Executive Summary

Introduced in 2010, the Common Core initiative proposed a set of student learning standards and an assessment system for all states. The purpose was to promote a more ambitious and less fragmented American curriculum, one that might advance educational equity. At first, the initiative gained widespread support and adoption. Today, however, it is in political trouble nearly everywhere:

- In New York, it suffered from too speedy an implementation and from fatigue with standardized testing among parents, teachers, and students. In some other states, it became a poster child for federal overreach.

- The testing consortia that were meant to supply the common assessments have been especially hard hit, with many states—including New York—abandoning them.

- As for a common curriculum, if the U.S. ever gets one, it will come from some other source.

- The student learning standards, however, seem likely to persist in many places, including New York—though less conspicuously than before, as if underground.

This paper examines the history of the Common Core Initiative, with a focus on New York, where Common Core fandom and public pushback, but also resilience have played outsized roles. Indeed, the New York Common Core story affords a good opportunity to examine a phenomenon not uncommon in US policymaking generally—whereby innovation under political pressure moves underground. Oblivion as we use the word in the title of this paper need not involve complete abandonment. It can mean, instead, a state of being still present, but overlooked. Of course, this may evoke faint hope among Common Core advocates who expected much more.
Origins in Context

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were officially released to the public on June 2, 2010, at Peachtree Ridge High School in Suwanee, Ga. The location was chosen to symbolize distance from Washington, DC. So were the first presenters of the standards: two sitting governors (a Republican and a Democrat), and two chief state school officers—all from different regions of the country. As former North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt tells the story of this unveiling—he a major figure behind the scenes—the CCSS originated in a commitment among a significant number of governors and state school heads to the following goals: 1) to promote educational equity in the face of a well-documented achievement gap by race and income; 2) to promote American competitiveness in a globalizing economy; and 3) to preserve state control of American education while advancing a more integrated and less fragmented American curriculum.1

These goals situate the CCSS initiative within an era of U.S. educational policymaking that covers more than 30 years, but may be reaching a transformative turn. The era has been distinguished by features once rare but now commonplace: student learning standards; frequent standardized testing and test prep; disaggregated data reporting based on equity targets; and a national perspective. Today, the second and fourth of these features are under severe political challenge in a number of states and communities, and this threatens the whole package.

Four events mark the era historically. The first is the publication in 1983 of the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, A Nation at Risk. It asserted with bellicose imagery the idea that schooling can save the economy. Its second paragraph begins: “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.” Focusing on the high school as a serious source of economic threat, the report called for more required courses, more homework, better teacher education, more testing, and explicit standards for student achievement. It also declared that excellence need not displace equity.2 The report’s recommendations and arguments seem pedestrian now, but this is a function of their decades of influence. In fact, the report broke ground—particularly by linking education to what we now call globalization. Governor Hunt’s CCSS goal number 2 (about standards and economic competitiveness) derives from this linkage, and indeed, the very focus of the initiative on standards—or articulations of what students should know and be able to do—is rooted in A Nation at Risk.

The second key event is the effort by President George H. W. Bush and Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas (and later President Bill Clinton) to gain agreement on a set of national academic standards and assessments. In the Bush years, the effort was called America 2000, and in the Clinton years Goals 2000. By either name it was the centerpiece of educational policymaking in both administrations, and it provided the foundation for the 1980s and 1990s “standards movement.” This involved a powerful coalition of politicians such as Governors Richard Riley of South Carolina (later Clinton’s Secretary of Education), Roy Romer of Colorado, and Lamar Alexander of Tennessee; academics such as Marshall Smith of Stanford and Lauren Resnick of the University of Pittsburgh; and policy activists such as Bob Schwartz, Marc Tucker, and Checker Finn. The coalition also included—an important detail for our story—the head of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker.

The standards movement was successful in establishing standards-oriented policymaking in every state—including statewide and grade-by-grade definitions of proficiency. It was not successful, however, in its effort to create coherence across these standards, or in its effort to introduce a set of what Goals 2000 called voluntary American Achievement Tests. These ideas engendered opposition on both the left and the right.3 In the end, many champions of the standards movement—including Governor James Hunt—were disappointed. His CCSS goal number 3 (that the Common Core standards should somehow reconcile national interest and local control) derives from his sense of this earlier effort’s failure, and from his own and many others’ inclinations to try again. Their enduring belief in the political feasibility of this goal is telling. Throughout the policymaking stretch we are describing, national perspectives have dominated, and local perspectives have struggled for influence.

The third key historical event, on January 8, 2002, illustrates another feature of the era—its emphasis on accountability for equity. On that day, President
George W. Bush signed a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), a law deeply associated with the Civil Rights Movement. Called No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the reauthorization intensified what had by then become a popular theory of action in American school reform: the pursuit of equity through the use of standards, standardized testing, and sanctions. In the early rulemaking for ESEA, Senator Robert Kennedy of New York had insisted that standardized testing play a role in ensuring that poverty-impacted children benefit from the billions of federal dollars about to flow to states and local districts—many of these states and districts then grossly inequitable in their educational expenditures. NCLB added these teeth:

- The test data reported to Washington would have to be disaggregated in terms of traditionally at-risk sub-groups of students (Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency).
- The states would have to set explicit equity targets for these groups, and ratchet up the targets each year until all students were proficient by the end of the 2013–14 school year.

Over the next decade, by these means, NCLB slowly raised the achievement and equity stakes for all states, districts, and schools. The problem, as demonstrated in thousands of studies, was that the raised stakes produced few real gains with respect to the targets. Reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) did rise slightly between 2003 and 2015, but also dipped from 2013 to 2015. And while all racial groups shared in this rise and dip, the disparities among them remained substantial. For example, 40 points separated Asian students from Black students on the NAEP combined proficiency rates in 2015—up from 31 points in 2003. Similarly, the achievement gap by poverty grew from 14.2 points in 2003 to 20.9 in 2015.

By 2007, when ESEA was due for another reauthorization, it was clear that nearly every school in the country would soon be under some form of sanction. Yet a gridlocked Congress could not agree on an ESEA revision strategy. Meanwhile, building on nearly a quarter century of standards-oriented policymaking, teaching, and thinking, a new generation of standards enthusiasts persuaded themselves and others that the problem in improving American schooling was not just NCLB, but the fact that it was based on disparate state standards. They wanted to try again to develop national standards that did not seem like federal standards. This would lead in time to the fourth historical event punctuating the policymaking era—namely, the unveiling of the Common Core State Standards in Georgia in 2010.
Where is Common Core Headed?

Several Fathers and a Mother

After leaving office in 2001, North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt—who remained highly respected among his peers—organized the James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Education Leadership and Policy. In June 2006, he invited a small group of education leaders to a meeting at the Institute to discuss resurrecting the idea of non-federal national standards. The discussion led to an effort over several years involving governors of 48 states (all but Alaska and Texas), and many others who might best be described as “inside-the-beltway” leaders—that is, people with substantial federal government involvement. These included leaders of the equity-focused Education Trust, the reform-minded Achieve, and the lobbying-oriented National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers. The latter two groups eventually assumed joint formal ownership of the emerging Common Core State Standards. But another group exercised a major leadership role too, namely the New York-based Student Achievement Partners, founded by David Coleman and Jason Zimba.7

In tracing the development of the Common Core Standards, it is important to bear in mind both the North Carolinian “progressive” Hunt and also the New Yorker “new reformer” twins Coleman and Zimba.* Both contributed a key constituency to the development task—a task that the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers appointed Coleman to direct. Now president of the College Board, Coleman exercised enormous influence on the standards’ design, insisting in particular on close textual reading as a distinguishing feature of the English language arts (ELA) standards, while Zimba became lead writer on the math side. The partners devised a politically astute design process—in terms of some interest groups—but one that was also tightly controlled. As Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute points out, it produced a set of standards that are not grounded—as many think they are—in international benchmarking, or empirical evidence that students who succeed in mastering them will be more “college and career ready.” Instead, they are the product of circumscribed inquiries among a small group of people with strong ideas, albeit some of them experienced K-12 educators.

Coleman played an outsized role too in the re-sourcing of the initiative. Johann Neem describes a 2008 trip to Seattle by Coleman and Gene Wilhoit, executive director of the school chiefs, to meet with Bill Gates and gain some $200 million for the effort from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. As Neem tells the story, the Gates investment caught the at-

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VOICES OF NEW YORK CITY SCHOOL LEADERS AND TEACHERS FROM A CONVERSATION ABOUT THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY ON MAY 9, 2016

* The term “new reformer” is sometimes used to distinguish a generation of school reformers active in charter schooling and the development of other innovative educational structures, cultures, and technologies. From the perspective of the policymaking era we explore here, however, these “new reformers” are as dedicated as many of their “progressive” predecessors to standards, standardized testing, and accountability in pursuit of equity.
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Attention of President Barack Obama, then running for President, and about to become himself a Common Core father, along with his Education Secretary, former CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, Arne Duncan.9

When Obama became President in January 2009, he had to cope with a nearly unprecedented economic crisis, and he managed to secure from Congress an $800 billion stimulus package to address the crisis—$100 billion of it designated for education. Only eight days into his first term, as journalist Steven Brill tells the story in his 2011 book, the President and Secretary Duncan met with quintessential new reformer (and New Yorker) Jon Schnur in the Oval Office, where Schnur presented a plan for using what would turn out to be $4.3 billion of the stimulus.10 The plan involved a school reform contest among the states called Race to the Top. In order to apply for a share of these funds—greatly in demand given the recession—states had to assure the federal government that they would develop better data systems, maintain or develop a viable system for turning around low-performing schools, improve teacher and school quality (in part by tying teacher evaluation to student achievement data), and adopt “college- and career-ready standards.” Although Race to the Top did not specify that these standards be the Common Core Standards, there was no ready alternative. Indeed, many states raced (in order to gain 40 more points for their proposals out of a 500-point possible total) to adopt the Common Core by an August 2, 2010, adoption deadline. This was merely two months after the standards were released. Thus at practically the very moment when the CCSS were being announced in a fashion arranged to symbolize distance from the federal government, the federal government was applying not-so-subtle pressure to adopt them.

Also in August 2010, the U. S. Department of Education awarded $330 million in stimulus funds to two consortia of states to develop assessments tied to college-and career-ready standards (again with no viable alternative to the Common Core Standards). The two consortia are the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). Within a year, 32 states had joined SBAC (including New York), and 25 other states plus the District of Columbia had joined PARCC. Some states joined both consortia. Only five states—Texas, Nebraska, and Virginia (all of which said no to Common Core), Alaska (which furtively adopted Common Core-like standards), and Minnesota (Common Core only on the ELA side) had spurned both consortia.

Then in 2011, Obama and Duncan did still one more thing to earn their status as Common Core fathers. After several years of continuing congressional gridlock that kept the unpopular NCLB still functioning, they offered states a waiver of certain NCLB requirements, especially the sanctions. In exchange, the waiver committed participating states to adopt college and career readiness standards (again code words for CCSS), to adopt an assessment system to measure these standards, and to factor students’ assessment results into teacher and principal evaluations. No wonder that by 2016, conservative critics across the country had begun to call the CCSS initiative “Obamacore.”11

Meanwhile, in New York, a Common Core mother was emerging. Merryl H. Tisch became Chancellor of the New York State Board of Regents in 2009, and turned an educational policymaking role that had been understated by previous chancellors into the state’s most powerful one. She left the post in 2016 after presiding over seven of the most transformative and tumultuous policymaking periods in recent state history. It involved the rollout of the Common Core Standards, the development of CCSS-aligned assessments, the hiking of cut scores on these assessments to make them “harder,” and the use of these scores in teacher and principal evaluations in accord with the state’s winning Race to the Top plans.

New York won praise among many policy advocates for moving quickly on this reform agenda, but the speed proved counterproductive. Louis Freedberg, comparing New York’s speediness with California’s comparative caution, points out that New York was only the second state to take the step of linking CCSS-aligned tests to teacher evaluations, and it did so before teachers had much chance to implement the instructional shifts implicit in the CCSS, and before they had fully grasped the materials available to support these shifts. In the end, the speediness contributed to a previously unimaginable phenomenon—the testing opt-out movement that in the spring
of 2016 enlisted one-fifth of the state’s families of third- through eighth-grade students (albeit with a significantly higher participation rate by affluent suburban families).12

In taking her leave, Tisch relished the disruption she had stirred up. “Some people say it was too much at once,” she told The New York Times. “Some people say it was implemented poorly. I say we disrupted stagnation. We disrupted complacency, and we tried to imbue the system with urgency.” She added: “We cannot back away from standards.”13

Common Core Today

The online policy journal, Education Next, began tracking support for and opposition to the Common Core State Standards in 2012. In that pinnacle year of support, 63 percent of the general public expressed support, and only 7 percent outright opposition. Teachers participating in the poll then were even more supportive (at 72 percent)—though, ominously, showed more outright opposition too (16 percent); and Democrats and Republicans then were virtually indistinguishable in their views. However, the next two years of EdNext polling found declining support, as well as inclining political divergence. And the latest EdNext poll (2015) puts public support for CCSS at only 49 percent, with 35 percent voicing outright opposition; and it puts teacher support at only 40 percent (with 50 percent opposed). Moreover, in this latest poll, Republicans and Democrats diverge dramatically in their views—with Republicans 50 percent in opposition, compared to Democrats at 25 percent.14

The latest (2015) PDK/Gallup Poll of attitudes on public schooling reports even higher CCSS opposition among public school parents (54% opposed overall)—though with significant racial differences. White parents were more likely than Black or Hispanic ones to express opposition. This is a finding that seems to track the history mentioned above of association between equity on the one hand, and standards and testing on the other; and it may also track the difference between suburban parent satisfaction with schooling and urban parent dissatisfaction. Usefully, the 2015 PDK/Gallup poll also asked parents how much they feel they know about CCSS, and how they learned what they know. Some 30 percent of parents reported knowing a great deal, and another 42 percent a fair amount. Their reported sources of knowledge especially include teachers or other educational professionals, and school communication (for example, a newsletter). Together these sources account for 46 percent of the variance in reported sources. Clearly, many parents rely on educators when it comes to judging educational policy. Thus rising opposition to CCSS among teachers has had a multiplying impact.15

What else may underlie the fast-rising opposition to and politicization of the Common Core State Standards? One factor, we think, is that the new reformers could do no better than the 1990s reformers in pulling off the trick of creating nonfederal national standards—even with a cross-generational team alert to past mistakes. In this case, the heavy-handed support of the Obama administration did not help. But even if the CCSS effort had never benefited from Race to the Top, the recovery funding of new assessment consortia, and NCLB waivers, it would likely have become on its own a Republican target in the 2016 election cycle, given the intensity of general political polarization. And funding by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation would hardly have escaped critical notice. Indeed, all the devices that the CCSS initiative used to portray itself as just a conversation among states seem in retrospect to have produced a very thin disguise.

That said, the changes suggested by the polling above seem to us to have much more to do with exhaustion with standardized testing among parents, students, and teachers, than they do with the Common Core Standards themselves, and in particular with concern about participation in the national testing consortia.16 This seems borne out by the still relatively stable set of state standards adopters, versus the dwindling set of state testing consortia adopters. As of July 2016, 38 states were still officially committed to the CCSS (albeit with some related legislation pending in some), whereas the current count on states still committed to the assessment consortia is down to 20 from the original 45, with only 15 states using the assessments K-12. PARCC is particularly hard hit, with only six states and the District of Columbia still involved.17 Meanwhile, with respect to the standards, the experience of the states that have formally
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withdrawn suggests that withdrawal may not be as dramatic as it sounds. Mike Cohen of Achieve, an old standards enthusiast, has suggested that the new Indiana standards look a lot like the Indiana Common Core Standards. And this is the case in South Carolina, too. Even in Oklahoma, where the legislature forbade the state school board from taking the CCSS into account in constructing new standards, what the board approved this year seems to us hardly the primitive throwback that some press reports have suggested. And one of the most recent states to withdraw—Louisiana—after adopting a very Common Core-like new set of standards, went on to create a set of free, online curriculum materials to help teachers meet the standards—one that seems closely modeled on the Common Core-inspired EngageNY website.

(More about EngageNY on page 8.)

Even the current dust-up in New York policymaking seems clearly more about testing than about the Common Core, again despite press reports. It derives from the enormous success of the opt-out movement in both the spring 2015 and spring 2016 testing seasons, and blowback from the teachers’ unions on Governor Andrew Cuomo’s call for ratcheting up the role of student test data in teacher evaluations from 20 percent to 50 percent. In September 2015, Cuomo dealt with the growing opposition in classical political fashion by convening a task force that he charged with making recommendations “to do a total reboot.” But reporting back three months later, the task force made very few suggestions for revision, and explicitly called for maintaining the CCSS “instructional shifts”—for example, the emphasis in English language arts classes on text discussions, and on building mathematical fluency. In fact, the task force aligns with the governor’s and his staff’s repeated criticism not of the standards themselves, but of their hasty and “mis-managed” rollout by the State Education Department under the leadership of former Chancellor Merryl Tisch, and former Commissioner (now U.S. Secretary of Education) John King.

Future of Common Core in New York

The Common Core operates in unique political circumstances from state to state. In New York—despite turbulence—the standards seem likely to endure the upcoming revision with only minimal changes—for example, a toning down of text complexity in the early grades, and more accommodation of the needs of English language learners. They seem insulated here from bigger changes by several factors. One is the Common Core fan base in the state. New York is, after all, the home of an influential Common Core mother and father—Merryl Tisch and David Coleman. It is the home as well of multiple aunts and uncles—for example, Hillary Clinton, who is strongly pro-CCSS; Andrew Cuomo, who likes charter schools (which like the CCSS); and Diane Ravitch, who gave a speech to the Modern Language Association (MLA) in 2014 that severely critiqued how the CCSS function today, but added that they would be useful if de-coupled from assessment and equipped with some kind of ongoing means of revision.

New York is also home to legions of new reformers such as Joel Klein, Jon Schnur, Eva Moskowitz, and John King—all CCSS supporters. And it is home to Michael Mulgrew, president of New York City’s United Federation of Teachers (UFT), and the successor twice removed to Albert Shanker, a standards enthusiast. Like Andrew Cuomo, Mulgrew has been a fierce critic of the rollout of the Common Core in New York, but in a debate with Chicago teachers at the 2014 convention of the American Federation
of Teachers, he showed himself an even fiercer opponent of efforts to disavow the standards. Caught on YouTube, he shouts, “These are the tools of teachers. The standards are ours . . . and we’re going to take them back.” The New York Daily News called his performance pugilistic, but it was hardly just that. It reflected his members’ views. Yes, members were at the time angry about the governor’s proposal to base 50 percent of their effectiveness job ratings on students’ test scores—particularly when the standards were relatively new and the tests brand new. But members nonetheless responded positively to a 2015 UFT survey of their views of the CCSS. And today, The UFT is deeply involved in the effort spurred by the governor’s task force to revise the standards—though in ways that keep them largely intact.

New York is also, of course, a media capital, full of companies large and small that hope to make a buck on the CCSS. In her MLA speech, Ravitch called them “a burgeoning educational-industrial complex of testing corporations, charter chains, and technology companies that view public education as an emerging market . . . [and that] hedge funds, entrepreneurs, and real estate investment corporations invest enthusiastically in.” All this is true. However, as it turns out, according to a recent Rand Corporation survey of teachers in 42 states, the third most widely used source of Common-Core curriculum materials (significantly ahead of McGraw-Hill, Houghton-Mifflin-Harcourt, and Pearson-Prentice Hall, and behind only “materials I develop myself” and “materials developed and/or selected by my district”) is EngageNY. This free online website developed by New York State, and created with funds from Race to the Top, offers a well-curated collection of Common Core-aligned materials—a great exception in quality, pitch, and packaging to typical state-managed curriculum collections. EngageNY is a reminder of how much New York remains associated with the Common Core—45 million downloads’ worth of association.

**Common Core Overall: More Dead or Alive?**

From the perspective of those who hoped that the Common Core standards might herald a transformation in American education—from fragmentation to consistency in aspiration, expectation, and achievement—the vital signs are fading. As one of us recently put it at a public panel on the Common Core State Standards at New York University, the whole point of the CCSS initiative was, after all, to form the common core of accountability across all states, and use it in a common pursuit of educational equity and of an American schooling system more attuned than the current one to the demands of the 21st-century economy. From this perspective, the fact that multiple states are in the process of doing what Oklahoma has done—repudiating the standards—or of doing what Indiana, Florida, Ohio, New Jersey, Louisiana, and other states have done (and now New York, too)—lowering the profile of the standards—seems a bad sign. Moreover, the politicization of the CCSS, the fact that the Republican National Committee has passed a resolution condemning them, and that more than half of the states originally committed to the testing consortia have now ditched them (including New York), seem mortal signs. And the goal of standards explicitly held in common across the United States, guiding a student’s learning (and the measurement of it) whether the student lives in California or Oklahoma, or has recently moved to New York from New Hampshire, or goes to a district, charter, or online school—seems imperiled too. Of course, in hindsight, one can ask whether such a goal was ever really achievable by means of the CCSS initiative. This brings us back to that word in the title of our paper, oblivion.

It is possible that the theory of action underlying the CCSS, and the long stretch of American educational policymaking we identified above, may have exhausted itself, and may seem suddenly to many Americans a bad fit for circumstances they perceive in their own families and schools. By theory of action, we mean the logic model underlying the policymaking. This logic model presumes a set of joints (or connections), beginning with an articulation of what students at different levels of schooling should know and be able to do, and ending with what A Nation at Risk called equity and excellence. In between, there are joints between standards and teaching materials, between teaching materials and teaching, between teaching and learning, between learning and testing, and between test data and re-learning as needed. For a long time, this pattern of joints has seemed to many—who perhaps should have known better—as a straight-forward action...
path rather than a useful heuristic to guide capacity-building. When policymaking grows really ambitious, David Cohen and Susan Moffit warn, it can outstrip the capacity of practitioners to implement it, and, we would add, the capacity of parents to comprehend and support it. At such moments, a theory of action can burst a joint, even several joints.

On the other hand, astute champions of long-term goals like educational equity and economic relevance in schooling know how to construct new theories of action to replace spent ones. Chris Argyris and Donald Schon have a name for this. They call it double-loop learning—or learning that causes one to re-think original premises. Double-loop learning begins in a confrontation with obstacles, and ends in imaginative re-routings—sometimes under the cover of oblivion.

This may perhaps be the way forward for CCSS energy, and it is the answer we give to the question that begins this paper’s title. Where are the Common Core Standards headed? To a state of being that calls less attention to itself politically, but continues to function as a heuristic for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers nationally.

We end the paper with three brief, illustrative examples of imaginative re-routing—under the cover of oblivion, under pressure from political pushback, in response to the realization that the Common Core State Standards Initiative in a number of places (especially New York) pushed too hard and too fast. What these re-routings have in common is what one of us has called connections—or deliberate efforts to build on, rather than avoid, the shards of broken policy effort; to emphasize continuity over discontinuity.

**Imaginative Re-routings of CCSS Energy**

**Testing by sampling.** As we suggest above, we think that the Common Core blow-back is—in at least some states (including New York)—more about testing than about standards. If we’re right, then pushing the standards underground as in New York, is hardly a sufficient response. Something also has to happen with testing. Imagine a post-traumatic testing environment that takes its cue from the only national testing system that has managed to take root in the United States—namely the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Rather than test all students, it samples them, though in large enough batches to report at statewide or large-district levels (depending on the willingness of the districts to participate). With more funding, it could report even more finely—while stopping far short of every single student. In the 1990s, California designed a portfolio-based assessment system that would—like NAEP—sample student achievement in districts and schools rather than test and report test data on every California student. But the system was never implemented for reasons that included a sense that parents expect to see data on how their children rank.

It seems possible now, however—following a quarter century of standardized testing and test prep that has left many students, teachers, and parents exhausted—that the United States might be ready for sampling. One hint of a shift in readiness for this comes from a recent insight by Ashley Jochim and Patrick McGuinn in their analysis of Common Core politics. They point out that the rise (and fall) of the CCSS testing consortia happened just as many Americans—for a range of reasons—began to feel the risk of privacy invasion. And as it happens, 64 percent of those responding to the 2014 *EducationNext* poll who had heard of the Common Core believed that it involved reporting detailed data on individual children’s academic performance to the federal government. Of course, this is not true. But it is true at the state level. And why? What if we turned to sampling instead? This would, of course, require adjustments to federal law, including of the new reauthorization of ESEA, called the Every Student Succeeds Act. Maybe the re-reauthorization could be called the Every Student Succeeds without Being Over-tested Act, or the Every Student Succeeds without Violations of Privacy Act. The advantage to the original CCSS goals would be enormous—data collection that did not disrupt learning en masse as before, and that actually produced (in the absence of teaching to the test) more valid findings.

**Re-construing goals and methods.** Imagine a renewed national commitment to state-level control of education, but one combined with cross-state opportunities for rich subject-focused conversations among educators, and the growth of new learner-centered teaching materials and methods. Indeed, the fact that the Common Core standards have stimulated the growth of such opportunities in many settings
accounts, we believe, for the persistence of CCSS attachment among many teachers. Such opportuni-
ties are at the heart of the Next Generation Science Standards too. Imagine such opportunities in other areas of intellectual growth as well—the arts, history, technology, and general career readiness. They are al-
ready budding there. For example, there is the energy that psychometrician Eva Baker aroused in her 2007 address as president of the American Educational Research Association. She said that conventional stan-
dardized testing cannot capture crucial intellectual skills that all students should master in high school—
like adaptive problem-solving, working alone with self-management, and playing changeable roles in real or virtual teams and groups. But such skills can be captured by other means, she insisted, and she out-
lined the system of digital badging that the MacArthur Foundation has invested in. Imagine associations of groups who continually work together in cross-state fashion to keep such standards and badging and other assessment technologies valid, and the materials re-
lated to them thoughtfully curated by and discussed among people actually using them. EngageNY seems a good model, as are the Innovation Lab Network and the Deeper Learning initiative.†

**Tinkering toward utopia.** This phrase is the title of a classic history of school reform by David Tyack and Larry Cuban. They rehabilitate a word—*tinkering*—that reformers (old and new) often disparage. Former New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein especially disdained the word, preferring a rhetoric of urgency. But Tyack and Cuban point out the futility of much urgent change, and contrast it with the well-distrib-
uted power of small and well-positioned alterations. As in natural selection, small alterations over time can produce massive change. In a similar vein, Jon Star points out the futility of large-scale theories of action for reforming teaching—for example, a reliance on new learning standards with aligned teacher evalu-
atations. He advocates instead a focus on incremental improvements, but ones that zero in on actual teaching practice—for example, teaching multiple strategies rather than singular ones for solving problems in math or writing. Imagine following the lead of these authors. Imagine embracing *tinkering*. Then, perhaps, when much of what has seemed to bother people most about the Common Core Standards (for exam-
ple, over-testing, reductive teacher evaluation, and federal intrusion) have abated, we may still retain the instructional shifts that the standards have inspired in many teachers’ practices.

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† On the Innovation Lab Network, see http://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2015/2/26/meet-the-funders-behind-the-innovation-lab-network.html. On the Deeper Learning initiative, see http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education/deeper-learning. Meanwhile, it looks like EngageNY, which had been funded largely by New York Race to the Top money, may soon disappear, except as a no-longer-curated site or cache. However, some designers of the site, with support of a group of foundations, have developed a new not-for-
profit website called UnboundED (https://www.unbounded.org/). The new site includes the EngageNY materials, as well as materials from Illustrative Mathematics (https://www.illustrativemathematics.org/), a Common-Core-aligned not-for-profit curated website begun in 2011. The UnboundED designers plan to incorporate other open-source materials over time, and to ensure ongoing curation of the collection by K-12 teachers.
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Endnotes


15. Richardson, J. et al. (2015). The 47th annual PDK/Gallup poll of the public’s attitudes toward the public schools. Special supplement to the Phi Delta Kappan, 97(1), September.


33. See http://www.nextgenscience.org/


