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Common Core Conversations in CT: Analyzing Public Testimonies

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ABSTRACT

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is an effort to minimize the learning gap between high- and low-achieving students in the United States by providing a set of standards all students must meet by the end of each grade level. Although 43 states have adopted the CCSS, there are varied opinions on whether this new reform will create positive change within America's school systems. This research examined the opinions of citizens in Connecticut by analyzing written testimonies from a public hearing that took place in Hartford on March 12, 2014. The results show that two main groups expressed support of the CCSS: statewide organizations and suburban administrators, who believed that the CCSS would create students that are globally competitive and better prepared for college and careers because the standards are challenging. On the other hand, suburban teachers and suburban parents were opponents of the CCSS because the standards were too rigorous and focused on test taking rather than critical thinking skills. The results of this research suggest that speakers may vary their support of the CCSS based on how they perceive the Core's effects within or outside the school.

Common Core Conversations in CT:

Analyzing Public Testimonies

INTRODUCTION

A hot-button topic in the world of education today, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is an effort to minimize the learning gap between high- and low-achieving students in the United States. The CCSS is a set of standards all students must meet by the time they complete each grade level. These standards include Math and Reading standards, starting with primary skills in Kindergarten and progressing all the way to college-level skills in the 12th grade. While the CCSS is an attempt to standardize curricula across the U.S., providing all students with an equal opportunity to succeed, it has created a significant amount of controversy. The implementation of the CCSS, for better or worse, creates changes in the learning environments of children. The people who speak for these children—educators, parents, and even policy makers—have a lot to say about the Common Core.

The History of the Common Core

Despite changes the CCSS makes to the current educational landscape, the idea of state standards is not new. In fact, most states developed their own standards during the 1990s and strove to develop curricula to meet these standards, although the efforts were met with mixed results. In an attempt to unify these state standards, state leaders developed the Common Core State Standards in 2009. After development, states began to review, adopt, and ratify the CCSS to replace the original state standards (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2014). There are currently 43 states that have adopted the CCSS, leaving all but seven states (Alaska, Indiana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia) working to implement the CCSS

within school districts (Academic Benchmarks, 2014). While all states are using the same standards, implementation looks different between states, districts, towns, and even schools.

CCSS in Connecticut

Connecticut is one state that has decided to implement the Common Core in its schools. Some school districts, like Hartford, have already incorporated the CCSS into its curriculum. Still other school districts, like Madison, have put up a fight. Even within districts, there is a disagreement between teachers, parents, and others whether the CCSS is beneficial to children in Connecticut. To make the conversation even more complicated, there are other initiatives to consider, such as the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) testing, which could test student understanding of the standards. The testing of these standards could also be tied to teacher evaluation.

Elizabeth A. Natale, a middle school teacher in West Hartford, CT, wrote an op-ed piece for the Hartford Courant that highlighted many teacher concerns for the CCSS, SBAC testing, and teacher evaluation. First, Natale believed that the CCSS was “stripping the joy out of teaching and doing nothing to help children” (Natale, 2014). Natale thought the CCSS to be insensitive to the needs of teachers and students, forcing teachers to change their ways of teaching to meet new standards. Next, Natale commented on the inappropriateness of SBAC testing and teacher evaluation:

The Smarter Balance program assumes my students are comfortable taking tests on a computer, even if they do not own one. My value as a teacher is now reduced to how successful I am in getting a student who has eaten no breakfast and is a pawn in her parents’ divorce to score well enough to meet my teacher evaluation goals. (Natale, 2014)

In her op-ed piece, Elizabeth Natale outlines some of the major concerns that teachers have in regards to the CCSS and other initiatives associated with the new education policy. Natale is worried that the CCSS, SBAC testing, and new teacher evaluation ignores previously established

teaching styles and methods and opts to treat every school as equal, even when some districts are faced with the challenges of educating impoverished students and others are not.

Although Natale, a teacher in West Hartford, speaks her distrust in the CCSS, the superintendent of the same district speaks positively of the new standards. In her own op-ed piece, West Hartford superintendent Karen L. List compliments the new policy. She writes, “I believe we must teach from rigorous standards, ones that will lead our students to be prepared for success in the future” (List, 2014). List even receives positive feedback from her teachers:

By the end of last year, parents and teachers were noticing the increased rigor in the work the children were doing. Teachers have said to me, “Teaching to the Common Core standards has made me a better teacher.” This is fantastic news. (List, 2014)

List believes the CCSS is rigorous, holding students to a higher standard, and therefore facilitating greater student achievement and better teaching. This is a much different story than Natale has told.

With a comparison of two op-ed pieces in West Hartford, it is evident that opinions on the CCSS and its implementation are highly varied. Differences in opinion are not just a West Hartford phenomenon, but occur at a statewide level. In the past spring, the state recorded many hours of public hearings at the state’s capital in which parents, teachers, and other members of the community discussed why they supported or rejected the CCSS. The speakers came from a variety of ethnic/cultural backgrounds, occupations, and school districts providing a range of positive and negative statements. It is clear that many entities stand divided when it comes to the Common Core, which lends one to wonder what causes a person to speak for or against the CCSS.

Research and Significance

This research addresses several factors. First, this research hopes to contribute to the conversation surrounding the Common Core by highlighting arguments made by the community in favor and against the new educational policy. Second, this research hopes to inform parents, teachers, and others on the changes that are occurring within the classroom, encouraging people within the community to continue their own investigation as they learn more about the Common Core.

This research attempts to discover *why* people are pro- or anti-Common Core by looking first at *who* is speaking and *what* they are saying. Specifically, the research will study the written testimonies of the speakers who participated in the March 12, 2014 Hartford Common Core public hearing, looking for trends in the data that would suggest general feelings of support or rejection from people within the same occupation and people from the same school district. The guiding research question is as follows: *What are public hearing participants saying about the Common Core and how do their responses reflect the community they represent and their role within this community?* My research intends to give an overview of the Common Core Controversy while noticing trends in the conversations that surround it.

After completing my research, I determined that some roles and districts favor the Common Core more than others. There are definite trends that can be seen between speaker role, speaker district, and speaker support for the CCSS. Depending on their role and district, speakers have different experiences with the changes caused by the CCSS. The results of this research suggest that speakers may vary their support of the CCSS based on how they perceive the Core's effects within or outside the school.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Past research covers a range of topics dealing with the Common Core. Many states employ a comparison study to show the differences (or lack thereof) between the CCSS and previously used standards. States often use this type of study to dispel the fear that the CCSS is something completely different from what teachers and students are used to. Another type of study determines whether the CCSS represents an improvement in student achievement, a concern for many parents and educators. Studies may also try to explore the underlying assumptions of the CCSS or explain the process of adopting the CCSS, both types of research attempting to inform the public. This research project, *Common Core Controversy in CT: Analyzing Public Hearings*, contributes to past research by studying how citizens in Connecticut perceive the changes caused by the CCSS. However, my research will also be unique in its focus on Connecticut schools and its use of hearings to decipher public opinion of the Common Core.

The CCSS and Equity

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) originated as an effort to improve equity in American schools. Researchers test this idea of equity, determining whether standards-based policy can really equalize education across urban, rural, and suburban school districts. Several researchers doubt that total equity is possible through standards-based policy. In her study, Alexander (2002) defines equity in terms of curriculum offerings. The research compares student enrollment in advanced classes before and after the implementation of the Regents Action Plan in New York. Her results conclude that the Regents Action Plan increased advanced course offerings in schools across the board, however these improvements occurred more in schools attended by white and affluent students. Thus, the standards-based policy improved course offerings, but it did not improve equity within the school system. In their research, Kornhaber et

al. (2014) also address equity in standards-based policy. After analyzing interviews with policy entrepreneurs, researchers determine that the majority of these entrepreneurs believe in the expansive view of equity. That is to say that the Common Core can only do so much to improve equity within a school and that certain outside-school factors, such as student home environment, prevent the CCSS from accomplishing complete equity.

I expect that many of the participants in my research, the speakers at Hartford's Common Core public hearings, will share their ideas on equity within the Common Core. My research will contribute to the research on equity by providing multiple perspectives on the topic. In my report, I intend to analyze these perspectives—views of equity from teachers, parents, community members, people of urban districts, people of suburban districts, and people of multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds—in order to discover trends in this thinking.

The CCSS and Change

For teachers, parents, and students, the CCSS is synonymous with change. It is this change, as well as its uncertain magnitude, that incites a certain level of fear and doubt within the community. To address this doubt, Porter et al. (2011) do a comparative study, looking at the CCSS as they align to previously established state standards. After looking at both reading and math standards for grades K-12, Porter et al. determined an average range of alignment index of .25. This means that, on average, only a quarter of the standards for a given grade level in a given state aligned with the CCSS, a low alignment with the previous standards. While Porter et al. describe CCSS-induced change in a quantitative manner, Gutierrez (2014) uses qualitative data to describe this change. Through four lenses of organizational theory, Gutierrez analyzes the impact of the CCSS on schools, explaining how the CCSS may influence certain organizational systems of learning. From a structural standpoint, the CCSS offers specific guidelines on

learning goals, creating structure within the classroom. From a human resources view, teachers, students, and parents play an important role in the implementation of the CCSS. The CCSS also emphasizes that these groups must work together in order to achieve the learning goals. Looking at the policy from a political perspective, which the author writes is the most dominant view, the implementation of the CCSS has created conflict, demonstrated power play dynamics, and organized political groups to either support or reject it. And finally, from a symbolic standpoint, the CCSS has become a symbol for many different groups in order for these groups to “create individual and shared meaning and understanding about the reform” (Gutierrez, 2014).

While both Porter et al. and Gutierrez research the CCSS and the change it creates, neither researchers suggest that this change is completely a good or bad thing. My research will also contribute to this conversation by collecting public opinions and observations on the change caused by the Common Core. I expect that some observed changes will be positive, while others will be negative, but it will be interesting to see which groups of participants report more negative or positive changes.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative data used in this research are written testimonies collected by the state of Connecticut’s Education Committee as part of a public hearing that took place on March 12, 2014. Unsure of the feasibility of the statewide rollout of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), House Republicans called the public hearing to discuss bill H.B. No. 5078, an act imposing a moratorium on the implementation of the common core state standards. Speakers who submitted written testimonies either spoke *in favor* of the bill, meaning they wanted to delay CCSS implementation, or *against* the bill, wanting to launch CCSS implementation immediately.

As a result of being for or against the bill, speakers also provided feedback on whether or not they supported the CCSS altogether. Thus, I labeled testimonies as being either in favor of the CCSS (often against the bill), against the CCSS (often in favor of the bill), or I isolated arguments that wanted to slow down the implementation of the CCSS but where not against the idea of using the standards within the classroom. The phrases I used to label these arguments were “In Favor,” “Against,” and “Slow,” respectively.

The public hearing for bill H.B. No. 5078, which took place at the state capitol building in Hartford, collected both oral testimonies on site and written testimonies before the event took place. While two types of testimony were submitted, I looked at the written testimonies for the purposes of this research, which made it easier for me to isolate speaker arguments and compare the arguments between other speakers. The Education Committee made all written testimonies available online, over 300 in total, which I then downloaded and coded for speaker background information and arguments.

The testimonies contained the identities of all participants along with their reasons why they supported or rejected the CCSS. Most participants provided more than one reason why she or he supported or rejected the Common Core State Standards based on her or his own personal experience with the standards. Participants in the data sample were diverse, having various roles and representing various districts within Connecticut. I labeled the roles as being “Teacher,” “Parent,” “Organization” (including teacher organizations), “Administrator,” “Other” (occupations that do not fall in the aforementioned categories) and “Unknown” (for speakers who do not identify their role). The “Other” category, the smallest of the six categories, contained testimonies from 1 student, 1 lawyer, 1 pastor, and 6 politicians. I labeled the districts as being “Urban,” “Suburban,” “Rural,” “Statewide” (for most organizations) or “Unknown”

based on the city or district that the speaker represents in the testimony. I determined district status based on the state's record of urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods.

In addition to speaker information, I also coded for individual arguments made by the speakers within the written testimony. I determined a list of codes by reading the first 50 testimonies and extracting commonly used phrases or themes, using a combination of In Vivo and Descriptive coding. I established a list of codes for arguments "In Favor" and "Against" the CCSS, which I outline in Figure 1 below. After finalizing the list of codes, I read the rest of the testimonies in the sample (N = 279), recording this data along with the speaker's role, district, and stance on the CCSS. After recording all of this information, I looked for trends in the data. I wanted to know if speakers from a certain district or occupation favored the CCSS more than speakers in other groups did. I also wanted to know which codes appeared often in a certain demographic. Analyzing the data this way let me explore, not only who was for or against the CCSS, but also for what reasons they were in support or against the standards.

Figure 1*Codes Used in the Research*

Arguments In Favor of the CCSS	Arguments Against the CCSS
New Curriculum	Rigor
Framework	Makes Teaching Difficult
Rigor	Too Narrow for Subject
College/Career Preparation	Not Appropriate for ELL
Global Competitiveness	Achievement Gap
Critical Thinking	Unequal Needs
Close Achievement Gap	Lack of Funding
	Constitution
	Too Easy
	Teachers Not Prepared
	Special Education
	Lack of Creativity

I began this research with a certain bias as the researcher. For one, I was most familiar with the issues faced by urban school districts and was therefore more sympathetic to their cause. I also came with my own biases for or against the Common Core State Standards, which may have affected the codes I used to analyze the data. I addressed these shortcomings to make my method as strong and unbiased as possible. In order to avoid a bias towards a certain school district, I first did a “blind reading” of the testimony, covering the speaker’s demographic information and noting the codes present before revealing what district the speaker is from. This method also helped me to create an unbiased analysis of the data. To lessen the effect of my bias towards the Common Core, I drew my codes from a number of resources, such as newspaper articles and op-ed pieces. I not only relied on the codes I saw present in the data, but also created codes based on past research and analysis of the standards. My research benefitted from having an unbiased approach, since it allowed me to gain as much information from the data as possible.

FINDINGS

The object of this research is to describe the conversation surrounding the Common Core State Standards in Connecticut. By recognizing who was talking about the Common Core and highlighting their key arguments, I paint a picture of how the Connecticut public views the state standards and what perceived changes have occurred as a result of the implementation of the Common Core. First, I look at *who* testified based on the speaker's role within the community and the district. Then, I look at *what* the speakers say about the CCSS based on their specific arguments "In Favor" or "Against" the educational policy.

Who testified?

Of the 279 speakers who submitted written testimonies, 35.48% were teachers, 32.26% were parents, 10.34% represented organizations, 9.32% were administrators, 3.36% fell into the "Other" category, and 18.28% did not state their role within the community. Within the sample, 19.71% of speakers represented or lived in urban areas, 44.09% lived in suburban areas, 11.47% were from rural areas, and 12.19% represented the entire state. Table 1 shows the breakdown of teachers, parents, administrators, organization representatives, others, and unknown based on their district of residence. As the table shows, the majority of people who submitted testimony were teachers and parents. Also, the majority of speakers came from suburban areas. The majority of teachers, parents, and administrators represented suburban areas, while the majority of organization representatives came from statewide organizations. This speaker background information describes the sampling of people who submitted written testimonies. These represent the "who" in my research question.

Table 1*Speaker Role Compared to District of Residence*

<u>Speaker Role</u>	<u>Urban</u>	<u>Suburban</u>	<u>Rural</u>	<u>Statewide</u>	<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Total</u>
Teacher	29	46	5	0	17	99
Parent	8	45	16	1	20	90
Organization	5	0	0	24	0	29
Administration	7	16	3	0	2	26
Other	1	1	0	6	1	9
Unknown	3	17	8	3	20	51
Total	55	123	32	34	60	304

*Note: Speakers who identified with more than one role (such as both teacher and parent) are counted multiple times in the data. Therefore, the grand total appears as larger than the sample size (N = 279).

The information I collected on speakers in the sample comes with its own set of implications. These numbers raise a set of questions, such as questions about the accessibility of the hearing to the public and whether the sample is representative of the entire population of Connecticut. I can hypothesize that more teachers and parents submitted written testimony over oral testimony due to their busy schedules and inability to attend Hartford in person. I can also hypothesize that more suburban parents had information about the hearing over urban parents, therefore participating in bigger numbers. However, I cannot assure that the sample is representative of the population without further research. My research is limited to the speakers who decided to submit written testimony.

What did they say?

After collecting background information on the speakers, I then compared this information to the speakers' stance on the CCSS. Tables 2 and 3 show a breakdown of "In Favor" or "Against" arguments based on the role and district of the speaker. According to Table 2, organization representatives were most in favor of the CCSS. People from urban areas and speakers representing the state also wrote the most testimonies in favor of the Common Core. When comparing both factors, suburban administrators and statewide organizations were the two

biggest groups that supported the Common Core. The two largest groups are marked in the table below.

Table 2

Stance “In Favor” of the CCSS Based on Role and District of Residence

<u>Speaker Role</u>	<u>Urban</u>	<u>Suburban</u>	<u>Rural</u>	<u>Statewide</u>	<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Total</u>
Teacher	9	5	0	0	0	17
Parent	3	2	0	1	0	6
Organization	3	0	0	17	0	20
Administration	5	12	2	0	1	17
Other	1	0	0	5	0	6
Unknown	2	1	0	0	2	5
Total	23	20	2	23	3	71

*Note: Speakers who identified with more than one role (such as both teacher and parent) are counted multiple times in the data.

According to Table 3, the biggest groups against the CCSS were parents, although teachers were a close second. In addition, speakers from suburban areas constitute a large majority of those against the CCSS. When comparing both role and district, the two biggest groups opposing the CCSS were suburban parents and suburban teachers.

Table 3

Stance “Against” the CCSS Based on Role and District of Residence

<u>Speaker Role</u>	<u>Urban</u>	<u>Suburban</u>	<u>Rural</u>	<u>Statewide</u>	<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Total</u>
Teacher	17	36	5	0	12	70
Parent	5	39	16	0	19	79
Organization	2	0	0	3	0	5
Administration	1	4	1	0	1	7
Other	0	1	0	0	1	2
Unknown	1	12	7	2	17	39
Total	26	92	29	5	50	202

*Note: Speakers who identified with more than one role (such as both teacher and parent) are counted multiple times in the data.

After determining the main groups supporting and opposing the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, I determined each group’s prominent arguments. Using the information from the argument codes previously gathered, I compared specific arguments from

each of the four main groups. Table 4 shows a breakdown of the arguments made by the two prominent groups in favor of the CCSS, suburban administrators and people who represent statewide organizations. Both statewide organizations and suburban administrators were in favor of the CCSS because the standards provide students with college and career preparation. Many of their testimonies suggest that the standards can help students become successful after they graduate high school. Both groups also were in favor of the CCSS because they believed the CCSS to be a positive challenge to students. These testimonies used words like “rigor,” “challenge,” and “higher standard,” to describe standards that pushed students to excel. Another prominent argument made by statewide organizations was that the standards create students who can compete in a global economy. These testimonies stress the importance of creating citizens who can compete at an international level with other students around the world. These testimonies also used phrases like “global economy” or “global society.”

Table 4
Arguments “In Favor” of the CCSS

<u>Area/Role of Speaker</u>	<u>College/ Career Preparat- ion</u>	<u>Critical Thinking</u>	<u>Frame- work</u>	<u>Close Achieve- ment Gap</u>	<u>Global Competit- iveness</u>	<u>Rigor</u>
Statewide Organizations	13	4	2	3	8	8
Suburban Administrators	7	3	2	1	2	7

*Note: Numbers on table indicate the number of testimonies that made a specific argument in each group.

Table 5 shows a breakdown of the arguments made by the two prominent groups against the CCSS, suburban teachers and suburban parents. Both groups share the top three arguments opposing the Common Core. First, suburban teachers and parents are against the CCSS because they believe the standards are too rigorous. Teachers and parents worry that the standards create

a disruption to student learning because the standards are too challenging and cause students to lose confidence in their academic abilities. Second, suburban teachers and parents are also concerned that the standards are lacking creativity and teach students test-taking instead of critical thinking. These testimonies admonished an emphasis on “rote memorization” or “test taking” while claiming that the standards lacked “critical” or “creative” thinking. And finally, both groups claim that the CCSS is inappropriate because different neighborhoods, different schools, and different students have different needs. These speakers do not believe that schooling should take a “one-size-fits-all” approach, and instead should attend to individual neighborhood, school, and children’s needs.

Table 5*Arguments “Against” the CCSS*

<u>Area/ Role of Speaker</u>	<u>Unequal Needs</u>	<u>Lack of Funding</u>	<u>Too Easy</u>	<u>Too Rigorous</u>	<u>Makes Teaching Difficult</u>	<u>Lack of Creativ- ity</u>	<u>Teachers Not Prepared</u>
Suburban Parents	11	3	4	19	4	11	2
Suburban Teachers	9	5	1	15	7	10	7

*Note: Numbers on table indicate the number of testimonies that made a specific argument in each group.

CONCLUSION

After recording speaker information and arguments for or against the Common Core, I discovered *who* was speaking about the CCSS, based on role and district, and whether these groups were largely in favor or against the Common Core. Next, I isolated the two groups most in favor, and two groups most against, in order to uncover each group’s specific arguments, determining *what* public hearing participants are saying about the CCSS. After finding the *who*

and the *what*, I can then form conclusions as to why a certain group is in favor or against the CCSS.

The two biggest groups in favor of the CCSS were statewide organizations and suburban administrators. Both groups have main arguments in favor of the CCSS because they believe that the standards are rigorous, providing a positive challenge to students, and because they think the standards will prepare students for college or careers after high school. Statewide organizations also believe that the standards will make students competitive in a global society. It is interesting to note that both groups in favor of the Common Core seem to focus on outside school factors, such as job preparation and global economy, which can be positively affected by the implementation of the CCSS.

I also discovered that the two biggest groups against the CCSS were suburban parents and suburban teachers. The three main arguments made by both groups are that the standards are too rigorous, the standards promote test taking over critical or creative thinking, and that the standards are inappropriate because neighborhoods have different needs. Unlike the two groups in favor of the CCSS, suburban parents and suburban teachers focus on within school factors, like rigor in the classroom and lack of creativity in the curriculum, which can be negatively impacted by the implementation of the Common Core.

A focus on outside school or within school factors seems to vary the arguments made by those groups in favor of the CCSS and those against. I conclude that a focus on outside school or within school factors is the reason *why* speakers are for or against the Common Core. The data shows an important trend in written testimonies in favor or against the Common Core State Standards. The groups most in favor of the CCSS support the standards for reasons that are removed from the classroom. College, career, and a global economy are all things that exist

outside the K-12 school walls. Perhaps these groups are in favor of the CCSS because they see that it can make positive changes outside of the classroom. However, those against the Common Core worry about the damage the standards cause *within* the classroom. Most of all, they are worried about the well-being of their students. A focus on within school or outside school outcomes may explain why certain groups are in favor or against the Common Core. Future research would be required to find the relationship between the arguments presented by the speakers and what they perceive to be the overall goal or outcome for education.

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