

OPINION

Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane: Common Core and continued prosperity

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“Secretaries relieve their employers of routine duties so they can work on more important matters.” This was the official description of the occupation “secretary” in 1976. How things have changed.

Computer technology has transformed the job descriptions of hundreds of occupations and, along with globalization, has swept away many of the low-skilled manufacturing and clerical jobs that enabled high school graduates of yesteryear to afford the homes, cars and pensions associated with a middle-class standard of living. “Good jobs” require much higher levels of analytical thinking and communication skills today than in the past.

Historically, America’s public schools have responded well to the challenges of a changing world. Indeed, America’s world leadership in education has fueled much of its prosperity and made the 20th century the “American Century.” Until recently, America’s decentralized education system had been the envy of the world and increased educational attainments enabled generations of Americans to enjoy higher living standard than their parents.

Technological changes and globalization have placed great strains on the American approach to public education. We are constantly reminded that the math, science and language skills of our children and young adult lag far behind those of children in many other countries. In the international rankings, our college graduation rates have fallen from first to 12th place.

Perhaps surprisingly, the basic skills of American schoolchildren are higher

today than they were 40 years ago, even among poor children. The problem is that they haven't risen nearly enough to maintain America's economic leadership in the decades to come.

Attempts to reform our education system have taken many forms, including increased spending, test-based accountability, charter schools and school vouchers. None has solved the problem, because none has focused on the difficult task of improving instruction and providing students with the coordinated learning experiences they need to master critical skills.

Enter the Common Core State Standards. The Common Core standards outline conceptual and procedural skills in English language arts and mathematics that American students should be expected to master at each level of schooling, from kindergarten through grade 12. A parallel set of science standards have been developed as well. As of this writing, 45 of the 50 states have adopted the Common Core standards. The standards' goals, particularly in the case of conceptual learning, are higher than those defined by all but a handful of states and considerably higher than the achievement levels of most American students.

The Common Core standards were developed in a grass-roots partnership among governors, business leaders and state school superintendents who saw them as vital for training the future labor force. Carefully designed to reflect the latest research, the standards offer teachers and school leaders a fundamental resource: clarity about the conceptual and procedural skills children should master in each grade.

Their widespread adoption may spawn other benefits. Test developers can finally focus their assessments on a single set of concrete learning goals. The textbooks that now weigh down our children's backpacks, offering mile-wide, inch-deep coverage of a host of topics, can slim down by concentrating on the essentials. Fifth-grade teachers will know exactly which topics were covered the year before. Schools of education, like our own, can prepare teachers to teach well the conceptual and practical knowledge their students will need in each grade.

Misconceptions about the standards abound. The Obama administration is

not forcing states to adopt the standards, even in its Race to the Top initiative. Concerns that the literacy standards are replacing classical literature with government documents are based on a misunderstanding of those standards and a lack of appreciation for both “government documents” like Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and Thomas Paine’s “Common Sense” and the need to build children’s background knowledge and vocabulary.

For many students, parents and teachers, the elevated standards contained in the Common Core are coming as a shock. Teachers will need a great deal of support in learning to teach these more demanding standards effectively. This will take time and cost money. As a result, it makes sense to delay strict accountability provisions linked to Common Core proficiencies for at least a few years to allow teachers and school leaders to master the new teaching challenges they face.

But retreat is not an option. Technology has upped the ante on needed skills while globalization means that American middle-class jobs, whether in California, Mississippi, Missouri or Vermont, will require workers with skill levels that match those of workers in other countries. As in the past, the prosperity of America is inextricably tied to the education of its citizens. The Common Core State Standards represent an early but vital step on the long path of ensuring that future generations of workers will be capable of maintaining America’s place in the world.

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