and their expectations, on training they have received, and on the implementation of the CCSSI in each district. Teachers also understand their specific student populations. Minority and low socioeconomic status (SES) students are typically marginalized in the classroom and inequalities between districts with varying populations of students in these groups are a primary cause of the wide achievement gap that exists in the United States.⁴⁴ Any reform effort will require that its impact on these students is specially considered and teachers are the window to that consideration. Lastly, teachers will be judged on student test scores under the Common Core, so they have a high stake in the effort. Thus, for what I will do in this thesis, teachers are an indispensable source of information.

The schools I have chosen to study were carefully selected to provide a spectrum of academic performance and poverty levels, which, I have already noted, are shown to have a negative correlation. To target these discrepancies, specifically, and to avoid other factors that could account for performance differences, I chose Niskayuna and Schenectady because of their similar geographic locations; they are juxtaposed in the New York State capital region. Another factor that went into my selection of these two schools was their location in proximity to myself. This thesis has been

⁴⁴ Tarisi Dunlop, "Education is a Common Good: There Should Be No Losers," *Education Digest* 79, no. 1 (2013): 18-20.

undertaken at Union College in Schenectady, New York. My location in relation to these two schools has helped me to succeed in my research; I found that school administrators were more open to work with me after I mentioned that I was a student at Union College, an institution that is well-known and respected throughout the region. If I had selected other schools that were not in the sphere of proximity to my college, I am confident that I would have experienced greater difficulty in soliciting participation from teachers and school administrators. Another advantage of my location is the access I have to local news sources that directly relate to education, poverty, and the Common Core in Schenectady and Niskayuna, my case study. Media reports on the Standards has been an essential component of my analysis, so this locational advantage is significant.

To gain a full understanding of the Common Core State Standards Initiative and to inform my analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the program, I use a wide variety of sources: government and non-government organization reports, academic, news, and original research with teachers. I looked at government and NGO-sponsored studies on the status of education in the United States, such as *A Nation At Risk* and the American Diploma Project's *Ready or Not*, among others. Such reports, coupled with some academic sources drawing attention to the deficiencies of American schools, inform my understanding of what problems exist in the U.S. Education system and what needs to be done to address them. News sources and teacher surveys, as well as supplementary sources such as Board of Education meeting minutes, have informed my understanding of the Common Core, as applied in Schenectady and Niskayuna, and has given me practical insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the reform effort. From the academic sector, I rely on books and journal articles to balance the bias that can often be found in the media and in reports from those with a direct stake in the program.

VI. Looking Forward

This introduction has only laid the foundation for my project. The second chapter focuses on the mechanics of the implementation of the CCSS. In chapter two, I use an analysis of the survey data, minutes from each district's Board of Education meetings, scholarly evaluations and current news articles to explore various areas of teacher support. The areas of teacher support encompass changes needed to bring existing curricula to CCSSI standards and the time given to make these adjustments; the extent and content of teacher training on the Standards; and the availability, validity, and use of state-prepared classroom resources in the schools of my case study. Sufficient teacher preparation and support is essential to the success of any education program, as indicated by various sources that I have researched⁴⁵, so this evaluation is key to determine if the Standards will work in New York State schools and what improvements need to be made for the reform to be a success.

Chapter two examines the flexibility under the CCSS, which is cited as essential to a successful national standards program in several studies on education reform.⁴⁶ As student populations are incredibly diverse - academically, culturally, and demographically, opportunities for individualized approaches must be included to make any reformed education program a success. My analysis of the survey data will inform the practical side of this section and I reinforce the conclusions drawn from the survey with scholarly interpretations related to the Initiative's flexibility and applicability to diverse schools. This analysis suggests that the Common Core is at least a limited success on this front because it does not subscribe a rigid curriculum and, instead, allows individual teachers and schools to design their own methods and lessons to meet the expectations of the CCSS.

⁴⁵ Kumashiro.

⁴⁶ James M. McPartland and Barbara Schneider. "Opportunities to Learn and Student Diversity: Prospects and Pitfalls of a Common Core Curriculum." *Sociology of Education* 69, Extra Issue: Special Issue on Sociology and Educational Policy: Bringing Scholarship and Practice Together (1996), 66-81.

The American Diploma Project, *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts*, (Achieve, Inc., 2004).

Chapter three studies current issues in the United States education system, which are largely informed from an examination of government and non-governmental organization (NGO) reports, as well as media and scholarly analyses. The areas I focus on are an overwhelming absence of in-depth, topical understanding among American students; a great lack of college and career readiness among today's high school graduates and disadvantages faced by racial minorities and students of low socioeconomic status (SES); U.S. students' consistent outperformance by international rivals; and the significant inconsistencies in educational quality based on geographic location within the U.S. This chapter has determined that the Common Core has the potential to make substantial improvements to all of these areas if given the time to reach full implementation, even if there is still more to be done.

The final chapter addresses improvements that can be made to the CCSSI to help solve pervasive issues with the current education system in the United States. Academic and news sources indicate that the Common Core, as currently implemented, has left many problems unaddressed. Problems like the negative psychological effects that poverty has on student ability to learn and the inequity in school funding and resource allocation need to be solved in order for any education reform attempt to achieve high levels of success. Another issue considered is the overwhelming stress that failure has caused for students and their parents, which harms the political feasibility of maintaining the CCSSI. This chapter concludes that the Initiative is a start to a long process of reform for complete educational equity, but should be maintained in spite of its vocal opponents.

CHAPTER 2: THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMMON CORE

Even the most well-thought out policy can reveal itself as disastrous when implemented. In order to fully evaluate the Common Core State Standards Initiative, I must first scrutinize its implementation and the burden that this policy shift has put on schools. This chapter will focus primarily on the New York State capital region, specifically the two case study schools of Schenectady and Niskayuna, but will be augmented by various news sources from across the United States, as well as scholarly opinions on the subject. To assess the burden of implementation, this chapter will be divided into two sections; the first will target the CCSSI and teacher support, the second will examine the flexibility of the new education system. The evidence presented in this chapter will indicate that the implementation of the Common Core has been difficult, with any measures to ease the transition in schools being too little, untimely, or insufficient to address the needs of diverse student populations. However, the trajectory is promising that the shift will become easier in the coming years.

I. CCSSI and Teacher Supports

As teachers are the primary facilitators of any and all education standards, it is crucial for the success of a new program that they receive adequate support during its implementation. This support can come from a variety of sources, including the federal, state, and/or local government, or their school's administration. For the purposes of this chapter, all four sources will be examined in depth; however, resources and supports that have been provided by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) will be acknowledged as more beneficial to the ease of transition because they require the least additional action from schools and, therefore, place the least stress and burden on the schools and their teachers. This section will look at the timeline of the transition to Common Core, both the official New York State plan as well as individual district plans; teacher training and

curriculum development; and sample resources generated by NYSED. Last, I will examine teacher training and the development of aligned curricula. All of these areas are nods in the right direction toward smooth implementation. However, the ultimate conclusion is that supports will need to be more robust to seriously reduce the stress the transition has placed on educators and to maximize the Common Core’s potential for success.

A. Time for Implementation

The first area of support that will be discussed in this section is the most indirect, but arguably the most important for the success of any new education policy: it is the time given to schools and teachers to update their curricula to match the Common Core’s higher standards. A teacher from Washington, quoted in a Scholastic and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation study, says, “I feel that my ability to be the best teacher possible for my students is most critically affected by the lack of professional time to adjust the curriculum to the Common Core.”⁴⁷ This statement rings true in much of the research that came out of the case study. In Niskayuna, the school board began discussing the transition to the Common Core in February 2012,⁴⁸ about six months before the start of the first school year in which CCLS were fully implemented in two high school subjects. The district’s 2012 Summer Curriculum Projects reserved two days for high school ELA and math teachers to work toward the transition to the Common Core, in addition to several other days devoted to the more consuming transitions that would take place at the elementary and middle school levels. All of these demonstrate administrative awareness of extra time needed to transition to the Common Core; teachers need training and resource development days, to be able to teach their students the appropriate, CCSS-aligned material.

⁴⁷ Scholastic and The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, *Primary Sources: America’s Teachers on Teaching in an Era of Change* (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014), 36.

⁴⁸ Survey.

Furthermore, as of March 20, 2012 the Board of Education (BOE) for Niskayuna had reserved increased time for teacher training and student learning in the 2012-2013 academic calendar. Specific measures included an increased number of half days on that year's school calendar to devote to professional development and the addition of one class period to the middle school daily schedule. Additionally, the Niskayuna BOE expressed a commitment to replace student study halls with academic resources whenever possible.⁴⁹ Such measures indicate that the district administration in Niskayuna was aware of the need for extra time, both for instruction and for learning. In addition to that, the administration was prepared to devote extra time to reinforce learning throughout the school year, both for students and for instructors. Such reinforcement, for teachers, has been acknowledged by survey participants; one hundred percent of respondents reported that their CCSS training was reinforced throughout the 2012-2013 school year at regular department meetings and on staff development days. Most indicative of the time required to transition to the Common Core is that all respondents also noted that they participated in staff development days that were particularly set aside for Common Core instruction.⁵⁰ Teachers from Niskayuna had no complaints about the training they received.

The Schenectady school district also found itself with the need to schedule extra time to transition to the Common Core. A majority of surveyed teachers from this district affirmed that their school sponsored staff development days, both during the academic year and in special summer sessions, were specifically designed to address the new standards of learning. The number of training days varies among the respondents. Almost forty-two percent of ELA and math teachers in the high school reported four or more days of Common Core training in the 2012-2013 school year; twenty-five percent had two or three days of training, another quarter had less than two days and the

⁴⁹ Niskayuna Board of Education, *Regular Meeting Minutes*, 20 March 2012, 4.

⁵⁰ Survey.

remaining respondents did not report a numeric value and answered “very few” days when asked about the time devoted to CCSS training. This variance can be at least partially explained by a SHS geometry instructor, whose open-ended comment on her school-sponsored training is as follows: “[Training was o]nly given to specific teachers and not the department as a whole until this year [the 2013-2014 school year]. Not all teachers are involved in creating [the C]ommon [C]ore [C]urriculum and unit plans until this year.”⁵¹ Thus, although the CCSS were implemented in the previous year, training for many was delayed because of the need to prioritize limited time. In September 2012, Superintendent Laurence T. Spring expressed a commitment to “ease of implementation” and “effect of implementation,” which encompassed a two-part focus on likelihood of completion and maximization of impact.⁵² This commitment, which involves the Common Core, the new system of teacher assessment, and other education policy changes, reflects the almost universal assertion that schools were not given sufficient time to transition and, therefore, had to prioritize different elements of the conversion to the new Standards.

One hundred percent of respondent teachers from Schenectady and Niskayuna negatively answered the question “Was the time given to implement the new, Common Core-based curriculum sufficient?”⁵³ This unanimous response transects the lines of poverty and school performance: all surveyed teachers feel that the time was not enough to implement the Common Core State Standards in their individual classrooms. Furthermore, education leaders across the country are similarly united in their belief that the CCSSI was rolled out too rapidly in schools. Despite the five-year plan, many educators request that the Common Core be phased into schools on a grade-by-grade basis. According to the School Administrators Association's NYS High School Principal of the Year Carol

⁵¹ Survey.

⁵² Laurence T. Spring, “Superintendent’s Entry Report,” *Regular Meeting Minutes*, 19 September 2012, 10.

⁵³ Survey.

Burris, “When educators ask for a phase-in of Common Core, they mean by grade level.”⁵⁴ A respondent English teacher from Schenectady High School echoes these sentiments: this educator states, “Students are expected to do too much immediately. This should have been rolled up, not just out. It should have started in kindergarten, then K-1, then K-2, and so on instead of forcing teachers and kids into exams based upon standards they may not have gotten yet!”⁵⁵

Despite this direct request from educators, as noted in the introduction, the phase-in that New York State schools were given is a five-year plan that involves, at the high school level, first transitioning English and mathematics classes to alignment with the Common Core for one unit in the 2011-2012 academic year, then the full curriculum in the following year culminating in CCLS-aligned Regents exams. By the 2015-2016 school year, specially developed Common Core assessments will be a graduation requirement for all students and the Standards will be fully integrated in NYS high schools.⁵⁶ The people are largely united in the belief that this five-year plan does not provide enough time for the successful implementation of the updated standards, but it is a significant acknowledgement by the State that a gradual implementation is necessary.

Teachers are not alone in their belief that the Common Core’s implementation has been too rapid. At the December 2012 New York State Senate Education Committee hearings on education reform, “[C]ritics blasted what they said was a botched, hasty implementation of both the standards and evaluations.”⁵⁷ Education experts also see the implementation as too rushed. Stephen Krashen urges,

⁵⁴ Carol Burris, “Report Fails to ‘Fix’ Common Core,” *Albany Times Union*, 22 December 2013.

⁵⁵ Survey.

⁵⁶ NYSED, “Changes to New York State Standards, Curricula, and Assessments: ELA and Mathematics,” *EngageNY*, Retrieved from <http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/ccsstimeline.pdf>, Accessed 16 January 2014, 1-2.

⁵⁷ Kristen V. Brown, “Educational Debates Will Keep Roiling,” *Albany Times Union*, 5 January 2014.

We should, at a minimum, demand that experiments and descriptive studies of groups of students be carried out so that the standards and measures can be evaluated. Instead, states whose departments of education and legislatures have jumped on the Common Core bandwagon are using nearly their entire student populations as experimental subjects.⁵⁸

This view, while far from the mainstream, reflects the common sentiment that the Common Core was implemented too quickly to be successful.

However, when Massachusetts enacted its Education Reform Act of 1993, there was similar complaint about the rushed implementation. Because the heightened, statewide standards were not implemented in a grade-by-grade basis, parents and other critics condemn the quick timeline. However, with patience and innovation in schools, Massachusetts academic quality was propelled to the top of the United States's charts and rivals the highest performing nations in the world in mathematics and science.⁵⁹ Perhaps, as this would indicate, the most important temporal consideration is not time given to gradually implement education reform, but rather allowing the new system sufficient time to produce results. Chip Wood, writing in the *Phi Delta Kappan* journal, corroborates my conclusion from the Massachusetts experiment. He writes,

Changes in educational approaches, beliefs, and practices come faster today than most teachers, parents, and children can begin to assimilate. New initiatives, curricula, and tests are piled one upon the other in suffocating layers, leaving little time for learning how to use them well. [...] Speedy results are seen as politically necessary. When new approaches are not successful immediately, they are abandoned in favor of even newer ones.⁶⁰

This is a perfect characterization of the problem with America's education reform: they are simply not given enough time to achieve results before the next initiative comes along. The Common Core is what the United States currently has to work with. U.S. leaders need to give the necessary time

⁵⁸ Stephen Krashen, "The Common Core," *Knowledge Quest* 42, no. 3 (2014), 44.

⁵⁹ Kenneth Chang, "One State Had a Plan and Saw It Through," *New York Times*, 3 September 2013.

⁶⁰ Chip Wood, "Changing the Pace of School: Slowing Down the Day to Improve the Quality of Learning," *The Phi Beta Kappan* 83, no. 7 (2002), 545.

for teachers and students to understand it before the Standards are prematurely labeled a failure. The importance of time to understand the new Standards will become evident in the next section on teacher training. Based on these facts, I would advise seeing the Common Core to full implementation and beyond.

B. Teacher Training and Curriculum Development

There is also a common sentiment that teacher training and curriculum development have been too rushed or insufficient. Methods of teacher training and the development of CCLS-aligned curricula varied between the two schools in this case study, especially with regard to outside resources used. The most widespread theme of Common Core training throughout both schools was increased collaboration within individual departments. Other elements include work with CCLS specialists and more time and money devoted to school-sponsored staff development. The next few paragraphs will detail the training that teachers had in each of the three schools and assess it based on teacher response, scholarly recommendations, and my own synthesis of the two.

Niskayuna High School

Niskayuna's Common Core training was more intensive than that of Schenectady. Teachers in Niskayuna High School were given handbooks on the CCSS in their subject, which served as the foundation and primary support for their training. For the English department, "[Niskayuna] hosted Syracuse University trainers to dig into reading [and] analytical strategies to influence evidence based writing,"⁶¹ which is an essential aspect of the English standards. One teacher even reports being sent to a state or regional teachers' conference to learn more about the Common Core and how to implement it in the schools. Otherwise, the department head was largely responsible for teacher training. English teachers report actually taking the 2013 Common Core-based Regents Exam in

⁶¹ Survey.

their subject to familiarize themselves more thoroughly with the exams of increased rigor. They used this experience to work together with the department head to rewrite common assessments for each grade level that align more closely with the new final exams.⁶²

Instructors in this department also significantly increased collaboration in lesson-planning and curriculum development. The administration provided for two days of summer training to adjust high school English and mathematics curricula to the CCSS.⁶³ During these summer sessions, the ELA and math department heads provided summer workshops to help anyone interested in augmenting the rigor of their existing units. Furthermore, at regularly scheduled monthly meetings, staff members often shared updated and/or newly designed lesson plans with others in their department for feedback and shared use.⁶⁴ This teacher education on the Common Core, which is much more comprehensive than what we will see in the subsequent overview of Schenectady, can be credited with the higher contentedness with the transition that was expressed by Niskayuna survey participants.

Schenectady High School

Educators from Schenectady High School, on the other hand, report less favorably on their Common Core Training. One respondent calls it “choppy and disconnected.” Most training was done through professional learning communities (PLCs), in which teachers met with others in their department and the school’s Common Core Coordinator to discuss the CCLS. In these PLCS, they determined what changes the Standards would require for their subjects and developed new units to match these requirements. A majority of English teachers further report that their department provided them with handbooks on the Standards to supplement their training conducted in-person,

⁶² Survey.

⁶³ Niskayuna Board of Education, *Regular Meeting Minutes*, 22 July 2012, 8.

⁶⁴ Survey.

which took place during regular department meetings, special seminars and summer sessions. These sessions and resources were described as “insufficient”⁶⁵ Discontent among Schenectady teachers was also noted in the previous section because not all were given Common Core guidance until the 2013-2014 school year, the second year of CCSSI implementation.⁶⁶ Clearly, the overall sentiment among this group of educators is that they need more preparation to successfully bring the Common Core into their classrooms.

There is a positive side of Schenectady instructors’ Common Core training, despite the criticisms. Collaboration and raised standards were significantly utilized at all levels and were strongly encouraged by the Schenectady City School District’s administration:

Final examinations shall be given in all middle school and high school subjects. The Board is strongly supportive of the development and use of common final assessment in all three middle schools after a period of development, piloting, review and modification.⁶⁷

This encouragement is reflected in the survey data. Nine out of twelve respondent educators from SHS cited collaborations with more experienced individuals or groups as part of their school’s Common Core training. More specifically, a majority of Schenectady survey participants report the use of PLCs in their trainings, with whole departments, grade level teams, or other groups of colleagues meeting with the school’s Common Core Coordinator to unpack the Standards and plan for their implementation, to develop new units, and to share ideas.⁶⁸

Adequacy of Training Efforts

While a majority of the surveyed educators from Niskayuna and Schenectady do not feel adequately trained, the administrations at these schools have definitely undertaken good efforts to

⁶⁵ Survey.

⁶⁶ Survey.

⁶⁷ Schenectady Board of Education, *Regular Meeting Minutes*, 22 July 2012, 7.

⁶⁸ Survey.

help the affected teachers in their transition to the Common Core. Professional learning communities are frequently cited as highly effective ways to prepare and support educators for the use of new standards of learning. According to a Mississippi assistant superintendent, as quoted by Anthony Armstrong, “[T]he most important resource for effectively implementing Common Core standards is time for teacher learning communities.”⁶⁹ Jollen Killon⁷⁰, the creator of a workbook to help schools increase collaborative learning for teachers, states,

As decades of research in professional learning conclude, deep practice requires intensive, standards-based, collaborative professional learning, sometimes extending across multiple years, that incorporates opportunities to practice without risk, coaching with feedback, and ongoing learning to refine and extend executive control of new practices.⁷¹

Much of the professional development teachers in this case study have received on the Common Core reflects the character of Killon’s statement on PLCs, an indicator of a positive aid to the successful transition to the new standards in these schools. Further, those twenty-one percent of respondents who feel that they possess an inadequate understanding of the Common Core Learning Standards may be able to rest assured in the upcoming 2014-2015 school year; there is a legislative push in the NYS government for increased school funding to help with the implementation of the Common Core. Albany’s *Times Union* reports that legislators intend the additional funding - if added to the new budget - to be used in part for teacher training and curriculum development,⁷² which would obviously enable districts to add more training days and/or create more learning opportunities for teachers.

A bombardment of information on the Standards and assistance in the design of aligned curricula alone cannot account for a successful implementation of the Common Core, nor any new

⁶⁹ Anthony Armstrong, “Making time for Common Core implementation”, *The Learning System* 8, no. 3 (2013), 1.

⁷⁰ Quoted by Anthony Armstrong.

⁷¹ Armstrong, 1.

⁷² Brown.

education policy, in schools. Teachers need to feel invested in the new policy and to be able to take some control over it. It is commonly understood that people do not work at their best when they are simply mandated to do something from the top levels of administration; instead, they must be allowed to act and be given the opportunity to comment on and influence any newly adopted operation.⁷³ This is true in any business, but is especially true in education where a teacher's passion, augmented or hindered by the amount of control in decision-making she or he allowed, is a major force that drives classroom success. Especially with the new Common Core State Standards Initiative, many teachers feel that they are being told how to run their classrooms from the NGA and CCSSO who developed the Standards, from the New York State Education Department (NYSED), and from district administration.⁷⁴

Because of this perceived deficit in teacher responsibility for the Common Core, schools need to get teachers directly involved in the implementation to stir their passion and increase the potential for success:

For a long time, people have realized that the principal alone can't run something as complex and enormous as a school. But now I think principals realize that. Principals are also beginning to understand that one way they can get teachers invested in what they're doing is to let them sit at the table with the other grown-ups and take on a leadership role.⁷⁵

Just as the schools in this case study have been doing the right thing in their use of PLCs to train their staffs, they go one step further and use training to give teachers more control over the new CCLS-aligned curricula in their subjects. In the survey, approximately seventy-one percent of respondents included themselves and/or other teachers in their answers to the question "Who was

⁷³ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 129.

⁷⁴ Survey.

⁷⁵ Roland S. Barth, "The Time is Ripe (Again)", *Educational Leadership* 71, no. 2 (2013), 11.

responsible for designing your subject's curriculum in order to meet Common Core standards?”⁷⁶ As education expert Roland S. Barth asserts, “When you’re responsible for something, whether it’s the science curriculum or the supply closet, you’re invested in making it work.”⁷⁷ Thus, the transition to the Common Core has an increased potential for success in Schenectady and Niskayuna than would be the case if these schools developed curriculum at the administrative level, exclusively. The training provided for educators is definitely appropriate, but more support from the state to give schools additional funding and resources for teacher education in the future would alleviate the feelings of insufficiency and, therefore, the burden placed on the schools in transition. A reduced burden would allow teachers to focus more of their energies on assisting their students to meet the higher expectations of the Common Core.

C. Classroom Resources Provided by NYSED

The supports for teachers that have the highest potential for alleviating the stresses of the process of implementing the Common Core State Standards Initiative are the optional, Common Core-specific classroom resources provided by the New York State Education Department. Because these are available in many different units, for all grade levels, across both disciplines, and can be taken from the Internet to the classroom with slight adaptation, they have the potential to be valuable resources for educators while they are still in transition to the CCSS. This section looks at their availability and variety (determined by myself) their use in the classrooms of my case study and their adequacy (as reported by surveyed teachers).

The availability of classroom resources and the ease with which one can find them is quite impressive. A quick Google search of “NYS Common Core resources” brings one to the “Common Core Curriculum” page of EngageNY, a website developed and maintained by NYSED to assist in

⁷⁶ Survey.

⁷⁷ Barth, 16.

the implementation of the most current state education reform efforts, which include the Common Core State Standards Initiative.⁷⁸ There, an educator can find various resources to support themselves and their students in the transition to the more rigorous standards. This webpage is designed to serve as a guide to teachers in their transition to the Common Core, as well as provide them with a plethora of classroom materials to use as examples or to take directly into their instruction. EngageNY describes these supports as follows,

The optional curricular materials on EngageNY are designed to be adopted or adapted. Educators will find both PDF and Word versions available for their use. Some lessons provide detailed instructions or recommendations but it is important to note that the lessons are not scripts and rather they should be viewed as vignettes so that the reader can imagine how the class could look.⁷⁹

This adaptability of the classroom resources will be especially noteworthy in the flexibility section of this chapter, but is useful to consider here because it enables teachers to use them more easily, and subsequently provides a strong support for the shift to the Common Core. Further indicative of the usefulness of these EngageNY materials is their variety. They “incorporate curriculum maps, lesson plans, performance tasks, scaffolding materials, samples of student work, and other classroom artifacts.”⁸⁰ Clearly, the great variety of resources and ways to use them indicate the availability of significant support for teachers and the potential for an eased transition into a curriculum that is aligned with the Standards. However, availability means little if the resources and guides are not used by real teachers in real classrooms, whatever the reason. Therefore, we must look at survey data from Niskayuna and Schenectady teachers to determine if NYSED has, in practice, been helpful to the schools’ conversion to the Common Core.

⁷⁸ NYSED, “About,” *EngageNY*, Retrieved from <http://www.engageny.org/about>, Accessed 1 March 2014.

⁷⁹ NYSED, “Common Core Curriculum,” *EngageNY*, Retrieved from <http://www.engageny.org/common-core-curriculum>, Accessed 13 September 2013.

⁸⁰ NYSED, “Common Core Curriculum.”

The first question and most important question to ask teachers is if they were even aware that NYSED provided these guides and standard materials. If they are unaware that they have these resources at their disposal, the resources can be of no use in the transition. To the attribute of the Education Department, about seventy-nine percent of respondents in this case study knew that these supports were available. However, only about nine percent believe that they are adequate to meet the needs of their individual student populations. Interestingly, one hundred percent of Schenectady participants felt that the resources were inadequate, while Niskayuna teachers split evenly.⁸¹ Based on school demographics detailed in the first chapter, it would be fair to speculate that the state-provided aids may not be suitable for low-performing districts based on the remedial need that such student populations have to be able to take on the challenge of the Common Core.

Despite the overwhelming feeling of inadequacy, fifty percent of teachers who admitted that they knew of these state-provided resources used them in their instruction during the 2012-2013 school year. These teachers identify lesson plans, in-class support work, homework, and assessments as the types of resources used, but nobody reported using scaffolding materials, samples of student work, or other resources created by NYSED. The materials that Schenectady and Niskayuna schoolteachers used most commonly are lesson plans and assessments. These were identified by five out of six teachers who claimed to have used any resources from EngageNY at some point during the 2012-2013 school year.⁸² This is predictable because lesson plans are the most general resources and, therefore, most adaptable to diverse classroom settings. The high use of assessments is also logical; teachers, students, and parents are highly concerned with the challenge students face in the new assessments: all of New York State was sent into shock in the spring of 2013 when it was

⁸¹ Survey.

⁸² Survey.

revealed that less than one-third of students achieved proficiency on these new exams.⁸³ Furthermore, seventy-one percent of surveyed teachers reported that the high-stakes nature of the standardized, Common Core-based final exams caused students so much pressure that the result has been deteriorated relationships between them and their pupils.⁸⁴ With the omnipresent stress brought about by looming final exams, it is easy to see that teachers would find significant use in unit assessments available from the same entity, the NYSED, which currently creates the final exams.

One other factor that needs to be considered when determining the usefulness of these EngageNY resources is the amount that they are used in the classrooms. The amount that these resources were used was divided. One-third of participants used standard, state-generated resources monthly; another third cited using these materials once or twice each unit. Less frequent responses were rarely and daily, on the two extremes, which each had one-sixth of respondents. The frequencies of use were also divided across schools, subjects, and grade levels.⁸⁵ This mixed bag indicates that use of these aids is completely at the individual instructor's discretion. Thus, they can be as useful as the individual makes them.

II. Flexibility of the Common Core

Another aspect of any national education policy that will greatly affect the practicality of its implementation is flexibility - what liberties the policy gives teachers to tailor the standards to their diverse student populations and unique classrooms. The American Diploma Project (ADP) suggests that, "In defining a core curriculum, states should make room for varied approaches and multiple pathways to help students meet standards aligned with the ADP benchmarks."⁸⁶ Flexibility can be

⁸³ Motoko Rich, "School Standards' Debut is Rocky, and Critics Pounce," *New York Times*, 15 August 2013.

⁸⁴ Survey.

⁸⁵ Survey.

⁸⁶ ADP, *Ready or Not*, 10.

provided for in various programs, including Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate, as well as different curricula and instructional techniques.⁸⁷ It is clear from an examination of the actual standards put in place under the Common Core that this policy is more of an outline of goals than a national curriculum. For example, ELA standards specify that students must be able to read “foundational U.S. documents,”⁸⁸ but does not mandate whether such texts should be the United States Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, or major Supreme Court decisions. Thus, educators are able to select the text that they feel is most appropriate for their particular group of students. Furthermore,

The standards specify what students should know and be able to do, but they don’t specify how teachers must teach those things. They’re intentionally leaving it up to each school to put together an effective curriculum that will lead to the accomplishment of those standards.⁸⁹

Thus, the CCSSI was designed to incorporate significant flexibility when implemented in various school districts. This section will examine the flexibility incorporated into the design and implementation of the Initiative, as well as look at the practical opportunities for schools to individualize their curricula to match the new requirements and teachers’ abilities to use the Common Core to meet the needs of diverse student bodies.

The fact that the Common Core does not mandate a specific curriculum for all schools to follow is a clear indicator of its potential for versatile use across the country. However, with a significant percentage of teachers responding to having used the standard, NYS-provided resources to assist in their transition to the updated education policy, schools across the state could adopt the same, cookie cutter lessons on their students of varying proficiency, which is obviously problematic. It appears that the New York State Education Department anticipated this potential problem, because

⁸⁷ ADP, *Ready or Not*, 10.

⁸⁸ Common Core State Standards Initiative, “Key Points in English Language Arts.”

⁸⁹ Barth, 13.

the sample curriculum resources that are available via EngageNY have been designed with adaptability in mind. Although there are lessons and classroom resources that can be brought into a classroom, they are designed to translate into different school environments and can serve various groups of learners, including English language learners, students with disabilities, accelerated students, and those whose proficiency is below grade level:

Lessons are adaptable and allow for teacher preference and flexibility so that what is happening in the classroom can both meet students' needs and be in service to the shifts and the standards. If you do choose to make significant changes to lessons, the Tristate/EQuIP rubric is available to help you evaluate the quality, rigor, and alignment of your adapted lessons.⁹⁰

EngageNY also emphasizes that the lessons available on this site are not scripts, but rather vignettes to be taken to illustrate the idea behind the lesson and the information that needs to be communicated to students, but not how the teacher should present it.⁹¹ Because almost seventy-nine percent of survey participants stated that the Common Core-based curriculum in their subject was significantly different from the previous curriculum used to meet NYS Regents standards⁹², the adaptability of these lessons is crucial to ease the burden that this shift in standards has placed on educators.

EngageNY's claims about flexibility of their Common Core aids are quite high; however, survey results tell a different story, with ninety-one percent of teachers who knew about the standard resources feeling that they fail to meet the needs of their individual student populations. All respondents from Schenectady, the school with the highest population of low-income and minority students, feel that the standard curricular materials are not suitable for their classes.⁹³ It would be helpful to have information from the teachers about why the resources will not work in their classrooms or even what specific resources, more than just type, they have tried to use. However,

⁹⁰ NYSED, "Common Core Curriculum."

⁹¹ NYSED, "Common Core Curriculum."

⁹² Survey.

⁹³ Survey.

the survey data does not include this information that hindsight revealed to be useful. However, strong conclusions can be drawn from a scrutinization of the reports from teachers in Niskayuna and Schenectady, as well as basic demographics, to see what types of student populations are not covered under these teacher supports. Niskayuna teachers are split on whether they believe the standard resources are useful for their classes. All respondents teach ELA to classes with a racial composition that is 75-90% white, so neither subject nor race are an issue here. The difference between the respondents is grade-level. Those who reported predominately teaching higher grade levels (eleventh and twelfth grades) feel that the available, standard resources are inadequate. However, teachers in the lower grades (ninth and tenth) report that the resources are suitable for their classes.⁹⁴

This could be highly indicative of a major problem of the Common Core: students in higher grade levels, who have been educated under a different system for all of their primary and the majority of their secondary educations, are not served by the Common Core. Results from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), show that U.S. twelfth graders are the worst off, at least in regard to knowledge of mathematics and science, than their international peers. The trends in the TIMSS suggest that as the grade increases, the global competitiveness of American students decreases.⁹⁵ This indicates that higher grades are least prepared for raised academic challenge. Therefore, generally speaking, these students are more than likely to require significant remedial work to bring their abilities up to par with the challenge embedded in the Common Core. Unfortunately, upper grade levels also do not have the time to gain noteworthy benefits from the Initiative and the Standard resources assume background knowledge that high school seniors in this transitional period simply lack.

⁹⁴ Survey.

⁹⁵ U.S. National Research Center, *TIMSS United States: Report No. 8* (April 1998), 1.

Schenectady High School, on the other hand, has more unified results on the ability of standard resources to be successful when used on the pupils in this school: all surveyed teachers answered “no” to the question “Do you feel that these standard resources are adequate to meet the needs of your student population?”⁹⁶ Participants represented both English and mathematics and all grade levels. Race is the common factor in the students of these teachers: all but one SHS teacher reported an average class composition of at least 50-75% nonwhite. Survey data demonstrates that the most probable explanation for this correlation is that minority students in this school are viewed as unprepared for the more rigorous challenges of the Common Core by half of the respondents and will require remedial work to become prepared for the increased challenge found in coursework and exams aligned with the Standards.⁹⁷ Investigation into the results from these two schools indicates that the flexibility of Common Core-aligned resources provided by NYSED are inadequate for student populations with high needs; upper grade levels that have been unprepared for the rigors of this system in their earlier education and high minority populations who are largely under-exposed to advanced learning materials, a phenomenon that will be discussed in-depth in the next chapter.

Although the Common Core does offer significant room for flexibility, educators report changes to their teaching style and techniques. Over half of survey respondents report having significantly altered their teaching style to satisfy the needs of the Common Core-based curriculum in their subjects. The same percentage admits adopting more innovative techniques in their instruction of Common Core-aligned lessons.⁹⁸ While this could be an indicator that the Standards do not allow educators to individualize their instruction practices, this does not have to be true. Educators can utilize trial and error approaches to find out what strategies will work best for their

⁹⁶ Survey.

⁹⁷ Survey.

⁹⁸ Survey.

students. This worked to the benefit of instructional diversity in Massachusetts.⁹⁹ Furthermore, motivating teachers to adopt different teaching methods does not indicate inflexibility; “[The CCSSI] doesn’t tell school districts how to teach kids - in this country, that’s a local decision - but it lets you know what a kid must be able to do to avoid falling behind.”¹⁰⁰ Also, it lets you know - via poor results - that a teacher must adapt to get his or her students to the necessary level.

Overall, the implementation of the Common Core has seen a mixture of positives and negatives. The timeline is gradual, which helps schools ease into the transition, and districts are able to make time to devote to staff development centered on the Standards. Training and the development of new, Common Core aligned curricula occurs frequently in professional learning communities, where increased collaboration has been utilized among subject departments and grade level teams. There are also a plethora of standard resources that are easily available and have served as models for teachers and as direct transplants into individual classrooms. Despite these successes, there is a general cry for more: more time to transition and to devote to training, more training resources, and standard resources that can apply to more groups of students. Time will tell if NYSED will answer these calls for help to ensure the success of the transition to the Common Core. Despite this need for change, the next chapter will show that it is not enough to abandon the Initiative. The implementation has not been smooth, but the Standards have a lot of potential to help schools and students overcome many of the inherent deficiencies in the American education system.

⁹⁹ Chang.

¹⁰⁰ Rex Smith, “Test Scores Get Schools’ Challenges,” *Albany Times Union*, 17 August 2013.

CHAPTER 3: HOW THE COMMON CORE ADDRESSES DEFICIENCIES IN THE U.S. SCHOOL SYSTEM

With a conclusion that the implementation of the Common Core has been less than smooth, - but could be successful with time, patience, and more investment in training and support - this chapter turns to an assessment of the Common Core's effect on commonly acknowledged educational deficiencies in the United States. The first section will look at college and career readiness, a level of academic proficiency that students require to succeed in life after high school without remedial training. An examination of three main factors that shape a students' level of college and career readiness reveals that the Common Core takes great strides to increase this level in American students. The second section focuses on a comparison of student achievement within the United States and with global competitors. Inconsistencies across the states are dramatic and American performance globally is unimpressive. In this deficiency, again, the Common Core shines on a path that could bring the lowest performing states up to par with the highest and increase the overall performances of U.S. students on exams given worldwide.

I. College and Career Readiness: Gaps and Overall Disappointment

Over the past few years, "college and career readiness" has become a buzz-phrase in the world of education reform. According to current Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, citing a study from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, "Over the last 35 years, the share of jobs in the U.S. economy that require a postsecondary education rose from 28 percent to 59 percent, and that figure is expected to rise to 63 percent by the end of the decade[, by 2020]."¹⁰¹ Currently, a majority of high school graduates are insufficiently prepared for the demands of college-level courses. Get to the Core, the branch of the national Common Core State Standards Initiative designed to educate the American people on the new public school standards, reports that

¹⁰¹ Duncan, 67.

ACT scores indicate that a mere one quarter of American high school graduates are ready to take on the challenges of college academics.¹⁰² As a result of this, “[t]ranscripts show that during their college careers, 53 percent of students take at least one remedial English or math class.”¹⁰³ On top of that, seventy percent of college professors report devoting at least some class time to teaching material and skills that students should have mastered in high school.¹⁰⁴ In other words, college students must learn material at their university that they should have mastered in high school. High school graduates are not just unprepared for higher academics, however. Employers in a single state spend an estimated \$40 million annually on literacy and mathematics training for employees. This huge expense does not even include job-specific training or computer skills, it is basic reading, writing, and numeric computing - areas which young employees with a high school diploma should have mastered.¹⁰⁵ Clearly, the lack of college and career readiness found in this country’s high school graduates is no small issue; it costs students, parents, universities, and employers unnecessary time and money. This section will look at three key factors that shape college and career readiness in students, the deficiencies in these areas that have been identified in the U.S. education system, and what the Common Core does (or does not do), to correct these deficiencies.

A. Breadth versus Depth in U.S. Curriculum

Depth of learning is an immensely important factor in student achievement. All students, no matter what their background or academic standing, will have positive learning gains when exposed to advanced content in depth.¹⁰⁶ “When students have more time in longer blocks to explore content

¹⁰² Get to the Core, “The Standards: How Common Core is Different,” *Get to the Core*, Retrieved from <http://get2core.org/national/what-is-common-core/standards>, Accessed 10 February 2014.

¹⁰³ ADP, *Ready or Not*, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work? A Study of Recent High School Graduates, College Instructors, and Employers* (Washington, D.C.: Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2005), 9.

¹⁰⁵ ADP, *Ready or Not*, 3.

¹⁰⁶ McPartland and Schneider, 68.

in depth, they can learn research skills, write about content, and revise and improve their work over time. Narrowing the curriculum fosters student achievement.”¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, deep learning helps struggling learners to master the material. Studies of high-achieving urban schools, with high populations of English language learners and struggling students, reveal that one of the best strategies for literacy success is teaching basic skills alongside the development of deeper textual understanding.¹⁰⁸ It is not just in literacy that low-achieving learners benefit from in-depth instruction; this can be translated to any subject. Furthermore, deep learning is a controllable factor that affects college and career readiness. The development of deep, critical understanding of course material is something that education policy, schools, and individual classrooms can promote over rote memorization.¹⁰⁹

Despite the importance of depth to academic achievement, American education is often described as “a mile wide and an inch deep.” This famous characterization by Professor William H. Schmidt has come to be one of the most common criticisms of U.S. schools: they cover too much material, but nothing with significant depth. Professor Schmidt offers the following reflections on curriculum depth in the U.S. versus achievement of the ideal:

What does a focused and rigorous curriculum look like in the top achieving countries? The number of topics that children are expected to learn at a given grade level is relatively small, permitting a thorough and deep coverage of each topic. For example, nine topics are the average number intended in the second grade. The US by contrast expects second grade teachers to cover twice as many mathematics topics.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Wood, 547.

¹⁰⁸ Doris Walker-Dalhouse and Victoria J. Risko, “Reading Research into the Classroom: Learning from Literacy Successes in High-Achieving Urban Schools,” *The Reading Teacher* 61, no. 5 (2008), 422.

¹⁰⁹ Andrea Venezia and Laura Jaeger, “Transitions from High School to College,” *The Future of Children* 23, no. 1 (2013), 119.

¹¹⁰ William H Schmidt, “Mathematics and Science Initiative,” *Research*, U.S. (Department of Education, 2004).

Essentially, each grade level should cover fewer topics in each subject and allow teachers and students to spend more time engaged with the covered topics. The CCSSI claims to do just that. According to Get to the Core, “The materials are designed to go deeper into fewer topics, so kids master the material instead of memorizing.”¹¹¹ The truth in this, at least in New York State, can be gleaned from a look at the sample curriculum for second grade math. If one were to go to access curriculum modules available on EngageNY and filter second grade math, s/he would find eight topics covered for the entire second year¹¹², which is below the average cited by Schmidt.

Teachers from Niskayuna and Schenectady almost universally report that the CCLS promote deeper learning in their students. Seventy-nine percent of surveyed educators acknowledged that the Standards required a deeper understanding of course content instead of rote memorization, which was common in the past. Furthermore, many teachers, when given the opportunity for free-response to the question “What do you think the greatest strengths of the Common Core State Standards are?” cited this deeper level of learning. Such responses include, “requiring students to work at a higher cognitive level,” “deeper understanding of why solutions work,” and “The curriculum is narrower at the elementary level allowing for the development of deeper understandings for those students who are capable.”¹¹³ Both teacher feedback and concrete evidence from the NYS sample curriculum shows that the Common Core fosters deeper learning in key areas, which will help all students, especially those who struggle with difficult material, to master topics covered. Thus, college and career readiness should improve.

¹¹¹ Get to the Core, “What is the Common Core?” *Get to the Core*, Retrieved from <http://get2core.org/national/about>, Accessed 10 February 2014.

¹¹² NYSED, “Grade 2 Mathematics,” *EngageNY*, Retrieved from <http://www.engageny.org/resource/grade-2-mathematics>, Accessed 10 February 2014.

¹¹³ Survey.

B. Exposure to Learning

Access to material has the most direct impact on a students' learning and, therefore, their preparedness for the intellectual demands of the college and work worlds. Research at both the primary and secondary levels has proven, time and time again, that "a strong correlation [exists] between the degree to which students had been exposed to the content of a particular achievement test in their classrooms and their actual levels of performance on the test."¹¹⁴ Furthermore, studies have shown that the quantity of education - number of classes taken in a subject area, for example - is the only consistent predictor of gains in pupil achievement. Exposure to rigorous coursework in high school substantially increases a student's chances of enrolling in and successfully completing a college degree program.¹¹⁵ Opportunities to learn have a higher impact on students' college and career readiness than instruction methods or course structure.¹¹⁶ In short, what is taught in schools, and at what level, matters. However, as evidenced by the dismal levels of college and career readiness of American students, a majority of youth in the United States is inadequately exposed to the advanced academic material necessary to prepare for post-high school demands.

Tracking

One factor that contributes to reduced exposure to rigorous content is the practice of tracking. "Tracking historically refers to the practice of grouping high school students by ability into a series of courses with differentiated curriculums; students take high-, middle-, or low- level courses related to the track they have selected or been assigned to."¹¹⁷ This practice, developed in the early twentieth

¹¹⁴ McPartland and Schneider, 67.

¹¹⁵ Melissa Roderick, et al, "College Readiness for All: The Challenge for Urban High Schools," *The Future of Children* 19, no. 1 (2009), 188.

¹¹⁶ McPartland and Schneider, 68-69.

¹¹⁷ Mary Hatwood Futrell and Joel Gomez, "How Tracking Creates a Poverty of Learning," *Educational Leadership* 65, no. 8, (2008), 75.

century to deal with the influx of immigrant children into U.S. public schools, is still widely used in American primary and secondary schools.¹¹⁸ Tracking creates huge gaps in opportunities to learn;

Students may attend the same high school in the same school district. However, graduates will share little mathematics content[, for example]. Although we do not suggest that all high school students should take the same mathematics courses, we do believe there ought to be a high level of overlap across programs for most students and a relatively small number of mathematics tracks.¹¹⁹

Authors of the above quotation, William H. Schmidt and Curtis C. McKnight, found that in a sample of seventeen school districts, there were fifteen hundred distinct tracks for mathematics based on the various sequences of classes that students took.¹²⁰ With such huge variance in courses taken, it is easy to see how certain groups are more, or less, prepared than others.

What is most concerning for the state of American education overall, though, is the limited opportunities to learn for the students in lower tracks;

Students are assigned to the lower-level programs and courses because they are deemed not ready or able to learn the more demanding content. But by these course assignments, such students are foreclosed from any chance to learn the more advanced material that is not covered in their classes.¹²¹

For example, Student A is assigned to a mathematics track that requires her to take pre-algebra in ninth grade, algebra I in tenth grade, then geometry and algebra II in eleventh and twelfth grades, respectively. This student would have to take at least a remedial course in pre-calculus (noncredit bearing) at her college or university before she can take calculus, a general education requirement of most college programs. Conversely, Student B is in an advanced track and takes algebra I in the eighth grade and required no slowed curriculum. In this scenario, Student B would find himself

¹¹⁸ Futrell and Gomez, 74-75.

¹¹⁹ William H. Schmidt and Curtis C. McKnight, *Inequality for All: The Challenge of Unequal Opportunity in American Schools* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2012), 111-113.

¹²⁰ Schmidt and McKnight, 112.

¹²¹ McPartland and Schneider, 66-67.

completing calculus in his senior year of high school. This second student is ahead of the game when it comes to college, most likely because of grades in elementary and middle school.¹²²

Not only does tracking lower college and career readiness through the reduction of access to material, it also limits this preparation by barring the ability to develop high order cognitive skills. This process relates to depth of learning and student achievement because students in higher tracks are exposed to enriching material and develop critical thinking skills that they can apply to their college and career lives. Those in the lower tracks receive simplified lessons that promote memorization over high level comprehension,¹²³ the latter of which is cited as necessary for most college and career fields.

Inconsistent Curricula and Graduation Requirements

Another factor is the variance of curriculum and graduation requirements across school districts. While the traditional thought in the United States is that local bodies of government should determine what students study and how they are taught, standards can and do affect curriculum, which in turn strongly affects student achievement.

For example, each nation [that participated in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study] performed more and less well in particular areas of mathematics and science emphasized in that country. U.S. 13 year olds scored second among TIMSS countries in the area of "life cycle and genetics"—topics that tend to be highlighted in middle school and junior high school curricula. But they scored near the bottom of TIMSS countries in the area of "physical changes," reflecting the lower emphasis in U.S. curricula on the physical sciences.¹²⁴

Another notable problem related to curriculum variance is the ambiguous definition of requirements across the board. The most noteworthy example of this would be mathematics requirements, which

¹²² Schmidt and McKnight, 115.

¹²³ Futrell and Gomez, 75.

¹²⁴ National Research Council, *Global Perspectives for Local Action: Using TIMSS to Improve U.S. Mathematics and Science Education* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academic Press, 1999), 30.

generally specify that students must take three courses during high school, but no definition of which courses is given.¹²⁵ Let us return to the example of Student A and Student B from the beginning of this section. With the assumption that her state provided no concrete definitions of the three courses needed to graduate, Student A could opt to not take mathematics in her senior year and enter college without Algebra II. This would make her substantially less college ready than Student B, assuming he stayed on the calculus track; students who report having completed at least Algebra II in high school report feeling thirty four percent more prepared for college mathematics than their peers who did not complete the course.¹²⁶ The Common Core, on the other hand, provides specific learning goals for mathematics and assesses students' mastery of these goals. Thus, even if Student A did not take the same course sequence as Student B, both would have to master the same content areas of algebra, geometry, number and quantity, functions, modeling, and statistics and probability to graduate.¹²⁷ It is also worth noting that the EngageNY sample curriculum provides resources exclusively for the algebra-geometry-algebra II-pre-calculus sequence.¹²⁸ Thus, students under the Common Core are more likely to take the same mathematics course sequence, which minimizes achievement variance.

Such variance creates the problem of inconsistent expectations across states, districts, and individual schools, which affects the students' readiness to take on college and careers.

[S]tudents who faced high expectations in high school are much more likely to feel well-prepared for the expectations of college (80%) than are college students who faces moderate (58%) or low expectations (38%). Additionally, those students who faced high expectations in high school are nearly twice as likely to be getting mostly A's in college (28%) than those who faced low expectations in high school (13%).

¹²⁵ ADP, *Ready or Not*, 7.

¹²⁶ Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge*, 10.

¹²⁷ Common Core State Standards Initiative, "Standards for Mathematical Practice," Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/Math/Practice>, Accessed 16 February 2014.

¹²⁸ NYSED, "Mathematics," *EngageNY*, Retrieved from <http://www.engageny.org/mathematics>, Accessed 16 February 2014.

Students who face high expectations are much less likely to take remedial classes in college (27% have to take remedial classes) than are those who faced low expectations in high school, 50% of whom have taken a remedial class.¹²⁹

Thus, variance in course and graduation requirements across districts results in a substantially reduced level of college and career readiness in the districts with lower expectations. While this variance is widespread, the CCSSI has the potential to reduce it. One of the aims of the new Standards is to “minimize such variation in content coverage.”¹³⁰

Some would argue that students are not ready for the increased academic rigors imbedded in a program like the Common Core. Parents, educators, and the media repeatedly echo that students are unprepared for these higher academic expectations and that they, in general, suffer from test anxiety. Data from college students and recent high school graduates in the workforce, conversely, suggests that America’s high school students are ready for an increased challenge. In fact, it will motivate them to work harder.

[I]f high schools raised standards, graduates say they would be able to meet them. Four in five college students (82%) and non-students (80%) say that they would have worked harder if their high schools had demanded more of students, set higher academic standards, and raised expectations of how much course work and studying would be necessary to earn a diploma. Furthermore, the majority (62%) of graduates say that they were motivated and inspired to work hard in high school.¹³¹

This augments the opportunities to learn argument. Not only will students learn more through simple exposure to advanced content, they will be motivated to work harder than they did under weaker standards. This could compound the gains made in the area of college and career readiness.

¹²⁹ Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge*, 9.

¹³⁰ Schmidt and McKnight, 117.

¹³¹ Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge*, 13.

C. The Gap Between High School Graduation Requirements and College and Employer Expectations

Low standards for graduation requirements and a mismatch between high school curricula and college and workforce expectations is the root of this problem. “As many as two in five recent high school graduates say that there are gaps between the education they received in high school and the overall skills, abilities, and work habits that are expected of them today in college and in the work force.”¹³² Any education reform effort in the United States must acknowledge this problem and attempt to overcome it in order to maximize students’ overall learning. The Common Core is unquestionably concerned with boosting the college and career readiness of high school graduates. This section will examine the sources of the gap between secondary and college expectations and look specifically at deficient areas cited by universities and employers to determine if the CCSS will be able to overcome the gaps.

As the American Diploma Project’s inaugural report acknowledges, “In almost every state, K–12 and postsecondary education systems operate as separate entities. They are governed, financed and operated independently.”¹³³ Students are required to take standardized exams generated by separate entities, such as the College Board’s Standard Aptitude Test (SAT) or the ACT, to gain admittance to most colleges and universities. Several analyses have revealed that scores on these college entrance exams, when coupled with high school grade point average (GPA), is a highly accurate predictor of freshman year GPA.¹³⁴ High school exit exams do not maintain this level of prestige in the eyes of college admissions departments. Additionally, “no state uses its existing high school assessment system, such as high school exit exams or college entrance examinations, to

¹³² Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge*, 2.

¹³³ ADP, *Ready or Not*, 14.

¹³⁴ Jennifer L. Kobrin, et al, *Validity of the SAT for Predicting First-Year College Grade Point Average* (New York, NY: The College Board, 2008), 1.

benchmark college readiness, and only a few states have linked high school student indicators to actual college performance.”¹³⁵ This disconnect between high schools and colleges is clearly problematic for the students and their overall learning outcomes.

Furthermore, although colleges do rely on the results of one or two highly esteemed standardized tests for admissions decisions, the high-stakes testing culture that permeates primary and secondary education is out of touch with college expectations. Professors want students to be analytical and critical, they want their pupils to be innovative and to push boundaries. With the extreme pressure placed on teachers to have students pass an abundance of standardized exams, student learning becomes methodical and outcome-driven; the antithesis of college expectations.¹³⁶ This is one area of disconnect that may be too large for one piece of education reform legislation to affect change. As noted in the introduction, the predominant culture in America is standards- and accountability-based. This does not conform with freethinking and creativity encompassed in college education because it is difficult to consistently and objectively measure the standards expected in college-level academics in that way. The Common Core can, however, address the content gaps between what is taught in high school and what college students are expected to know.

Where the content gaps in what high schools teach and what students are expected to have mastered to be successful in college programs? Table 2 (below) offers a comparative view of students’ and college instructors’ perspectives on areas of concern. The perspective of recent college students can help identify the areas in which high school preparation falls short. According to an Achieve, Inc. study, forty-five percent of college students identify oral communication as an area in which they had not been adequately prepared in high school. Forty-two percent identify gaps in their

¹³⁵ Roderick, et al, 186.

¹³⁶ Susan Fanetti, et al., “Closing the Gap between High School Writing Instruction and College Writing Expectations,” *The English Journal* 99, no, 4 (2008), 79-81.

mathematics ability and college expectations. On the English Language Arts side, two-fifths cite research as an area in which they are insufficiently skilled and thirty-five percent see significant discrepancies in the quality of writing expected at the secondary and college levels.¹³⁷ Student reports on the matter are useful, especially since such large numbers cite inadequacies in their high school preparation. However, concrete evidence shows that the problem is larger than students let on;

Most notably, even among those who believe that they were extremely or well prepared for college level work, three in ten (31%) took at least one remedial course in college. In comparison, among those who say that they had gaps in their preparation, nearly half (46%) took at least one remedial course.¹³⁸

Table 2: Where are the Gaps?: Different Perspectives in High School Graduates' Academic Deficiencies

	College Students' Perspective	College Instructors' Perspective	Employees' Perspective*	Employers' Perspective
Oral Communication	45%	N/A	46%	34%
Quality of Writing	35%	62%	38%	38%
Reading Comprehension	29%	70%	33%	41%
Research	40%	59%	45%	N/A
Mathematics	42%	52%	41%	40%
Computer Skills	N/A	N/A	45%	N/A

* Employees are recent high school graduates in the workforce with no further education.

¹³⁷ Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge*, 4.

¹³⁸ Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge*, 4.

College professors' input on the readiness of their students is even more compelling. "When asked what they expect from students entering first-year composition courses, college instructors generally noted that their expectations have dropped over the years,"¹³⁹ due to the poor and/or incorrect preparation that recent high school graduates have in their repertoire. "College instructors estimate that 42% of high school graduates are not adequately prepared by their high school education for the expectations of college classes and are struggling or having to take remedial courses to catch up."¹⁴⁰ Regarding specific content areas, postsecondary instructors estimate that fifty percent of all high school graduates are under-prepared for college-level mathematics and the same percentage is not ready for the demands of college-level writing.¹⁴¹

On the career preparation side, the gaps between high school preparation and employer expectations appear to be larger in almost every area. Forty-six percent of recent high school graduates in the workforce identify a gap in their oral communication abilities and what their employers expect, while forty-one percent feel inadequately prepared in mathematics. Additionally, forty-five percent note that their research abilities are lower than employer demands and thirty-eight percent note chasms in the quality of writing expected at each level. The computer is another area in which many young adults in the workforce are poorly trained; more than four in ten surveyed youth report that they lack necessary computer skills for their jobs. Employer estimates reveal that nearly forty percent of high school graduates lack the skills necessary for entry-level jobs.¹⁴²

The learning goals that the Common Core established aim to close this gap. This paragraph offers a comparison of college and employer expectations with Common Core Learning Standards.

¹³⁹ Fanetti, et al., 80.

¹⁴⁰ Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge*, 8.

¹⁴¹ Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge*, 8.

¹⁴² Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge*, 5-6.

The *New York Times* reports that “[b]y 12th grade, [students] will be asked to solve problems and answer questions by conducting focused research projects — using skills that are generally associated today with the first year of college.”¹⁴³ Reading standards are designed to encompass increasingly difficult texts, in a variety of fiction and nonfiction, which should foster improved reading comprehension abilities for all students. Writing requirements include the ability to write logical and persuasive arguments, as well as to conduct research. ELA requirements also place a greater emphasis on speaking abilities than previously required.¹⁴⁴ On the math side, the standards are narrower and deeper to improve the mathematical abilities of all students. They are also well-defined¹⁴⁵, to prevent curriculum variance that was previously acknowledged as severely detrimental to the college preparation of high school graduates.

“Business leaders strongly support the Common Core”¹⁴⁶ because of its potential to improve students’ career readiness and to limit the need for employers to devote precious time and money to teaching young recruits basic skills. As noted in the introduction to this section, on-the-job training of skills that youth should have developed in high school is a huge expense, but has become a necessity because of how academically unprepared young Americans are for their career fields. Employers who are concerned with current abilities of recent high school graduates can rest assured based on the design of the Common Core Learning Standards; they ought to be satisfied by the same curricular advances that colleges are pleased with. In addition to those areas, about two in five employers believe that high school graduates are unsatisfactorily able to apply what they have learned to problem-solving in the career world.¹⁴⁷ The Common Core addresses this concern, as the

¹⁴³ The Editorial Board, “Moving Ahead with the Common Core,” *The New York Times*, 20 April 2013..

¹⁴⁴ Common Core State Standards Initiative, “Key Points in ELA.”

¹⁴⁵ Common Core State Standards Initiative, “Key Points in Mathematics.”

¹⁴⁶ Smith.

¹⁴⁷ Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge*, 6.

mathematics standards are designed, especially at the high school level, to encourage students to apply mathematical reasoning skills to solve life problems.¹⁴⁸ Lastly, both areas of the Common Core focus on increasing computer skills in students because of the prevalence of computers in current society.¹⁴⁹

While the skills may be imbedded in the design of the curriculum, practicality rules in education, so teachers' survey responses are used to weigh the learning standards in relation to college and career preparation. With regard to ELA, eighty-two percent of respondents noted that the Common Core forced high school English classes to focus more on persuasive and analytical writing. Fifty-five percent also noted that their classes spent more time developing oral presentation and argument skills under the CCLS. Over half also cited an increased focus on research. Two-thirds of surveyed mathematics teachers report that the Common Core has increased their course's focus on deeper understanding of algebra, numeric reasoning, and logical analysis while one-third of classes see an increased use of data interpretation and statistics.¹⁵⁰ Although the practical evidence shows that there is still room for growth, it is clear that the Common Core provides students with a better education and the skills necessary for success in college and their careers.

D. Racial and Socioeconomic Inequalities

On its own, the dismal levels of college and career readiness among high school graduates in the United States is problematic. When one looks at racial and socioeconomic disparities in this area, though, the issue becomes even greater. "[N]ational statistics show large

¹⁴⁸ Common Core State Standards Initiative, "Key Points in Mathematics."

¹⁴⁹ Common Core State Standards Initiative, "Key Points in Mathematics."
Common Core State Standards Initiative, "Key Points in ELA."

¹⁵⁰ Survey.

differences in both high school drop-out rates and college-matriculation rates by factors such as income and ethnicity.”¹⁵¹

Over the past several decades, high school students’ college aspirations have increased markedly, and gaps in educational aspirations across race and ethnicity and income have fallen dramatically. But significant, and in some cases widening, gaps remain in college readiness, access, and success across these groups.¹⁵²

Although gaps exist between affluent students and their low-income and minority peers at all levels, they broaden as students progress from elementary to middle and high schools. Current Secretary of Education Arne Duncan attests, “Instead of reducing achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students over time, public schools in the United States widen them.”¹⁵³ These persistent and widening gaps are caused by a variety of reasons, but a major one is the fact that students of these groups, in general, get less exposure to advanced content required for college and career readiness and, subsequently, are less prepared for the intellectual demands beyond high school. The numbers show that students are ill-prepared for the academic demands of college courses; results from a 1988 study reveal that “63 percent of students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile took a developmental course in college compared with only 25 percent of students in the highest quartile.”¹⁵⁴ These percentages still accurately portray the gaps that continue to this day to define the college readiness of different socioeconomic classes. On the racial side, evidence from the ACT, one of the two main college entrance exams used in the United States, shows that, while an overwhelming majority of American students are inadequately prepared for college, African American and Hispanic students are drastically worse off.

¹⁵¹ Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge*, 11.

¹⁵² Roderick, et al, 186-187.

¹⁵³ Arne Duncan, “Back to School: Enhancing U.S. Education and Competitiveness,” *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 6 (2010), 70.

¹⁵⁴ Roderick, et al, 189.

[I]f the ACT is a reliable barometer of “college and career readiness,” there is ample evidence that the American education system is not preparing students adequately. ACT, Inc. reported last year that only 25% of students who took the test were found to be college ready in all four tested subjects. [... The results show that] while only 5% of African-American and 13% of Hispanic students were college-ready in all four subjects, only 42% of Asian-American students and 32% of white students were as well.¹⁵⁵

To reiterate, while it is a concerning fact that only one-quarter of students in the U.S. are college and career ready, it is downright depressing that underserved minority groups have a significantly lower rate of preparation. Even worse, despite substantial increases in college enrollment for African American and Hispanic students, these two minority populations have not increased their share in degree completion rates.¹⁵⁶ The next section will examine the reasons for this achievement gap and effects the Common Core has on the college and career readiness of disadvantaged groups.

One of the most crucial factors that causes the disparities in college and career readiness based on minority and socioeconomic status is the simple variance in neighborhood schools. Schools which predominately serve pupils from these backgrounds are typically underfunded, given inadequate resources, and have low expectations for their students. Prominent education reform activist Michelle Rhee describes the imbalance between schools in more affluent communities, where Caucasians are concentrated, and the poorer communities, where minorities are the dominant group, in Washington, D.C. Rhee worked as Chancellor of Education in the early 2000s in the nation’s capital, which provided her with firsthand knowledge of the gaps between the neighborhood schools. She characterizes the differences between the various D.C. schools from the late 1970s until she took over:

For the next twenty-five years school buildings fell into disrepair the Washington Teachers’ Union controlled the classrooms, nepotism rules the central administration - and generations of African American students were not taught to read or write, add or subtract. The dropout rate was above 50 percent. But in white neighborhoods east

¹⁵⁵ Hess and McShane, 64.

¹⁵⁶ Roderick, et al, 187-188.

of Rock Creek Park, some schools were among the best in the nation. Elementary schools prepared students to excel. Each year top graduates of Wilson High, an integrate school in Tenleytown, went to Harvard, Princeton, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The achievement gap was a canyon.¹⁵⁷

Rhee's characterization of D.C. public schools is not unique to that area. Looking at the case study for this thesis, it is easy to see how schools that serve majority populations of low-income and minority students have lower levels of academic success.¹⁵⁸ Schenectady is a diverse community with a poverty rate that is higher than the NYS average; its high school ranks 425th out of 429 schools in upstate New York.¹⁵⁹ If someone were to take a ten minute drive from Schenectady High School to Niskayuna High School, that individual would find a completely different situation. Niskayuna, despite its incredibly close geographic proximity to Schenectady, ranks eleventh on that same list¹⁶⁰ and serves a mostly white, middle class community with the highest median household income in the New York State Capital Region.

The aforementioned practice of tracking highly limits the college and career readiness of low-income and minority students. These students most often find themselves in the lowest tracks, which cuts them off from opportunities to learn and to develop higher order skills required for postsecondary success. Minority and low-income students tend to perform much better in Catholic schools than their peers in public high schools. This is attributed to the core curriculum typically found in Catholic schools; all students are exposed to the same difficult courses with the same high expectations for success. Thus, minority students and those from low-income families are better academically prepared for postsecondary expectations.¹⁶¹ Based on this fact, the natural conclusion

¹⁵⁷ Rhee, 111.

¹⁵⁸ See Table 1 for specific demographic information.

¹⁵⁹ G. Scott Thomas, "2013 Upstate New York School District Rankings," *Business First: Buffalo*, 10 October 2013.

¹⁶⁰ Thomas.

¹⁶¹ McPartland and Schneider, 69.

is that national standards can improve college and career readiness for all students through a universal exposure to advanced learning materials. In fact, the American Diploma Project predicts that substantially higher numbers of students in these groups would graduate from high school college and career ready if they were enrolled in a “rigorous, ‘college-prep’ curriculum.”¹⁶² In actuality, the Common Core has helped to level the racial and socioeconomic discrepancies in students’ exposure to difficult content; sixty-four percent of surveyed teachers in Niskayuna and Schenectady report that these typically disadvantaged students have been exposed to more rigorous coursework under the CCLS. While this small majority may not be conclusive on its own, when taken in tandem with responses to a follow-up question, they show how impactful the elevated Standards are. The majority of those teachers who thought that disadvantaged students were not exposed to more advanced material attributed this to the fact that “a high percentage of low-income and racial minority students were already enrolled in rigorous courses.”¹⁶³

It is undeniable that the Common Core, once fully implemented, will give all students access to the same challenging course content. Education expert William H. Schmidt puts a lot of faith in the Common Core, especially the mathematics standards:

The new Common Core State Standards in Mathematics, for example, presents an excellent chance for implementing high-quality standards. The Common Core represents a chance to reform the fragmented, incoherent U.S. math curriculum that makes mathematics education a product of blind chance, and to move toward a system that really does provide every child with an equal chance at an education.¹⁶⁴

Increased rigor and more comprehensive standards worked in Massachusetts, and proved that poverty and minority status are not an end all be all for children's academic performance. Despite

¹⁶² ADP, *Ready or Not*, 9.

¹⁶³ Survey.

¹⁶⁴ William H. Schmidt, “Inequality in the American Education System,” *The Huffington Post: The Blog*, 17 July 2012.

the state's twelve percent child poverty rate, the 1993 reform efforts, with their heightened expectations and consistent application, test scores have surpassed their expected levels because these children were given the opportunity to excel under difficult standards.¹⁶⁵

E. Concluding Remarks on College and Career Readiness

The Common Core is not a curriculum, but it does encompass a strong set of goals that, if properly implemented, would be able to make U.S. youth better prepared for the real academic demands of college and career paths. "The standards are designed to build upon the most advanced current thinking about preparing all students for success in college and their careers."¹⁶⁶ Not only are the goals of the Initiative consistent with getting all students ready for post-secondary endeavors, the learning standards required for successful high school completion reflect areas cited by colleges and employers as important for recruits, but often not mastered.

The success of the Common Core in improving students' levels of college and career readiness is already evident. In Kentucky, the first state to fully adopt the Standards and implement aligned assessments has experienced significant gains in student achievement. Between 2010, under the previous education standards, and 2013, after two years of CCLS, twenty percent more students were deemed college and career ready. The percentage soared from thirty-four percent to fifty-four percent under the Common Core.¹⁶⁷ Despite this evidence, educators remain skeptical. Surveyed teachers from high schools in the New York Capital Region overwhelmingly believe that the Common Core is insufficient to prepare high school graduates to pass a college program in either English or mathematics without remedial classes.¹⁶⁸ As noted in the previous chapter, however, this

¹⁶⁵ Helen F. Ladd, "Presidential Address: Education and Poverty: Confronting the Evidence," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 31, no. 2 (2012), 206.

¹⁶⁶ Get to the Core, "Learn the Facts," *Get to the Core*, Retrieved from <http://get2core.org/myths-and-facts>, Accessed 20 February 2014.

¹⁶⁷ Amanda Ripley, "The New Smart Set: What Happens When Millions of Kids Are Asked to Master Fewer Things More Deeply?", *Time Magazine*, 30 September 2013, 36.

¹⁶⁸ Survey.

lack of confidence could easily be the result of the limited time the CCLS have had to affect learning outcomes. Surveyed educators had only experienced one full year of the Common Core, which was not enough in Kentucky, or in the earlier Massachusetts State education reform, to see improvements. “[New York] State Education Commissioner John King notes that if we could add a single percentage point to New York’s college completion rate, we could boost the state’s economy by \$17.5 billion a year.”¹⁶⁹ Both in theory and in practice, the Common Core stands to raise the number of college graduates in states that adopt it. Not only is it good for the students, but the CCSSI has the potential to be great for the economy.

An examination of the Common Core Learning Standards, coupled with teacher reports on the Standards in their classrooms, reveal that the strengths of the Common Core lie in its ability to level the playing field, so to speak, with regard to college and career readiness and to close the gaps that currently exist. The new education standards focus on deeper learning and create more opportunities to learn for all students, which translated into positive academic gains for all. It also successfully helps to bring more attention to areas in which U.S. high school graduates tend to be poorly prepared, which will boost college and career readiness. Even though more could be done to bridge the gap between high schools and the postsecondary world, the Common Core is a promising start.

II. Inconsistencies between the States and Global Competitiveness

A. Inconsistencies within the United States

A 2013 study of American students’ 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results - compared with TIMSS results from international peers, showed huge gaps in student performance across the states. While a majority of American states were found to rank above

¹⁶⁹ Smith.

the international average in this study, that does not disguise the huge variance in students' performance from state to state. The fact is that New England states such as Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont consistently make the top ten in tested subject areas. On the other end, Southern states like Mississippi, Alabama, and West Virginia were considerably below the international average, on par with Kazakhstan and the United Arab Emirates, two nations definitely not known for their academic excellence.¹⁷⁰ No other advanced, industrialized nation experiences such variance in student performance across its provinces.

Data from the turn of the century reveals that instructional time varied widely among U.S. schools for core subjects. "Instructional time varied by over 25 hours [per year] in schools where all students took the same eighth grade mathematics course, a difference equivalent to several weeks' instruction."¹⁷¹ This wide variation holds true at all levels and in all subjects. If students in some schools lose weeks of instruction compared to their peers, they will be significantly less prepared for college courses and career fields that involve these skills: education inequality at its finest. Other variations, including differences in course definitions and offerings and graduation requirements also greatly affect the achievement gap within the United States. These have been discussed at length in the section on "College and Career Readiness," subsection "Opportunities to Learn," and, therefore, will not be discussed here.

Since education has traditionally been a locally-controlled entity in the United States, it is easy to see how this wide degree of difference in achievement has come into existence. "High school students earn grades that cannot be compared from school to school and often are based as much on effort as on the actual mastery of academic content. They take state- and locally mandated tests that

¹⁷⁰ Kimberly Hefling, "Mixed Bag When States' Scores Compared Globally," *Associated Press*, 24 October 2013.

¹⁷¹ William H. Schmidt, et al., *Facing the Consequences: Using TIMSS for a Closer Look at U.S. Mathematics and Science Education* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 18.

may count toward graduation, but very often do not.”¹⁷² The American Diploma Project asserts the benefits of national standards, not only as a way to increase overall student achievement, but as a way of ensuring consistency across the states.

Although high school graduation requirements are established state by state, a high school diploma should represent a common currency nationwide. Families move across state lines, students apply to colleges outside their own state and employers hire people from across the country. States owe it to their students to set expectations for high school graduates that are portable to other states. The ADP benchmarks can help make this portability a reality.¹⁷³

Although that excerpt notes that ADP benchmarks can be used to ensure uniformity across the states, it also applies to any set of national standards, specifically the Common Core, which was created largely based off of the American Diploma Project’s initial report.

B. Achieving Global Competitiveness

In 2010, President Barack Obama gave a speech on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. He spoke of the need for higher education standards and better quality education to revive the nation’s global competitiveness. One of his most powerful statements characterizes the problem of the U.S.’s poor academic performance on the international playing field: “Our competitors understand that the nation that out-educates us today will out-compete us tomorrow.”¹⁷⁴ The United States, while collectively performing above average compared to other nations on the TIMSS¹⁷⁵, is far removed from the position it once held as the world leader in education. In fact, the U.S.’s results on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) have been very poor

¹⁷² ADP, *Ready or Not*, 2.

¹⁷³ ADP, *Ready or Not*, 4.

¹⁷⁴ Barack Obama, “Weekly Address” (speech, Washington, D.C., March 13, 2010), *Homeroom*, Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/blog/2010/03/president-discusses-proposal-for-esea/#more-2907>, Accessed 20 February 2014.

¹⁷⁵ Helfling.

in recent years. In 2006, American students ranked twenty-third out of thirty OECD countries in mathematics and twenty-fifth in science.¹⁷⁶ In 2012, Americans fared no better. In reading, fifteen year old American students' average score was slightly higher than international average - 498 points for the USA compared to 496 for all participating nations. In science literacy, the average score for American students was slightly below the international mean: 497 compared to 501. In mathematics, it becomes clear that education in the United States is seriously deficient. PISA results indicate that the United States trails the international average score by thirteen points.¹⁷⁷

Some argue that the United States's global deficit is misleading because international test scores do not account for poverty rates. This is exactly the argument of Stephen Krashen, who states that "[o]ur overall scores are unspectacular because of our high rate of child poverty (more than 23 percent), the second-highest among all industrialized countries. In comparison, Finland, a country that consistently has high scores, has about 5 percent child poverty."¹⁷⁸ This assertion is reiterated in an informational video, created by the American Federation of Teachers, about the myths of American education. The video highlights that schools in the United States, when compared to countries with similar poverty rates, outperform these nations.¹⁷⁹ Such claims are narrow-minded, however. Just as one cannot divide the United States's educational performance by state, look at Massachusetts, and say that the country is succeeding in education, one cannot break up schools into distinct entities based on poverty rates, compare them to whole nations, and assert that the U.S. is internationally competitive. The country's global competitiveness is a problem because the poverty

¹⁷⁶ Duncan, 69.

¹⁷⁷ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "United States Student Performance: PISA 2012," *Education GPS*, Retrieved from <http://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=USA&treshold=10&topic=PI>, Accessed 16 February 2014.

¹⁷⁸ Krashen, 37.

¹⁷⁹ American Federation of Teachers, "5 Myths About Our Schools That Fall Apart When You Look Closer" (video webcast), Retrieved from <http://www.upworthy.com/5-myths-about-our-schools-that-fall-apart-when-you-look-closer-6?c=ufb2>, Accessed 13 January 2014.

in this nation exists and is a detriment to its test performance; “countries with high proportions of low-ESCS students are likely to have lower overall test scores than countries in which incomes are distributed more equally.”¹⁸⁰ Therefore, the U.S. will not maximize its global competitiveness until it addresses its high poverty rates. To account for the exceptionally high rate in international comparisons does nothing to solve this problem.

Advocates of the extended school day might say that U.S. students spend substantially less time in school than rivals in China, Korea, Japan, and Singapore, for example, but such advocates miss the whole point. These outliers may devote more hours to learning than the average school in the United States, but the U.S. is still above average in instructional time on the global scale. Schmidt suggests that the bigger issue with instructional time is the huge discrepancies between different schools, even when grade level and subject are controlled. Further, varied time spent on instruction contributes to academic inequalities both within schools and across states.¹⁸¹ Tracking, discussed in the previous section, is a related element that causes the U.S. to lose global competitiveness. While most of our international rivals utilize the practice at the high school level, there are clearly defined tracks in a limited number. Furthermore, the practice of tracking middle school students is totally avoided by the schools in many of the highest performing nations.¹⁸² The majority of high performing nations offer all middle school students essentially the same courses in core subject areas, so all students are exposed to equally rigorous work and equal opportunities to learn.¹⁸³ A failure to serve all students to the standards found in the highest performing schools creates a huge achievement gap which, in turn, lowers the United States’s overall performance globally.

¹⁸⁰ Ladd, 210.

¹⁸¹ Schmidt, et al, 18-19.

¹⁸² Schmidt and McKnight, 121-122.

¹⁸³ Schmidt, et al, 19.

More time spent on school is not the solution to improve American students' global competitiveness. Research on high-performing schools internationally favors a set of national standards for improving learning outcomes and global competitiveness in the United States. The National Research Council suggests aligning local and state practices with national standards to enhance the country's overall performance on international exams like the TIMSS. It goes further to suggest that teachers and schools should reflect on their classroom expectations and how they align with what is expected beyond the individual school level.¹⁸⁴ The Common Core Standards, adopted in forty-five states at this point, will do just that, and the final exams that are being phased into schools that adopted the Standards will assist schools in ensuring that their classroom practices align with national expectations. Thus, the Common Core, if allowed to be fully implemented, will improve the United States's ranking on international exams.

That is speaking generally, however. If one were interested in what specific areas would be useful to focus on in more internationally competitive standards, it would be beneficial to juxtapose the Common Core and other internationally-benchmarked standards and see if they are comparable. For the purposes of this thesis, I compare the CCLS with the ADP standards because the latter are well-known and respected for their accuracy in global comparability. The American Diploma Project identifies eight general areas that will make students in the United States college and career ready to the same level as their most primed competitors in other areas. These areas are: proper and appropriate use of language; oral and written communication; high-quality analytical writing; the ability to conduct research and to draw and explain conclusions from research; the ability to reason; reading and comprehension of literature and informational text; and media savvy.¹⁸⁵ The Common Core Learning Standards for ELA encompass all of these areas. The ADP mathematics benchmarks

¹⁸⁴ National Research Council, 30-32.

¹⁸⁵ ADP, *Ready or Not*, 28-30.

comprise four general areas that outstanding schools abroad keep at the forefront of mathematical instruction. These areas are: the ability to use number sense and numerical operations; algebra; geometry; and data interpretation, statistics and probability.¹⁸⁶ Like the ELA standards, the Common Core places the most emphasis on these areas in its mathematics standards.

“The analysis suggests that it is intuitively plausible that faithful implementation of the CCSSM would improve PISA results. Presenting high school students with better modeling problems – and testing these skills through assessments – would be an important step in achieving this.”¹⁸⁷ This statement, the evidence shows, is not limited to PISA or to mathematics. Both the CCSSM and CCSSE consistently bring heightened rigor into American classrooms, rigor that is on par with the practices of the nations that edged the United States out of its position as the premiere world education leader. Rigorous standards alone will not bring about change in the United States’s performance internationally, though. The National Education Association (NEA) provides insight into other aspects of an education reform policy that could raise the nation’s global rankings in schooling:

Examination of the education systems of high performing countries such as Singapore and New Zealand indicates that those countries have common standards or curriculum that articulate broad, high goals for students, provide adequate preparation and support to teachers, allow teachers to exercise professional judgment, and involve teachers in all aspects of the education enterprise including curriculum, standards, and assessments as well as instruction. The Common Core State Standards Initiative has the potential to begin to move education in the U.S. along this path.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ ADP, *Ready or Not*, 54-55.

¹⁸⁷ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA 2012 for the United States* (OECD Publishing, 2013), 10.

¹⁸⁸ National Education Association, “NEA’s Involvement in the Common Core State Standards: How and Why NEA Has Been Involved in the Development and Implementation of the Standards,” *NEA: Great Public Schools for Every Student*, Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/home/46665.htm>, Accessed 14 February 2013.

Clearly, respected bodies of educators, like those found in America's largest teachers' union - the NEA, are confident in the CCSS and their abilities to enhance their students' performance on a global scale. Further, improvements to curriculum and standards will bring gains independently of other areas, such as increased instructional time. Thus, the Common Core does what it needs to do in order to improve America's international competitiveness. It is up to individual schools and teachers to make the faithful transition to enable this country to see results.

CHAPTER 4: AREAS OF CONCERN

While the previous chapter articulated the plethora of strengths that the Common Core State Standards Initiative can bring - and has already brought - to public education in the United States, this chapter addresses the still persistent problems that affect the quality of education American students receive. Primarily, these are issues of education equity. The first, and most important, deficiency that will be addressed is poverty and the educational disadvantages it brings to those children it affects. The second issue, highlighted significantly in the differences between Schenectady and Niskayuna, is the school funding inequality. A third issue that will be scrutinized is a largely negative opinion toward the implementation of the Standards and how that could lead to their premature repeal. This thesis does not assert that any of these shortcomings of the Common Core are cause to repeal the Standards and to revert to No Child Left Behind or to move forward in a few years with a new project. With improvements and supplemental reform policies, all of these problem areas can be adequately addressed. It is more practical, for both students and teachers, to improve the existing policy to address and correct the deficiencies outlined here.

I. Undressed Issues of Educational Equality

A. Negative Effects of Low Socioeconomic Status on Education

It is well-known that children from poorer, disadvantaged families tend to also be educationally disadvantaged. Various studies have shown strong correlations between income and standardized test scores, among other education outcomes; the general trend is that, as family income rises, so do scores on exams like the NAEP and the PISA.¹⁸⁹ A plethora of factors associated with low-income families account for this relationship. Such factors include low birth weight, insufficient access to health and vision care, malnutrition, limited access to high quality preschools, and little

¹⁸⁹ Ladd, 208.

participation in academically enriching summer and after school programs.¹⁹⁰ Lori S. Caplan, the current superintendent of the Watervliet School District in the NYS Capital Region describes many of the concerns she has for her students, sixty-five percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced price school lunch. In her article entitled “Poverty, Not Intelligence, Impacts School Performance,” Caplan writes, “Poverty is the single most significant factor common among the school districts at the bottom of the list, not test performance or teacher ability.”¹⁹¹ Her students fail to perform as well as more affluent peers, she asserts, because their parents do not have the means to meet their basic needs, such as filling, nutritious meals, appropriate clothing, and health care.¹⁹² While the correlation between poverty and lower educational achievement exists in most countries across the globe, U.S. students from low-SES families perform significantly worse than their global peers while higher SES Americans perform on par with students of a similar status in other countries.¹⁹³ Thus, the United States needs to do more to combat the effects of poverty.

Schools whose student populations are composed, in majority, of impoverished students and other disadvantaged groups can overcome these inherent disadvantages and surpass their expected education outcomes. A commitment to support students in need and to hold all students to the highest expectations is a characteristic found in schools and individual classrooms that overcome the odds that fate has stacked against them. A unique case study of schools across the nation that consistently overcome the limitations of poverty revealed that an attitude of “never good enough”¹⁹⁴ is common among all successful schools with high populations of low-income students. “What the more

¹⁹⁰ Ladd, 206.

¹⁹¹ Lori S. Caplan, “Poverty, Not Intelligence, Impacts School Performance,” *Albany Times Union*, 25 July 2013.

¹⁹² Caplan.

¹⁹³ Ladd, 210.

¹⁹⁴ Janet I. Angelis and Kristen C. Wilcox, “Poverty, Performance, and Frog Ponds: What Best-Practice Research Tells Us About Their Connections,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 93, no. 3 (2011), 29.

effective schools have in common is not only the refusal to accept the limitations of poverty, but educators' commitment to the vision of that every student can succeed in school and life."¹⁹⁵ Similarly, the nations with the most success in educating very low-SES students, Finland and South Korea, are dedicated to equal opportunities in education and believe that all students can succeed under this condition.¹⁹⁶ Holding true to this vision and motivating their students to meet the highest expectations is an essential contributor to these schools' and nations' positive outcomes.

The vision that all students can succeed is not only a characteristic of the most successful schools that serve impoverished youth; it is also a characteristic of some of the most effective teachers in these areas. Teach for America (TFA) is an organization whose teachers exclusively work in low-income communities. These teachers see significant improvements in the academic achievement of their students. Although the organization has recently received criticisms for its program, numerous studies reveal that TFA's teachers, coming out of a five-week training program, range from as effective to significantly more effective than their peers from mainstream teacher training programs during their first year. More specifically, the evidence shows that TFA corps members are more effective in promoting student growth in both ELA and mathematics than their peers from traditional programs.¹⁹⁷ Further, studies have revealed that students whose classes are taught by a TFA corps member receive the equivalent of 2.6 months of additional learning in mathematics than classes whose teachers are from other alternative or traditional preparation programs.¹⁹⁸ What the success of TFA demonstrates is that a "deep belief in the potential of all kids

¹⁹⁵ Angelis and Wilcox, 30.

¹⁹⁶ Ladd, 209.

¹⁹⁷ Strategic Data Project, "SDP Human Capital Diagnostic: Los Angeles Unified School District," *Harvard University: Center for Education Policy Research* (2012), 3.

¹⁹⁸ Paul T. Decker, et al., *The Effects of Teach for America on Students: Findings from a National Evaluation* (Princeton, NJ: Mathematics Policy Research, Inc., 2004), 29-31.

and a commitment to do whatever it takes to expand opportunities for students”¹⁹⁹ can make a significant difference in the achievement of low-income students. Despite the potential to beat the odds, even the highest performing schools and classrooms that serve mostly disadvantaged students cannot compete with neighboring districts that serve wealthier students.²⁰⁰ Thus, education policies ought to reflect more than just higher standards and increased access to advanced content to help traditionally disadvantaged students. This, unfortunately, is the extent of the equalizing measures embedded in the Common Core State Standards.

B. Unequal Distribution of School Funding

School funding is a major contributor to the poor quality of education in America. It is not a matter of the overall expenditure on education, though. When one takes the average across the nation, the United States tops the global charts in annual spending per student:

With the exception of Luxembourg, the United States spends more on a student in his or her elementary years than any other OECD nation. As for secondary education, only Luxembourg, Norway, and Switzerland spend more per student. At the college level, U.S. spending per student (from both public and private sources) exceeds that of any other nation in the world.²⁰¹

The root of the funding problem is the source of dollars to fund schools: local property taxes. The variance in property values and tax rates from district to district contribute to huge gaps in expenditure per student. The structure of school funding distribution in the United States is an incredibly flawed system that perpetuates inequalities between various school districts.

The unbelievable inequity in school funding distribution is evident in the case study of Schenectady and Niskayuna. Start with the difference in property values between the adjacent school

¹⁹⁹ Teach for America, “Who We Look For,” Retrieved from <https://www.teachforamerica.org/why-teach-for-america/who-we-look-for>, Accessed 26 February 2014.

²⁰⁰ Angelis and Wilcox, 27.

²⁰¹ Duncan, 70.

districts. In Schenectady, the median house value as of 2012 was \$110,300.²⁰² Nearly doubling this figure is the average property value for its suburban neighbor: the average home or condo in Niskayuna is valued at \$202,013.²⁰³ If both districts were taxed at the same rate, NHS would have about twice as much money to spend per student on schooling each year. This is not the case, however. In Schenectady, the annual property tax is 3.243%; Niskayuna's is 1.930%.²⁰⁴ Although the fact that Niskayuna has a lower tax rate does help to even out the gaps, it is insufficient to compensate for the stark contrast in residence values. This significant funding inequity contributes, in part, to the achievement gap between the two schools.

Funding shortages create a plethora of problems each year at schools in the position of Schenectady. At a 2011 meeting of the Schenectady Board of Education, president Cathy Lewis states, "At some of the workshops I have attended, there is a theme of 'do differently with less.' We will need to remember this statement,"²⁰⁵ in reference to budget cuts faced by the district. In 2013, the Schenectady School Board was forced to lay off much of its staff in compensating for the budget deficit: "Last year, a large number of aides and teaching assistants were a casualty of budget woes."²⁰⁶ In total, the district eliminated one hundred and five positions. In preparation for the 2014-2015 school budget, layoffs and program cuts are again on the table, despite a one percent tax increase voted into the budget and state aid.²⁰⁷ Such programs that could be on the chopping block are programs for gifted students and other academically enriching activities that round out and enhance the overall education experience for district pupils. Budget cuts have been a common theme

²⁰² "Schenectady, NY," *City-Data.com*, Retrieved from <http://www.city-data.com/city/Schenectady-New-York.html>, Accessed 01 March 2014.

²⁰³ "Niskayuna, NY," *City-Data.com*, Retrieved from <http://www.city-data.com/city/Niskayuna-New-York.html>, Accessed 01 March 2014.

²⁰⁴ "Schenectady County School Tax Rates," *Schenectady County*, Retrieved from <http://www.schenectadycounty.com/FullStory.aspx?m=373&amid=1091>, Accessed 1 March 2014.

²⁰⁵ Schenectady Board of Education. *Regular Meeting Minutes*, 16 March 2011, 3.

²⁰⁶ Paul Nelson, "Layoffs, Program Cuts Likely at Schenectady," *Albany Times Union*, 11 January 2014.

²⁰⁷ Nelson.

in the U.S. in recent years, with decreases in state and federal aid, as well as caps to tax levies that have eliminated key sources of funding to close the gaps in district budgets. Even wealthy districts feel the burden: already in 2014, Niskayuna school officials are entertaining the option of an elementary school closure at the end of the academic year to make up for inadequate funding. Otherwise, the suburb would have to resort to the unpopular option of an increased property tax, something the BOE and the town government refuse to do.²⁰⁸ While funding limitations are an almost universal difficulty in schools across the United States, those schools in areas with lower revenue from property taxes feel the burden more intensely than more affluent districts.

Students in different districts do not only have less resources, fewer classroom aids and tutors, and lower quality facilities due to differences in property tax revenue, though. The structure of property taxes compounds the financial burden on those living below or near the poverty line because it is a flat rate tax; all pay the same percentage of their home's value, regardless of means to pay. "The problem with the property tax is that the bill doesn't much match a person's ability to pay. This particularly hits senior citizens on fixed incomes, but there are also many working people across the state, from Long Island to Buffalo, struggling just to stay in their homes."²⁰⁹ As noted in the above discussion of poverty's effects on education, this takes away from the learning capacity of students in these homes.

No other nation funds education in such a corrupt manner. Secretary of Education Duncan comments that "those developed nations that spend less per student than the United States typically channel more of their spending toward the most challenged students and to providing incentives to

²⁰⁸ "Niskayuna School Board May Decide on School Reconfiguration," *Fox 23 News*, 28 January 2014, Retrieved from <http://www.fox23news.com/news/local/story/Niskayuna-School-Board-may-decide-on-school/kt4udxhbLkeP7J8drhdBLg.csp>, Accessed 1 March 2014.

²⁰⁹ Editorial Board, "Try a Better Tax Solution," *Albany Times Union*, 18 September 2013.

attract the best teachers to the most difficult classrooms.”²¹⁰ Finland, notorious for a successful use of this strategy, combined with increased teacher support, to turn around its failing education system to lead the world in school quality and equality.²¹¹ In the United States, the opposite is true: the bulk of school funding comes from and stays in wealthy areas. The areas with high needs are left to fend for themselves, with few attractions for good teachers to instruct the students who need their expertise the most. Aid from states is common and, in NYS at least, is based on need formulas that ensure it helps to lessen the divide between the rich and the poor districts.²¹² However, the aid is not enough to bring balance, let alone the additional aid that schools with high populations of low-SES students would need to overcome the inherent disadvantages their students face daily. A proposed, more equitable alternative is to fund schools through state income taxes. This proposition would enable the regressive property taxes to be kept low, thus reducing the financial burden on the poorest homeowners. Further, income taxes are progressive, so they have a greater potential for gaining funds, but reflect one’s ability to pay.²¹³ Thus, school funding through state income tax is conscious of socioeconomic disadvantage on multiple levels. Michelle Rhee offers another alternative, which is to distribute funding, regardless of its source, based on need instead of property values.²¹⁴ Whichever alternative is favored, even if it is one not mentioned here, school funding distribution is in need of reform. The local property tax source and distribution mechanism contributes to the appalling achievement gap in the U.S. and serves to keep the entire nation less globally competitive.

²¹⁰ Duncan, 70.

²¹¹ Guisbond, 15.

²¹² Editorial Board, “School Reform Can’t Wait,” *Albany Times Union*, 27 December 2013.

²¹³ Editorial Board, “Tax Solution.”

²¹⁴ Rhee.

II. Difficult Public Discourse

The second major area of concern involves the public discourse on the Common Core. One major problem that I encountered in writing this thesis was a willingness for individuals to discuss the reform effort. The first section will offer detailed insight into the complications of obtaining participation in the case study and draw conclusions from which districts had the highest resistance.

A. Reluctance to Discuss the Common Core

In my research, one of the greatest difficulties was finding educators willing to talk about the Common Core in a constructive manner. Originally, the case study was intended to include three schools, a high-performing, an average-performing, and a low-performing school. After initially gaining permission from Colonie Central High School principal, David Wetzel, to survey teachers on the Common Core, no data could be from that school. The link was sent out to Principal Wetzel, along with Schenectady High School's Kerri Messler and Danielle Bouton-Wales, chairs of the English and Mathematics departments, respectively, and Niskayuna High School's Common Core Coordinator, Eva Jones at the end of October. The contacts were expected to forward the public access link out to all ELA and mathematics teachers in their high school, along with a brief explanation of the survey and its importance to my thesis. I sent follow-up emails to these individuals on an almost weekly basis and asked them to encourage and/or remind their staffs to complete the brief survey. Messler, Bouton-Wales, and Jones all responded to my emails in a prompt manner and expressed a lot of positivity about the project, overall. Wetzel never responded, but as a direct response was never required, I did not consider this cause for concern.

However, once I checked the results in late December, it was clear that there was cause for concern. I had responses from Schenectady and Niskayuna teachers, but none from Colonie. Being the week of Christmas, schools were closed, so I was unable to reach Principal Wetzel by telephone.

I sent him a last email, expressing concern that none of his teachers had taken the survey and directly asked if he was still willing to have his school participate and if he had any problems with the questions contained in the survey. Once again, there was no response. Finally, after a week without a reply, I got in touch with Matthew Raso, a counselor at Colonie High School who also teaches Educational Psychology at my school, Union College. The term before I started my thesis, I had taken this course with Professor Raso and used him to initially secure the agreement for participation from David Wetzel. Professor Raso had not heard that the principal changed his mind about the survey and promised to ask him about it.

Several weeks passed with no word from either of Colonie's representatives, so I began to call Colonie High School in search of David Wetzel. I got his voicemail service several times before a secretary answered my call and took a message, which consisted of my name, phone number, and a request to promptly return my call. Amazingly, the next day, I received a returned call. Unfortunately, the timing was off and I was in class, unable to answer. The voicemail stated that it was David Wetzel, returning my phone call from yesterday and to call him back. I did just that later that day, this time leaving more specific information about myself and the purpose of my phone call - the Common Core teacher surveys. I apologized for being unable to answer his call and explained that I had been in class. I left very specific times for the rest of the week that I would be able to receive a return call. I also left my email address in case that would be a more productive means of communication. This phone call was in late January, several months after Colonie agreed to participate in the research. I never heard anything back from David Wetzel or anyone from Colonie High School, no teachers took the survey, despite my last, futile attempt to send the link to Principal Wetzel again. Since it was so late and all projects have deadlines, I made the decision to cut Colonie

from the case study and to focus more on the contrast between Schenectady and Niskayuna, whose differences are far more extreme than those between either school and Colonie.

Not only was this experience incredibly frustrating for my work, it raised one of the major issues of the Common Core and controversial policies, generally: many are unwilling to talk about them constructively. David Wetzel was willing to return my call only when he did not recognize my name and connect it to the Common Core surveys, clearly indicative of an unwillingness, despite earlier claims, to participate in a productive dialogue on the new education standards. This failure to speak productively is not a universal phenomenon, though. Teachers from Schenectady were very enthusiastic respondents and a majority of teachers in the English and Mathematics departments participated in my research. Even Niskayuna teachers, while lacking the impressive participation rate of their urban neighbors, had well-thought out, constructive feedback to give. Why did Colonie refuse to respond? Also, why did Schenectady have a participation rate that was overwhelmingly higher than Niskayuna? Answers to these questions can only be speculative, but, grounded in fact and scholarly opinion, are worthwhile to bring under consideration.

Teachers from Schenectady, a school that serves chronically underperforming, disadvantaged students, have the most to gain from the Common Core. Schools like this benefit greatly from innovation and elevated standards. As survey results indicate, the nature of the Common Core makes it necessary for instructors to adopt more innovative teaching strategies in their classrooms.²¹⁵ Innovation has worked incredibly well in the academic gains of disadvantaged students in charter schools across the country.

According to the 26-state study [from 2013]: Students in poverty, black students, and those who are English language learners (ELLs) gain significantly more days of learning each year in both reading and math compared to their traditional public school peers. Performance differences between charter school students and their

²¹⁵ Survey.

traditional public school peers were especially strong among black and Hispanic students in poverty and Hispanic students who are ELL in both reading and math.²¹⁶

The same study also notes that

[s]tudents in poverty, English language learners, and special education students all benefit from attending charter schools as well. Because these students are generally considered to be underserved by the TPS [traditional public school] system, higher quality educational options for these groups.²¹⁷

These findings are not limited to charter schools, however. As the above excerpts acknowledge, students who have most often been underserved by public schools have the most to gain from higher quality standards and educational innovation: clear evidence that the Common Core has a high potential for bringing positive gains to the students in schools like Schenectady.

Because these educators and their students have the most to gain from the new Standards, it is logical that they have the highest tendency to comment on the positive and negative attributes of the program: they are the most invested in its success. In the survey, while no teacher from Niskayuna believed that the CCSS will expose low-income and minority students to more rigorous course content than previously before, three out of four educators from Schenectady believed that the Standards would help low-income and minority students in this way.²¹⁸ This difference reveals several things. One, the previous NYS Regents standards were not serving most low-income and minority students, a majority at SHS and a minimally present minority at Niskayuna.²¹⁹ The second aspect revealed in this comparison is that Schenectady teachers are invested in the Standards and NHS teachers are not. Third, Schenectady teachers appear more optimistic about the new policy. Although a lower percentage of educators from the urban district believe that the Common Core will

²¹⁶ Kelly Davis and Meg Cotter Mazzola, “Charter Schools Make Gains, According to 26-State Study” (Stanford University: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 25 June 2014), 2.

²¹⁷ Edward Cremata, et al, *National Charter School Study* (Stanford University: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009) 81.

²¹⁸ Survey.

²¹⁹ U.S. News, “Schenectady.”
U.S. News, “Niskayuna.”

adequately prepare their students for a college-level field of study in the subject areas under the rigorous standards, the phrasing of the total question must be taken into account. The exact question reads, “Based on your knowledge and experience, is the Common Core curriculum sufficient to prepare your students to enter and pass a standard college program in your field without the need for remedial courses?” Based on conclusions from the other question that touches on the need for remedial courses, one can conclude that the negative responses to this question from Schenectady indicate that students will need remedial work to catch up to the level of the Common Core in high school, even before entering college.²²⁰ Thus, SHS is not pessimistic about the ability of the Standards to adequately prepare students for college and careers; they just understand the existing limitations of their students.

B. Increasingly Negative Perception of the CCSS

One major concern about the Common Core is the recent lack of support it has received since the exams were rolled out in the spring of 2013. Teachers’ unions, once among the most ardent supports of the CCSSI, have now adopted a more critical outlook on the Standards and, in particular, their implementation. The media has also been increasingly negative, reflecting parent concerns about the pressures of Common Core-aligned end of year exams and skepticism of the effectiveness of the new system, as well as the worries and demands of NYS lawmakers who are unimpressed by the Standards’ roll out. Since policies are readily abandoned with shifts in public opinion, this negativity could force the repeal of the CCSS before the positive effects have time to appear.

Teachers’ Unions

Teachers’ unions are incredibly vocal, as expected, in the Common Core debates. Both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association - the two largest and most

²²⁰ Survey.

influential teachers' unions in the country, among others, were involved in the generation of the reform effort and were early supporters of the cause. The NEA's official website acknowledges many of the benefits of the Common Core and expresses significant optimism for the reform effort, particularly its own involvement in the process.

NEA believes that this work on Common Standards has the potential to provide teachers with far more manageable curriculum goals. Their breadth allows teachers to exercise professional judgment in planning instruction that promotes student success. As the standards are extended to grades k-12, NEA is optimistic that they will continue to be fewer, broader, and more challenging than most of the current state standards. They will give teachers flexibility and a common, general focus that will extend across states.²²¹

Additionally, "[t]he AFT believes that, if implemented carefully and with the needed supports and resources, these new standards will help improve education for all students."²²² While this is still the official stance at the time of writing, as reported by the AFT and NEA official websites, a barrage of news articles have come out in early 2014 that show teachers' unions are having second thoughts about the Standards.

In a well-publicized letter to his constituents, NEA President Dennis Van Roekel expresses concerns for the implementation of the Standards. An excerpt from his letter reads,

I am sure it won't come as a surprise to hear that in far too many states, implementation has been completely botched. Seven out of ten teachers believe that implementation of the standards is going poorly in their schools. Worse yet, teachers report that there has been little to no attempt to allow educators to share what's needed to get CCSS implementation right. In fact, two thirds of all teachers report that they have not even been asked how to implement these new standards in their classrooms.²²³

²²¹ NEA.

²²² American Federation of Teachers, "Common Core State Standards," *AFT: A Union of Professionals*, Retrieved from <http://www.aft.org/issues/standards/nationalstandards/>, Accessed 24 February 2014.

²²³ Dennis Van Roekel, "NEA President: We Need a Course Correction on Common Core," *NEA Today*, 19 February 2014.

Van Roekel continues to suggest that educators like himself need more time and support resources for implementation, such as a chance to field test aligned curricula to determine what succeeds and what fails and money to train teachers and purchase aligned textbooks.²²⁴ These criticisms and suggestions reflect the same sentiments expressed by teachers from NYS Capital Region schools in Chapter 2.

Other teachers' unions have been in the news for their newfound criticisms of the implementation, as well. As of January 26, 2014, New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) formally withdrew its support for the Common Core. The president of this NYS union, Richard Iannuzzi, cites the failed roll-out of the standards, the extremely fast pace of elementary learning, and the mathematics trajectory at this high school level, which the union feels leaves out important topics and fails to encourage students to take calculus. Further, "[t]he NYSUT is insisting on a three-year moratorium on the high-stakes consequences attached to the exams; the union argues that no teachers should lose their jobs and no students should lost their chance at graduation because of poor performance on tests during a transition period."²²⁵ The moratorium is urged largely because union leadership feels that teachers have not been given sufficient time to revise lessons to align to the CCLS.²²⁶ While neither national organization has gone this far, it may be a short step toward other states' unions following suit.²²⁷ This shift in attitude is clearly a problem for the fate of the Common Core because teachers' were initially the most influential supporters of the reform effort.

²²⁴ Van Roekel.

²²⁵ Stephanie Simon, "New York Teachers Turn on Common Core," *Pollitico*, 26 January 2014, 2-3.

²²⁶ Editorial Board, "Poll: Parents Support Testing," *Albany Times Union*, 18 August 2013.

²²⁷ Simon, 2.

General Public

Independently of the teachers' unions, the media has seen a surge of anti-Common Core articles in the early months of 2014. An article in the *Huffington Post*, written by a teacher, laments, "Sadly, if reformers will not agree to even a delay in imposing high-stakes Common Core testing, we have to defeat it before we can move on to realistic solutions."²²⁸ The writer also explains the pessimistic title of his article, "No Moratorium, No Common Core," as a representation of the extreme failure that the roll out has been. The title also emphasizes the need for a break from high-stakes testing requirements before the whole experiment becomes, in his opinion, disastrous.²²⁹ Other teachers, speaking as individuals and not union members, feel similarly about the Common Core, as reported in the survey, and urge a slowdown of the implementation to give teachers and students more time to develop the foundation for the heightened expectations.²³⁰ Decorated NYS principal Carol Burris is even more critical and speaks out against the standardized exams associated with the reform, the fact that change is coming from government and administrators, and the botched implementation.²³¹ Many educators are publicly in opposition to the Common Core, as it is currently implemented.

Although those directly involved in education are an influential voice that can help dictate education policy, one cannot discount the opinion of the general public in swaying school policy. According to the *Times Union*, "The depth and breadth of dissatisfaction by the general public, not just by the unions or teachers or administrators, but by parents of all political persuasions, is a game

²²⁸ John Thompson, "No Moratorium, No Common Core," *The Huffington Post: The Blog*, 24 February 2014.

²²⁹ Thompson.

²³⁰ Survey.

²³¹ Valerie Strauss, "Principal: 'I was Naive About Common Core'," *The Washington Post*, 4 March 2013. Burris.

changer.”²³² Many parents are active in the anti-Common Core dialogue. News sources report that thousands of parents interrupted their work day to protest the new Standards at public meetings on the topic. On several occasions, they went as far as to boo NYS Education Commissioner John King.²³³ The political implications of this are unclear. A Siena College poll from November 2013 indicated that voters in NYS are incredibly divided on the Common Core. Forty-nine percent are not confident in the capabilities of the Common Core to improve college and career readiness while forty-five percent are confident that improvements will come out of the Standards. Voters are similarly divided when asked about the demands the CCLS place on students in the state: about one-third each think that the Standards are too demanding, just right, or not demanding enough.²³⁴ Despite the divisions, it is the vocal opponents who capture media attention.

The negative perception of the Common Core is so bad, in fact, that many New York State legislators have publicly demanded a delay in the program. Many lawmakers spoke out against the Standards and in favor of a moratorium in the Senate Education Committee’s January 2014 hearing on the Common Core. Committee chairman John Flanagan is reported to have stated that, despite the legislature’s restraint in exercising this power, the body does have the authority to override the Board of Regents and force either a repeal or a slowdown of the implementation.²³⁵ Even NYS Governor Cuomo has come to criticize the flawed implementation of the Standards in the 2014 State of the State address.²³⁶ Likely, this is the result of the simple realities of electoral politics:

Most of the populace does not show up to vote for most elections. People who have strong reasons to vote do, and turnout often determines elections. Getting passionate

²³² Fred Lebrun, “End Madcap Plunge into Common Core Chaos,” *Albany Times Union*, 26 January 2014.

²³³ Joy Pullmann, “Common Core: The Biggest Election Issue Washington Prefers to Ignore,” *The Federalist*, 25 November 2014.

²³⁴ Shane Vander Hart, “Poll: New York Voters are Divided on Common Core,” *Truth in American Education*, 19 November 2013, Retrieved from <http://truthinamericaneducation.com/common-core-state-standards/poll-new-york-voters-are-divided-on-common-core/>, Accessed 3 March 2014.

²³⁵ Rick Karlin, “Common Core Slowdown Urged,” *Albany Times Union*, 24 January 2014.

²³⁶ Lebrun.

people to vote is half the point of a campaign. The Common Core moms have a reason to vote, and boy, do they have a lot of friends.²³⁷

Clearly, despite the divided poll, the vocal opposition and potential political clout of an inflamed group of suburban women has politicians worried, maybe worried enough to force a repeal or slowdown of the Standards, which would be a serious mistake.

Countering the Criticism

Despite the vocal opponents to the Common Core in New York State, the fact remains that most teachers still support the Initiative. A 2014 survey of teachers sponsored by Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation revealed that educators see the challenges that the transition has brought and will continue to bring, but an overwhelming majority remain optimistic. “Overall, 73% of teachers who teach math, English language arts, science and/or social studies in Common Core states are enthusiastic about implementation in their classrooms. At the same time, an equal percentage of these teachers believe implementing the standards is or will be challenging.”²³⁸ The same study reports that teachers gain confidence in the Standards as they reach full implementation in their schools and that, compared to 2011, fourteen percent more instructors feel more prepared to teach the Common Core.²³⁹ These results indicate two things. First, although teacher opponents of the Common Core are loud, their criticism does not reflect the feelings of all teachers. Second, teachers will feel more comfortable with the Common Core as implementation progresses in their schools. Thus, even the most vocal critics are likely to be assuaged within the next couple of years as schools complete their transition. This second revelation recalls the concluding argument in Chapter 2’s section on time for implementation.

²³⁷ Pullmann.

²³⁸ Scholastic and The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2.

²³⁹ Scholastic and The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2.

With respect to the criticisms of other groups, one Schenectady educator puts it best when s/he states, “Administrators, students, and parents need to understand that since this is new thinking, it is going to take a while for students to be able to master these new skills, and therefore, their grades will suffer temporarily as they work through these new skills.”²⁴⁰ With any transition, there is going to be a time of difficulty before students, teachers, and administrators have adequately assimilated to the new expectations. True improvement can only be reached when commitment outlasts the challenging periods.

III. COMMON CORE’S USE OF STANDARDIZED EXAMS

One of the most universally criticized areas of the Common Core is its promulgation of standardized exams. Criticisms of the tests include the stress they cause students, their quantity and quality, and their use for student and teacher evaluations. For every criticism, there is a counterargument. This section will consider these criticisms and assess their validity in the context of improving the overall quality and equality embedded in the reform effort. Particular attention is given to a comparison between the Common Core’s use of standardized exams and the same in the Massachusetts State education reform effort, the model of success.

The stress that these exams placed on students, parents, and schools was evident in the spring of 2013, when Common Core-aligned final exams were first taken by students in New York State. Normally advanced students now struggle to meet the demands of the intensified coursework that teachers use to prepare students for the daunting spring exams. Carol Burris, the outspoken, anti-CCSS activist, illustrates an example of this in an article reported by the *Washington Post*:

An English teacher in my building came to me with a ‘reading test’ that her third grader took. Her daughter did poorly on the test. As both a mother and an English teacher, she knew that the difficulty of the passage and the questions were way over grade level. Her daughter, who is an excellent reader, was crushed. She and I looked on the side of the copy of the quiz and found the word “Pearson.” The school,

²⁴⁰ Survey.

responding to pressure from New York State, had purchased test prep materials from the company that makes the exam for the state.²⁴¹

The stress that students face has a greater impact than the fleeting worries of a child, however. Seventy-one percent of surveyed teachers from Schenectady and Niskayuna have perceived a deterioration in the relationship between themselves and their students since the implementation of the CCSS. The educators attribute this deterioration to the stress created by the difficulty of Common Core-aligned final exams.²⁴² Commissioner John King retorts that “[i]t’s better to have that worry in eighth grade than when your child arrives on a college campus and is told they have to take remedial classes.”²⁴³ King’s point has merit when one considers the fact that the whole program is designed almost as an early intervention to help students before they get to the college level.

The extreme rate of failure that came out of the tests appalled many and schools have struggled since then to meet the needs of their increased number of students who require support services.²⁴⁴ One Schenectady ELA teacher worries that the exams are particularly challenging for special education students and low-skill readers. Another argues that to count the tests is unfair because some students are not given adequate support to succeed.²⁴⁵ What is a bigger issue, however, is that there is no support for increased academic intervention services (AIS) to match the increased numbers of students who qualify for them and will need the intensive support to pass the next round of exams based on the CCLS. NYSED has changed AIS requirements so that schools are only obligated to provide them for thirty percent of students, despite the nearly seventy percent failure rate of exams in the 2012-2013 academic year. Worse than that is the fact that the state will only

²⁴¹ Strauss.

²⁴² Survey.

²⁴³ Scott Waldman, “Anxiety Rings in the Year,” *Albany Times Union*, 1 September 2013.

²⁴⁴ Waldman, “Anxiety.”

²⁴⁵ Survey.

provide AIS funding for up to thirty percent of the student body.²⁴⁶ Teachers in the NYS Capital Region are feeling the burden that this new policy has caused and believe that they will have to provide extra supports to more students than the prescribed thirty percent, regardless of what the state says.²⁴⁷

This lack of support could be a major problem for the success of the Common Core in New York State. When Massachusetts implemented its own more rigorous standards and accountability exams, increased support from the state was a given: “The state has made investments in remedial opportunities, which are offered during and after regular school hours and in the summer. The state is also committed to sticking with students for as long as it takes for each one to achieve competency.”²⁴⁸ This is at odds with Commissioner King’s statement²⁴⁹ that, “[t]he larger issue is about changing instruction, not just remediation.”²⁵⁰ This is a nice ideal, but until students are under the Common Core for a few years and brought up to par, the key to the longevity of the reform is support: “[T]he basic architecture of the reform - higher standards and greater accountability in exchange for more resources for building capacity - has remained intact.”²⁵¹ Without these resources for building capacity, which include more professional development for teachers, as well as funding and extra attention directed toward underserved, underperforming populations, it is unlikely that the MCAS, the assessments associated with the reform effort, would have survived.

Another concern at the forefront of the Common Core testing debate is the volume of tests and time devoted to test prep. “Critics say it [the CCSSI] has turned the schoolhouse into a testing

²⁴⁶ Scott Waldman, “No Lifeline for Struggling Students After State Tests,” *Albany Times Union*, 22 September 2013.

²⁴⁷ Waldman, “No Lifeline.”
Survey.

²⁴⁸ S. Paul Reville, “High Standards + High Accountability = High Achievement in Massachusetts,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 85, no. 8 (2004), 595.

²⁴⁹ Quoted by Scott Waldman.

²⁵⁰ Waldman, “No Lifeline.”

²⁵¹ Reville, 593.

mill, where children are trained to take exams, not develop their intellects or abilities to think creatively.”²⁵² Carol Burris is an advocate of this position. She argues that students have spent significantly more time on exams and their prep since 2010 than in the past, a fact she attributes to Common Core. The nationally-recognized principal claims that parents are primarily concerned with the time their children spend on tests.²⁵³ Despite the criticisms and the claims, a 2013 Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs poll reveals that sixty-one percent of parents feel their children take an appropriate amount of tests.²⁵⁴ Data from Niskayuna and Schenectady give insight into how much class time is devoted to test preparation under the Common Core. The breakdown can be viewed in Table 3 (see below). The significant variance shows that all classrooms are not “testing mills.” The two highest frequency prep times (daily and monthly) combined had less than forty percent of respondents. Furthermore, an equal percentage of instructors spend almost no time on test prep as spend one class per unit or one class at the end of the year. These percentages do not raise the alarm that students devote too much time to testing and test preparation. The facts should quell the fears.

Those who do worry that NYSED is forcing the state’s youth to become professional test takers can breathe more easily. The State Education Department secured a waiver at the beginning of 2014 to exempt students from some Common Core exams. Those affected will be students in the seventh and eighth grades who receive Algebra I instruction.²⁵⁵ They will take the Algebra I Regents exam and be exempt from the Common Core exam for seventh and eighth grade math. As more

²⁵² Waldman, “Anxiety.”

²⁵³ Burris.

²⁵⁴ Phillip Elliot and Jennifer Agiesta, “AP-NORC Poll: Parents Back High-Stakes Testing,” *Associated Press*, 17 August 2013, Retrieved from www.apnorc.org, Accessed 1 March 2014.

²⁵⁵ Cassey Seiler, “Schools Granted Exam Waiver,” *Albany Times Union*, 3 January 2014.

Regents exams become aligned with the CCLS, which is the goal by the 2015-2016 school year²⁵⁶, one can assume that these will be the only standardized assessments that students are obligated to take for high school credit.

Table 3: Class Time Spent on Exam Preparation in Niskayuna and Schenectady²⁵⁷

Frequency of Test Prep During Instruction Time	Percent of Respondents
Daily	23.1%
Weekly	15.4%
Monthly	15.4%
Once per unit	7.7%
One class at the end of the year	7.7%
Two weeks at the end of the year	15.4%
Almost never	7.7%

The great stress and criticism to come out of the Common Core exams is understandable, when one considers the fact that class of 2017, current freshmen, will graduate or not based on the outcomes of these exams.²⁵⁸ One teacher from SHS comments on this as a major failure of the Standards: “There are many kids who will not graduate because they are going to fail the Regents and their finals. That just is not fair when services to provide all our students with remedial help [are not] available, especially [for] our Guyanese population who don't qualify for ESL services.”²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ NYSED, “Changes,” 3.

²⁵⁷ Survey.

²⁵⁸ Lebrun.

²⁵⁹ Survey.

However, the Massachusetts example again provides valuable insight on what is required to achieve academic improvement. S. Paul Reville writes, “Historically, tests without stakes or with very low stakes have seldom driven change or improvement. [. . .] In other words, meaningful stakes are the direct cause of substantial change in Massachusetts’ schools.”²⁶⁰ Furthermore, as of 2014, state lawmakers are working to gain exam exemptions from the federal government for students who are English language learners and those who are disabled.²⁶¹ Thus, for the students who are capable, the high-stakes tests are essential and beneficial; for the students who are not, efforts are being undertaken to exempt them.

Furthermore, the emphasis on student graduation is narrow-minded. The idea is for students to graduate, it just might not occur in the standard four years if they are unable to pass the rigorous exams. The emphasis on graduation, in the implied four years, begs the question, “Why is time spent in school such an important measure of success?” Indeed, it has been that way in most areas of the United States. The American Diploma Project asserts that a diploma from a school in the U.S. “often serves as little more than a certificate of attendance.”²⁶² The Common Core assessments, like the MCAS in Massachusetts, challenge this definition of a diploma. “Time is no longer the constant in education. Learning is the constant, and time must vary to meet the educational needs of all students.”²⁶³ With this in mind, parents, teachers, and students themselves ought to be thankful for an extra year or two in school. When they finally achieve that diploma, it will mean that they are ready for the intellectual demands of the postsecondary world.

Currently, there is little confidence in the quality of the exams based on the CCLS. Less than half of educators surveyed from Schenectady and Niskayuna feel that the exams reflect the content

²⁶⁰ Reville, 594.

²⁶¹ Brown.

²⁶² ADP, 1.

²⁶³ Reville, 596.

of the curriculum. Taken as a whole, this could indicate that the newly designed ELA and mathematics tests do not measure what the Common Core guides teachers to teach. However, a separation of the data by schools tells a different story. One hundred percent of respondents from NHS believe that the standardized exams measure learning that was taught under the Common Core-aligned curriculum in their subject. On the other hand, only about seventeen percent of SHS teachers say the same.²⁶⁴ If anything, this shows that Schenectady ought to reflect on its curriculum and make the necessary changes to align to the exams. Teachers likely acknowledge this concern because their CCLS training was rushed and low-quality, according to the survey. Another quality concern is the tests as a measure of college and career readiness. Roughly fourteen percent of those surveyed believe that the Common Core's tests are accurate measures of their students' college and career readiness. This leaves about eighty-six percent, an overwhelming majority, who feel the exams are inadequate measures.²⁶⁵ This is something that New York State ought to bring under consideration. The exams should be scrutinized by education experts to determine their use as a predictor of college and career success. If the results show the exams are not accurate measures, then they need to be redesigned to align them with college and career expectations. Conversely, if a study reveals that the exams are adequate measures, then more confidence in the value of these tests needs to be instilled in the instructors. Either way, action must be taken to reflect on the quality of these exams.

If Common Core-aligned final exams came to be perceived as such good predictors of college readiness that they became college entrance, as well as high school exit, exams, the situation would still be problematic in terms of educational equity. One major current concern with the SAT and ACT is that wealthier students have access to extra preparation that low-SES students lack.²⁶⁶ For

²⁶⁴ Survey.

²⁶⁵ Survey.

²⁶⁶ Venezia and Jaeger, 120.

example, a private SAT tutor from the Princeton Review, available near Schenectady, NY ranges in price from \$2,760 to \$6,600.²⁶⁷ This is well above the means of a family living in or near poverty. Even books for self-guided SAT preparation are pricey. Available from the Princeton Review, these books range from \$9.99 for a crash course to \$34.99 for a comprehensive version with several practice tests and an instructional DVD.²⁶⁸ Depending on the family, perhaps some low-income students could at least afford a book. The hierarchy of books ensures that students with the most disposable income will receive the superior preparation, while the typical student who prepares with just a book will be leagues behind the typical one with a personal tutor. While the unequal levels of preparation based on ability to pay are a characteristic of any high-caliber, standardized exam, the Common Core has one huge advantage over the SAT and ACT as a potential set of college entrance exams: the exams are designed to measure what students are taught in school and nothing more. This is not the case for the traditional set of entrance exams, which largely measure knowledge and abilities not explicitly covered in public education.²⁶⁹

As of March 2014, the College Board has announced revisions to the SAT that could assuage some, but not all, of these inequities embedded in the current model of college entrance exams. The plans currently in place would reform many of the drawbacks to the SAT. One is that the questions will be more relevant to what students learn in high school and are expected to know in college. Another is that old test questions and instructional videos will be available for free online in the spring of 2016. These efforts are designed to quell the affluent advantage embedded in the test.

²⁶⁷ Princeton Review, "Make the Admissions Officers Drool," *The Princeton Review*, Retrieved from <http://www.princetonreview.com/ChooseProducts.aspx&zipcode=13365&testtype=TAA&producttype=TUT&productdetail=InPersonTutoring>, Accessed 3 March 2014.

²⁶⁸ Princeton Review, "Book Store," *The Princeton Review*, Retrieved from <http://www.randomhouse.com/princetonreview/college/sat/>, Accessed 3 March 2014.

²⁶⁹ Venezia and Jaeger, 120.

College Board President, David Coleman, is quoted in the *New York Times* on the motive for this major change: “It is time for the College Board to say in a clearer voice that the culture and practice of costly test preparation that has arisen around admissions exams drives the perception of inequality and injustice in our country, It may not be our fault, but it is our problem.”²⁷⁰ These reform efforts will definitely help to level the playing field, but Common Core exit exams would still be superior because of their singularity and the more equitable nature of them. While the reformed SAT will help low-income students to be better prepared, it will not prevent wealthier students from using their economic resources to receive higher test scores.

IV. THE FUTURE OF THE COMMON CORE

If the Common Core is not forced into abandonment like many other educational reform efforts, it will still have some problems to address. If the goal is truly to give American students the best education possible to make them ready for college and careers in a globally competitive world, then the issues of poverty and funding inequity must be addressed. In these areas, the Common Core is a crucial start because it ensures all students exposure to the same high expectations, as noted in Chapter 3. However, students who come to school hungry and improperly dressed simply cannot compete with wealthier students. For education reform to bring true equality, it needs to encompass strong anti-poverty measures to level the playing field from the start. The Common Core plus a strong social welfare reform effort could see the racial and socioeconomic discrepancies reduced. Until that happens, though, the youth from poor and minority backgrounds will still trail behind advantaged peers, albeit to a lesser degree, and bring the entire nation’s academic prosperity down.

A more immediate concern that will need to be addressed is the quality of the final exams and the pressures from opposition. The conclusions of this thesis strongly advises government

²⁷⁰ Tamar Lewin, “A New SAT Aims to Realign With Schoolwork,” *New York Times*, 5 March 2014.

officials in New York State to stick with the Common Core until it is possible to see results. This will take more than a few years, as it did in Massachusetts. In the meantime, though, there needs to be a reevaluation of the final exams to ensure that they are adequate measures of college and career readiness. Schools need to use these measures to determine if their students are ready to graduate and this cannot be done if they are inaccurate. With these changes, there is no reason for the Standards to be abandoned. Instead, they should be supported more in their implementation so that schools can use them to best meet the needs of their pupils.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION: THE COMMON CORE SHOULD BE HERE TO STAY

The analysis offered in this thesis is a comprehensive examination of the Common Core State Standards Initiative, as it is currently implemented in New York State. The work in its entirety addresses the question “Are the Common Core State Standards a pedagogically appropriate education reform, as applied in New York State schools?” The conclusion I reach is that the Standards are indeed pedagogically appropriate. I am not the first to weigh the merits and the disadvantages of the Initiative, and I will not be the last. However, this work has been more comprehensive than any of the other writings on the topic, which largely consist of a brief analysis of one aspect of the Common Core - the use of standardized exams or the hasty implementation, for example. Furthermore, no other analysis of the reform effort is rooted in practicality, whereas mine is grounded in a study of two specific schools, Schenectady and Niskayuna. Nor is the viewpoint expressed in this thesis polarized, as the overwhelming majority of writings on this controversial political topic are. Instead, I see the Common Core as a workable solution to many of the problems that currently exist in the United States’s public school system. It has deficiencies, which I do not ignore, but my work is far from an outraged cry to repeal or slow the implementation.

My research and analysis yielded three major findings that are attributes to the potential of the Common Core. The first is that the Common Core has the potential to significantly enhance the college and career readiness of U.S. graduates. Increased, universally applied standards give all students, regardless of race, family income, or geographic location, exposure to advanced content. This is the primary factor that affects learning outcomes, so this alone would provide for higher degrees of readiness for postsecondary life, especially for traditionally disadvantaged students. However, the Common Core goes further to close the gap between high school requirements and college and workplace expectations. The Standards provide for more focus on the skills the

postsecondary world demands, such as comprehension of nonfiction readings, mathematical reasoning, oral communication, and computer skills. Critics who argue that the CCSS will not bring about significant change in this area are misguided and have not allowed the Standards sufficient time to affect change in the schools. Once they do - as was the case in Massachusetts after the 1993 education reform and the case when Kentucky became the first state to fully adopt the Common Core - the evidence strongly indicates that test scores and overall learning will significantly improve for the majority of students.

The second major conclusion of this thesis is that the Common Core will help to close the achievement gaps in multiple facets of American education. Because of its nearly universal adoption, statewide performance differences would be significantly reduced if all states stayed on track and reached full implementation. The high-performing states would continue to be high-performing and the low-performing states would be brought up to the level of their more educationally advanced neighbors. The Common Core will also help to close the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students; it already provides those on the lower side with the higher expectations and increased exposure to advanced learning necessary to gain more knowledge similar to what affluent peers obtain. A common theme of this paper is that it is a mistake for the educational achievement and economic competitiveness of the nation to underserve the disadvantaged groups or areas. Thus, the equalization effects of the Standards will benefit the United States as a whole.

The third finding in support of the Common Core is that public opposition is neither as severe nor as absolute as media reports currently portray it. Although many are unwilling to discuss the Initiative constructively, a majority of teachers and parents respectively still support the Common Core as a whole and support various controversial aspects embedded in it, such as testing. The problem with the opposition to the Common Core is its vehement nature and the political power that

the minority group already exercises over lawmakers. If lawmakers in all states, not just New York, fail to maintain their commitment to the reform and abandon or slow the adoption, education in America will suffer. In the face of challenge, it has become custom in American politics to abandon reform before it has a chance to succeed. This is a grave mistake. Transition is always difficult, but that does not indicate that the policy is a failure.

This leads to one of the areas of concern that have come out of this analysis of the Initiative: its implementation. To say that it has been difficult would be an understatement, especially according to teachers from Niskayuna, Schenectady, and beyond. Schools are stressed and, especially in under-resourced schools like Schenectady, educators do not have the supports necessary to ease this burden to serve their students in the best way possible. To the credit of NYSED, more supports are available with each passing day. The Education Department is engaged in efforts to generate and improve the sample curriculum resources available online to all educators and lawmakers are in the actively seeking to secure financial resources for increased professional development. While the state is engaged in efforts to better the implementation, schools and the public ought to reflect on whether it is fair and appropriate to harshly judge a new program based on its implementation. It is commonly known that the immensely successful Social Security Program was highly criticized and flawed when it was initially introduced. The government persisted with it, however, and today it is one of the most popular actions even undertaken by the United States government and has kept millions of elderly citizens out of poverty. Even Obamacare has the potential to insure millions of Americans and keep individuals and families from leaving health problems untreated or from acquiring massive debt to pay for healthcare. Nobody would realize this from the complications encountered during its implementation. If one were to look at the Common Core in this context, that individual would see

the errors in judging a policy exclusively on its initial transition period. Despite the difficulties, the Initiative retains plenty of room for success.

The issues that the Common Core State Standards Initiative leaves unaddressed ought to be the next step for education reform for an individual state like New York, or the United States as a whole, to be fully successful. Chapter 4 reveals that the inequity of the school funding distribution mechanism is a major contributor to disparities in achievement between schools and districts. On top of that, one of the common themes to come out of this thesis, as discussed above, is that the collective cannot be successful if it does not adequately serve its underprivileged groups. Areas that are already economically disadvantaged suffer further from the unequal distribution of school funding through the property tax structure, which causes the academic quality of the entire nation to suffer. Thus, NYS and any other state that utilizes this system of funding needs to adopt an equal method of school funding, or one that favors the more economically depressed areas, as the most successful countries abroad do. Additionally, education reform efforts can only go so far without poverty reform. While some would say that the high poverty rate in the U.S. Proves that American schools are not failing, I counter this in the fourth chapter because the fact that the poverty levels are bad enough to drastically impact the overall quality of American schools indicates that the public education system is not a great equalizer it is perceived to be. Anti-poverty measures need to be undertaken, in tandem with the Common Core reform of education standards, to increase the potential for significant education gains.

While the analysis presented here is valid, it is also limited. While news reports and the universality of the Common Core suggest that the benefits and drawbacks of the effort occur in all states, the thesis is focused on New York State. Most evidence is from NYS sources, which could limit the findings to New York State, exclusively. Further study would need to be conducted, perhaps

with a focus on another state that is very different - in terms of demography, geography, and past performance - from the one in my case study, to see if the conclusions hold across states. Additionally, the primary concern of this thesis is what the Common Core will do for students; any mention of teachers is in relation to their ability to serve their students, such as their understanding of the Standards and the flexibility they have to adapt the CCLS to the needs of their distinct student populations. This does not suggest that the effects on teachers - such as the performance evaluations attached to student exam results - are irrelevant to the success of the Initiative. This would be an area to examine in the future, in another analysis more focused on teachers. Fairness is important and if the Standards do not treat teachers fairly, then this is a problem that demands rectification. Future research should address these areas to provide a more rounded view of the Common Core that goes beyond this student-centered thesis. This need to further study does not minimize the findings here, though. The Common Core is an education with significant possibility for improved student learning outcomes and ought to be bettered, but maintained.

The true need for the Common Core will not be found in the statistics or politicians remarks. It is found in the individual public education experiences of disadvantaged students. I consider myself to be in this group. Raised in Little Falls, New York, an economically depressed area of Central New York, by a single mother who works in a convenience store is a very different experience than many of my highly affluent peers at Union College. I was not crippled, like many others in a similar situation, by the damaging psychological effects that a childhood in poverty has on primary and secondary students. This was because my mom worked hard and instilled a value of education in myself and my two sisters. I managed to graduate second in my high school class and was accepted into a prestigious college, on scholarship. To my credit, and to the credit of my substandard public education in rural NYS, I am about to graduate *summa cum laude* in June.

The fact remains, however, that the education I received was substandard. In my research on Schenectady and Niskayuna, my curiosity was piqued about my own high school, so I looked up some statistics on it for fun. My high school's College Readiness Index is 18.1.²⁷¹ Higher than Schenectady's, for sure, but not even close to the high school that a good friend of mine at Union attended. This friend graduated from Townsend Harris High School in New York City, which receives a College Readiness Index of 87.9.²⁷² My friend was nearly sixty percent more prepared than I was for college, and yet we attend the same school and are held to the same expectations. There are countless examples of things I did not learn in high school that is a general expectation in college. My classmates at Little Falls High School and I did not have the opportunity to read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* because those texts were perceived to be too difficult for us. In the fall of my junior year of college, this put me at a severe disadvantage in my Ancient World Mythology class because my professor expected everyone to have already read and to have an understanding of those texts. From conversations with my classmates, I was the only individual in the class who failed to meet this expectation. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is another novel that all American students are expected to have read. My Honors English class read this famous novel in the eleventh grade. My friend from Townsend Harris read it in eighth grade.

These deficiencies would not happen if all schools were held to the same high, comprehensive standards - as they are under the Common Core - when I was in high school. If all students were held to the same standards and given the opportunities to learn the *Iliad* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* earlier, some students in Little Falls would have struggled; I am confident in this, but

²⁷¹ U.S. News, "Little Falls High School: Overview," Education: Best High Schools, Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/new-york/districts/little-falls-city-school-district/little-falls-high-school-13832>, Accessed 12 March 2014.

²⁷² U.S. News, "Townsend Harris High School: Overview," Education: Best High Schools, Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/new-york/districts/little-falls-city-school-district/little-falls-high-school-13832>, Accessed 12 March 2014.

I am also confident in the fact that some students at my friend's high school also struggled. Above this, though, I am confident that my classmates and I would have risen to the challenge. We simply were not given the chance to try. Because of that, we will struggle to compete with more privileged peers for the rest of our lives. The Common Core gives the next generation of students like me that chance, and it is not something we should throw away because it has had a difficult transition and does not address every single problem with the American school system. The students who are currently affected by the Common Core deserve the chance to learn more and to do better, so they can face the demands of the postsecondary world on a more equal level with rivals on the national and international scale. The Common Core, if given the necessary time to establish itself, will give all students that ability.

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APPENDIX

Survey Title: Teacher Evaluation of Common Core												
Report Type: Frequency Table												
Start Date: 25-Oct-13												
End Date: 30-Apr-15												
Invitations Sent: 6												
Delivered: 6												
Bounced: 0												
Completed Responses: 14												
Unique Access Response Rate: 0.00%												
Incomplete Responses: 0												
Incomplete responses included in this report: 0												

Q1. Where do you teach?										
	Colonie		Niskayuna		Schenectady		Did not answer		Total	
Responses Received	0	0%	2	14.29%	12	85.71%	0	0%	14	

Q2. Which subject do you teach?										
	English		Mathematics		Other (Please specify)		Did not answer		Total	
Responses Received	11	78.57%	3	21.43%	0	0%	0	0%	14	

Q3. Which grade level to you predominately teach?													
	9th		10th		11th		12th		Multiple (Please explain)		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	4	28.57%	2	14.29%	3	21.43%	2	14.29%	3	21.43%	0	0%	14

Q4. What is the approximate racial make-up of the average class that your teach?													
	0% nonwhite, 100% white		10-25% nonwhite, 75-90% white		25-50% nonwhite, 50-75% white		50-75% nonwhite, 25-50% white		75-100% nonwhite, 0-25% white		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	0	0%	2	14.29%	1	7.14%	9	64.29%	2	14.29%	0	0%	

Q5. In your main subject area, is your curriculum designed to meet the Common Core learning standards?							
	Yes		No		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	12	85.71%	2	14.29%	0	0%	14

Q6. Have the Common Core Standards in your subject area been clearly articulated to you?							
	Yes		No		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	11	78.57%	3	21.43%	0	0%	14

Q7. Who was primarily responsible for informing your understanding of the Common Core Standards in your subject area?																			
	State Representative		Superintendent		Principal/Assistant Principal		Department Head		Coworker		Myself/Independent Research		Media		Other (Please specify)		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	0	0%	0	0%	1	7.14%	9	64.29%	1	7.14%	10	71.43%	0	0%	1	7.14%	0	0%	
Note: Multiple answers per participant possible. Percentages added may exceed 100 since a participant may select more than one answer for this question.																			

Q8. Who was responsible for designing your subject's curriculum in order to meet Common Core standards?											
	Myself		Department Head/Department Representative		NYS Department of Education		Other (Please specify)		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	5	35.71%	2	14.29%	2	14.29%	5	35.71%	0	0%	14

Q9. Is the Common Core-based curriculum in your subject significantly different from the previous curriculum used to meet New York State Regents standards?							
	Yes		No		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	11	78.57%	3	21.43%	0	0%	14

Q11. Was the time given to implement the new, Common Core-based curriculum sufficient?							
	Yes		No		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	1	7.14%	13	92.86%	0	0%	14

Q13. Did your school-provided Common Core training include the following? Select all that apply.													
	Seminars given by experts/leaders already trained in the standards		Handbooks and/or other text-based guides		Practice exercises		Collaborations with more experienced individuals/groups		Other (please specify)		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	5	35.71%	6	42.86%	4	28.57%	11	78.57%	2	14.29%	0	0%	14
Note: Multiple answers per participant possible. Percentages added may exceed 100 since a participant may select more than one answer for this question.													

Q15. Has your Common Core learning standards training been reinforced throughout the school year? If so, please specify how.																									
Responses Received	At regular staff/department meetings		At staff meetings specifically designed for this purpose		On regular staff development days		On staff development days specifically designed for this purpose		Through regular correspondence with administration		Through Common Core-specific correspondence with administration		At state or regional teacher conferences		Through my own research		I was not trained on the Common Core		My training has not been reinforced throughout the school year		Other (Please specify)		Did not answer		Total
	3	21.43%	3	21.43%	4	28.57%	8	57.14%	2	14.29%	1	7.14%	2	14.29%	6	42.86%	0	0%	2	14.29%	1	7.14%	0	0%	
Note: Multiple answers per participant possible. Percentages added may exceed 100 since a participant may select more than one answer for this question.																									

Q16. Were you aware that the NYS Department of Education offers Common Core-based classroom resources, including lesson plans, homework assignments, and assessments?							
	Yes		No (please skip to question 19)		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	11	78.57%	3	21.43%	0	0%	14

Q17. Do you feel that these standard resources are adequate to meet the needs of your student population?							
	Yes		No		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	1	7.14%	10	71.43%	3	21.43%	14

Q18. Have you personally used any of these resources in your instruction?							
	Yes		No (please skip to question 19)		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	6	42.86%	6	42.86%	2	14.29%	14

Q19. Which types resources have you used?													
	Lesson Plans		In-class support work		Homework		Assessments		Other (Please specify)		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	7	50.00%	1	7.14%	1	7.14%	6	42.86%	0	0%	5	35.71%	14
Note: Multiple answers per participant possible. Percentages added may exceed 100 since a participant may select more than one answer for this question.													

Q20. How often have you used these resources in your instruction?													
	Daily		Weekly		Monthly		A few times each unit		Once or twice each unit		Rarely		Total
Responses Received	2	14.29%	1	7.14%	2	14.29%	1	7.14%	3	21.43%	2	14.29%	14

Q21. Have you significantly altered your teaching style to meet the needs of the Common Core-based curriculum?							
	Yes		No		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	8	57.14%	6	42.86%	0	0%	14

Q22. Has the Common Core forced you to adopt more innovative instruction techniques?							
	Yes		No		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	8	57.14%	6	42.86%	0	0%	14

Q23. Low-income and racial minority students are significantly less likely than average to be college and career ready because they are underrepresented in rigorous courses. Has the Common Core significantly increased the exposure of low-income and minority students in your school to more rigorous coursework?											
	Yes				No				Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	9				5				0	0%	14

Q24. What is the factor most responsible for this change or lack of change?															
	A high percentage of low-income and racial minority students were already enrolled in rigorous courses		The curriculum previously offered was more rigorous than the Common Core		The Common Core now requires all students to take a more rigorous course load		Low-income and racial minority students have more to gain from rigorous courses		Low-income and racial minority students have more to lose from rigorous courses		Low-income and racial minority students are unprepared for the more rigorous coursework of the Common Core and have to take remedial courses to catch up		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	3	21.43%	0	0%	4	28.57%	1	7.14%	0	0%	6	42.86%	0	0%	

Q25. One major criticism of education in the United States is that it promotes rote memorization over deep understanding of class content. Does the Common Core encourage deeper understanding over memorization for student success?							
	Yes		No		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	11	78.57%	3	21.43%	0	0%	14

Q26. Math teachers, please skip this question. Has the Common Core increased your course's focus in any of the following areas? (Select all that apply)															
	Persuasive and analytical writing		Research		Knowledge and use of sophisticated vocabulary		Oral presentations and arguments		None of the above		Other (Please specify)		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	8	57.14%	5	35.71%	3	21.43%	5	35.71%	2	14.29%	2	14.29%	3	21.43%	
Note: Multiple answers per participant possible. Percentages added may exceed 100 since a participant may select more than one answer for this question.															

Q27. English teachers, please skip this question. Has the Common Core increased your course's focus in any of the following areas? (Select all that apply)

	Data Interpretation		Statistics		Probability		Deeper Understanding of Algebra		Deeper Understanding of Geometry		Deeper Understanding of Trigonometry		Numeric Reasoning and Logical Analysis		None of the above		Other (Please specify)		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	1	7.14 %	1	7.14 %	0	0%	2	14.29 %	0	0%	0	0%	2	14.29 %	1	7.14 %	0	0 %	1	7.14 %	14

Note: Multiple answers per participant possible. Percentages added may exceed 100 since a participant may select more than one answer for this question.

Q28. Based on your knowledge and experience, is the Common Core curriculum sufficient to prepare your students to enter and pass a standard college program in your field without the need for remedial courses?

	Yes		No		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	2	14.29%	12	85.71%	0	0%	14

Q29. Some studies have expressed concern that the pressures of high stakes tests will deteriorate teachers' relationships with their students and, in effect, negatively impact students' learning. Have you observed this trend in your own classroom since the implementation of Common Core-level final exams?

	Yes		No		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	10	71.43%	4	28.57%	0	0%	14

Q30. Approximately how much class time have you devoted to preparing students for the final exams outside of teaching the normal curriculum? (Examples: sample exam questions, practice tests, reinforcement of material to the exams, etc.)

	10 minutes each class		1/4 of each class		1/3 of each class		1/2 of each class		One class per week		One class per month		Once class per unit		Two weeks at the end of the year		One week at the end of the year		One class at the end of the year		Other (Please specify)		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	0	0%	0	0%	1	7.14 %	0	0 %	2	14.29 %	2	14.29 %	1	7.14 %	2	14.29 %	0	0 %	2	14.29 %	4	28.57 %	0	0 %	14

Q31. Based on your knowledge and experience, do the Common Core final exams reflect the content of the curriculum?							
	Yes		No		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	5	35.71%	9	64.29%	0	0%	14

Q32. Based on your experiences, do the Common Core final exams accurately measure a student's college and career readiness?							
	Yes		No		Did not answer		Total
Responses Received	2	14.29%	12	85.71%	0	0%	14