Chapter 4

Coupled to the Core:

Endorsing School Accountability and Failing Anyway

Dissertation Chapter

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Introduction

It was one of my last observations a faculty meeting one Monday night in November 2015. The tricks played on my circadian rhythm by the early onset of night that accompanies the Fall made the otherwise pedestrian faculty meeting feel all the more tiresome and dreary. The faculty meeting had mainly been about the schools’ new culture initiative and how the culture among the adults was going. But after a brief update about faculty’s upcoming visits to other schools, the meeting took a sharp turn – the schools’ test scores had come in.

The director introduced the topic: “So we want to share our initial results as a school. The results have [already] been shared with the Math and ELA teams. It’s mostly their data, but it’s not just theirs. The results are not where we want them to be. It’s not where the Math department wants them to be. They’re not where ELA wants them to be. But, we can agree that we think the results are honest. It’s where we think we are. It’s a higher bar. Math and ELA are out in front of the response.”

Kelly, the Director of Academics, shows the results from ELA and then from Math. They follow earlier patterns where the school underperforms in earlier grades, but in both Math and ELA perform above average in the latest grade tested (9th grade in this case). There is a green highlight for the scores where the school performs above the state’s average. This makes it easy to see the comparison. However, the student growth numbers have no point of comparison and so are difficult to interpret. They range from around 30 to 60.
Kelly then takes questions from the staff. She explains the new scale: the state’s traditional qualitative levels of passing, needs improvement, failing, and so on have been replaced with a 5 point scale in which 4s and 5s are satisfactory and 1s, 2s, and 3s are underperforming. One teacher asks how they’re calculating student growth (one of the scores shown on the PowerPoint) given there was no PARCC last year. Kim answers that they’re using a formula comparing prior scores on the state test to current PARCC scores to create a cross-test growth score.

Kelly concludes, “So there are next steps from here. There will be more data released this week. We know we need to respond as a school to this. These are all our results.”

The school’s scores were mediocre and met with widespread disappointment. Until PARCC, all of their students were passing the state’s test by the time they got to high school. Now, fewer than half of the school’s students received a passing grade. For most subjects, only twenty or thirty percent of students passed their test.

Organizational and educational scholars tell us that teachers and administrators should have rejected the test as inaccurate, particularly because, at the time, the state had already decided to scrap the PARCC following widespread critiques of the test. They should have also rejected the Common Core as a superficial policy with little practical relationship to the demands of their classroom. In fact, education has long been the poster child for decoupling (Deal & Celotti 1980; Coburn 2004; Weick 1976). Schools, administrators, and teachers are supposed to be intransigent to one another and the state.

Achievement College Prep didn’t decouple. They did not challenge the test or the standards. Instead, they thought the test was a reasonably accurate reflection of their students’ learning. Their students just were not able to pass the more rigorous PARCC exam. Their failure actually served to deepen their coupling. They doubled down. They would work even harder to teach their students according to the Common Core standards.

However, the school accountability regime is fatally flawed. It cannot lead to more effective schools in a reasonable time horizon. Achievement College Prep is the perfect example
of this flaw. The logic behind the accountability regime is to provide schools with a clear system for success, the standards in this case, while taking the ability to define success away from schools through standardized testing. This regulatory paradigm only works if there are reliable means for using the system to achieve the prescribed outcomes. As I find in my observations of Achievement College Prep, there is a gap here that no amount of coupling can fill. They can implement the standards and prepare students for the test, but there is no predictably effective way of teaching the standards. If we want an accountability regime that improves schools, we need to offer instructional methods proven to work for the standards given. In general, if we want to legislate effectiveness, we must first provide organizations the means to be effective.

Emergence of The School Accountability Regime
We live in the shadow of A Nation at Risk which, in 1983, told us schools were not adequately preparing students for the jobs of tomorrow, particularly in science, math, technology, and engineering. In response, state and federal governments tightened their oversight of schools by establishing standards for what students should know, requiring a core curricula of science, math, language, and history for graduation, implementing standardized testing, and punishing and rewarding teachers, students, and schools for test scores. These policies constitute what we today call school accountability and Common Core is its most recent instantiation.

School accountability is an example of a broader type of change in the way we see the role of government in a neoliberal society, called the New Public Management (NPM). NPM sees the role of government as maximize social impact while minimizing financial costs (Barzelay 1992; Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2005; James and Manning, 1996). Agencies should be more like corporations than bureaucracies. Part of this shift is privatization, shifting government services from government-run agencies to government-regulated
corporations. Accountability replaces administration with monitoring, evaluation, and ultimately capital mobility to ensure services are delivered effectively and efficiently. In the language of clarity and control, the government provides service providers with clarity in the form of rules and regulations but retains control over whether the provider has successfully met its goals.

Accountability can successfully lead to improved organizational performance in two ways. Either government is able to move capital to more effective schools or schools make themselves more effective by following the regulatory framework. School accountability has largely been set up with the latter in mind. States created standards which define the things students should know. Schools that taught students those standards would have students who pass the standardized test. It is this version of accountability that I address in this study. The market-based has been addressed elsewhere (Arsen & Ni, 2011; Lubienski, 2003; Zimmer & Buddin, 2009).

How standards should connect to test scores has evolved over time (see Hamilton, Stetcher, and Yuan 2009 for an overview). States have been experimenting with standardized testing since the 1960s but policy-makers and educators only seriously discussed regulating standardized curricula beginning in the late 1980s (O’Day & Smith 1993). The leaders of the Standards-based Reform movement of the 1990s saw connecting standards to tests as part of a larger reengineering of the educational landscape that would align teacher training, classroom instruction, pedagogy, student assessment, educational evaluation, and accountability (Smith, O’Day, & Fuhman 1992).

Reformers realized the difficulty of such a project early on (Cohen 1990). Standards would not change teaching overnight. The connection between a standard and whether and how best to assess a students’ mastery of it was unclear. Moreover, states could legislate standards,
but getting teacher training programs to prepare students to teach the standards and rewarding schools based on test scores were all controversial.

Initial accountability systems themselves were inconsistent (Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin 2004; Diamond 2007). Some states had their own standardized tests while others used tests from other states. The standards and curricula teachers were supposed to implement were sometimes defined by states and sometimes by local districts. There were often inconsistencies between curriculum, standards, and test. Moreover, standards and curricula prescribed content but not instruction or pedagogy. Teachers had to teach the Civil War and calculating the area of shapes, but they could teach them however they wanted.

With this internal inconsistency early on, it should come as no surprise that, when he looked at how accountability was affecting one elementary school in 1999, Tim Hallett found a battle brewing between a new principal seeking to implement the district’s standards and teachers defending their long-standing autonomy over the classroom (Hallett 2010). While the district already had standards in place, teachers had been left to follow them as they saw fit. The new principal changed this by observing classrooms herself, implementing universal grade reporting, and standardizing lesson plan reporting. All of this change was too abrupt for teachers who revolted, sending a one-hundred-page complaint against the principal to the district’s central office.

Successive waves of policy-making have largely tightened the connection between the various aspects of accountability and increased the punishment for schools that failed to perform. Rather than just send failing students to summer school and putting schools on probation; students would be allowed to move to better schools and, eventually, failing schools would be shuttered altogether. Common Core was formulated with explicit though not mandated
pedagogical preferences for active learning, abstract understanding, and skill acquisition rather than proceduralization.

The accountability system has become increasingly rationalized since it was conceived in the late 1980s. It is easier for teachers and schools today to understand what is being asked of them and the stakes for success. That is to say, it is easier for schools to become coupled to the accountability regime (Meyer & Rowan, 2006).

**Two Dimensions of Coupling**

Among education and organizational scholars, schools are famous for their impermeability to regulation and the latest trends in educational policy (Payne, 2008.). They have been the canonical case of a “loosely-coupled” organization (Wieck, 1976) - ones in which what happens in one part of the organization has little influence over other parts of the organization. School accountability thus represents a historically significant shift in the way schools operate.

Coupling occurs along two dimensions: practical and ideological (see Figure 1). Most studies of regulation focus on the practical dimension: the extent to which an organization behaves in a way consistent with the regulation. Do they actually follow the regulations? The second dimension, ideological coupling, refers to the extent to which members of an organization adopt the worldview underlying the regulation. When there is weak ideological coupling, few people understand or believe in the regulation.
Ideological and practical coupling are independent dimensions. Organizations can adopt the worldview of a regime without its practices. In their seminal article, Meyer & Rowan (1977) argue that organizations are only coupled to policy symbolically. Leaders adopt new structures or programs as a show of good faith to regulators, collaborators, and customers. But these are only myths about how the organization operates. The daily work of employees flows from the technical requirements of the job. There is strong ideological coupling by organizational elites, but everyone else goes about their business. In the extreme case, you can have what Jal Mehta calls “paradigmatic” coupling in which organizational members adopt a worldview without any specific practices having yet been defined (Mehta, 2013).
Organizations can also adopt the practices of a regime without also adopting its worldview (Snellman, 2012). In an extreme case, carrying out the practices leads to a regime. For example, Kelly & Dobbin (1998) find that affirmative action compliance offices, created in American corporations during the 1970s, galvanized the creation of diversity management in the 1980s after federal enforcement of workplace discrimination waned. In the absence of a worldview legitimizing their role, these offices continued their work until they could put one together.

These cases of decoupling appear to be rare (Bromley, Hwang, & Powell, 2012; Coburn, 2004). More often than not, coupling is selective, partially occurring on both dimensions (Pache & Santos 2013). Bromley & Powell (2012) argue that “audit culture” has forced organizations today to respond to pressures from many constituencies, leading them to pick and choose different programs, practices, and structures to couple to. Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui (2005) show how early policy commitments were used as leverage by social movements to gradually develop countries’ human rights compliance regimes. Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert (2012) detail the coevolution of practical and ideological coupling among companies adopting corporate responsibility.

These studies demonstrate that coupling is a process in two senses. One, it unfolds over time. At one moment in time, an organization may be loosely coupled or symbolically coupled. However internal and external forces are regularly pushing or resisting policies, practices, and ideas. Organizations change their coupling over time. Moreover, coupling is a process in the sense that it is the result of concerted social action. People work to convince one another of ideas, formulate practices, and hold one another accountable. It is an achievement. Over the past
thirty years, school accountability advocates have achieved much by creating a regime that can
could be coupled to.

The ideal case for accountability advocates is what I call deep coupling – when
organizations adopt both the worldview and practices of a regulation. Deep coupling is symbolic
of an organization’s willingness to go along with policy, but it is also perpetuates itself. Research
shows that when organizations have groups of people who believe in a policy and practice it, the
organization as a whole becomes more aligned to that policy in practice and in worldview
(Lounsbery 2001; Dobbin 2011). Deep coupling often occurs among early adopters who adopt a
policy to accomplish their a pre-existing goal (Westphal & Zajac 1994; Westphal, Gulati, &
Shortell, 1997; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983). For those who adopt a policy later, deep coupling is
driven by embeddedness in expert networks who can provide technical support for adopting the
practices and can explain the worldview (Kostova & Roth, 2002; Simmons, Dobbin, & Garret,
2006; Weber, Davis, & Lounsbery, 2009).

The fragmentation and ambiguity in what school accountability involved early on
undermined the potential for deep coupling. The evolution of standard tactics, processes, and
expectations has only recently made deep coupling possible. Common Core represents a
capstone in this sense – a shared worldview and set of practices to organize the work of
educators across the United States.

The Common Core Worldview
In his book, Street Level Bureaucracy, Michael Lipsky argued that government programs
work by shaping the ways in which the workers who carry out these programs, whom he called
“street-level bureaucrats,” understand and implement the programs they oversee. Public agencies
and officials have significant latitude in defining the ways in which social programs are carried
out, laws enforced, and benefits doled out. Government leaders, administration officials, politicians, and policy activists project a worldview with sets of beliefs, values, and norms about how these programs should work and provide cohesion to street-level bureaucrats’ discretion. These worldviews, in tandem with the daily life of the program and organizational policies constitute institutions these street-level bureaucrats inhabit (Hallet & Ventresca, 2006).

In education, several worldviews have come in and out of vogue in the past several decades. The most recently studied is the argument put forward by Jonathan Simon regarding school discipline. Simon (2008) argues that governmental policy has begun addressing social problems through the lens of crime. The central problem for schools is student safety and misbehavior and the way to address it is with crime-fighting - zero tolerance discipline, increased surveillance, and policing (Skiba, 2000; Kupchik, 2008; Hirshfield, 2008). This shift in worldview, which Simon calls “governing through crime,” led to a variety of new practices and policies carried out by teachers, principals, and police that had real impacts on the lives of students (Skiba, 2000; Rios, 2011; Nolan, 2011; Perry & Morris, 2014).

Common Core represented a return to a worldview in education focused on learning. The problem to be solved was an accountability system that didn’t prepare students for college and careers. Standards did not promote the right kind of learning and the tests were too lenient and undiagnostic of students’ actual learning.

Common Core was meant to be a sea change in the curriculum. First, it replaced the specifically American commitment to a wide but shallow curriculum with one that is narrow, but deep common to high-performing European and Asian countries. Students would repeatedly engage a smaller number of topics throughout their education. This repetition would lead to conceptual understanding rather than proceduralization and rote memorization. In English
Language Arts, students would learn to read a variety of texts and pull out relevant information from the text itself rather than relying on background knowledge or simply spotting techniques like figurative language. In Math, students would learn to identify the types of concepts involved in a specific problem or real-world situation and using a variety of procedures to work towards a solution.

Common core tests were meant to be more rigorous and reflective of what students learned. The new standards required new tests. This would eventually result in infamously impregnable word problems in math and the addition of writing sections in the math test. But these changes in the test reflected a worldview in which new test items needed to be developed to accurately assess the new types of understanding expected of students. It was not enough to say whether students selected the right answer. The new tests would require them to prove they used the right concepts and procedures to arrive at the answer. Thus, in the Common Core worldview, the new standardized tests were to be a more reliable and rigorous measure of student learning than prior tests. As such, they would be better tools for holding schools accountable.

**Common Core Practices**

Common Core, in practice, means three things – adopting standards, taking standardized testing, and changing instruction. The ideology of the new standards was made real in the form of new standards in Math and English Language Arts from kindergarten through the end of secondary school. As before, the standards set out what students should know in each grade level. Compared to prior standards, the Common Core defined fewer standards per grade and largely repeated the same standards from one year to the next. Teachers would teach fewer topics per year and revisiting them repeatedly during the course.
For example, the Language Arts standards cover four domains: reading, writing, speaking/listening, and language (i.e. grammar and vocabulary). These four domains are repeated every year through grade-appropriate “anchor standards.” For example, one anchor standard is “Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.” In kindergarten, one grade-appropriate standard is “Capitalize dates and names of people” and in grades 11 and 12, one standard is “Observe hyphenation conventions.” In the minds of their creators these standards represented a sea change in educational curricula, emphasizing depth over breadth; conceptual understanding over memorization.

Two consortia of states were created to develop new Common Core aligned standardized tests. One of these was the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), the consortia for the state governing Achievement College Prep. Originally, PARCC planned to develop four standardized tests per year. Two would be formative assessments at the beginning and middle of the year to diagnose students’ strengths and weaknesses and help teachers and schools target their resources. Two would be summative, occurring at the middle and end of the year to measure students’ learning and hold students, teachers, and schools accountable.

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1 The streamlining in math is less obvious as there are eleven domains including “Statistics and Probability,” “Geometry,” and “The Number System” which are introduced in different ways in different grades and which, in high school, do not even map to traditional classes. Numerically, there are fewer standards in Math courses at Achievement College Prep under Common Core as compared with the classes under the previous state standards. And Math teachers said that the Math standards represented a narrower range of topic.

2 See CoreStandards.org for the most current version of the official Common Core standards.
accountable. States were given the choice of which tests to administer and when and, during my focal year, students were given the two summative tests.

Finally, to change instruction, states planned to create resource pools, teacher training programs, and updated certification programs to help teachers teach to the new standards. It is critical to note that, central to the teaching profession in the U.S. is the lack of regulation over instruction. Every profession is founded on the control over some expertise and each seeks to preserve that expertise vis-à-vis other professions and the state (Abbott 1988). For teachers in the United States, this sacred ground of expert control is instruction – it is up to the teacher to decide what the right in-class activity is for their class. The state can require that students learn hyphenation norms, but teachers determine how they learn it. In order for the state to encourage teachers to teach the new standards, they offer instructional material teachers can use, provide educational briefings on the Common Core, work through professional institutions to change their requirements, and rely on the educational marketplace to offer Common Core aligned material.

The Accountable School

In the ideal world of school accountability, the practices and worldview provide schools with a clarity in purpose and direction. Schools perform the practices and integrate the worldview. We should see teachers teaching students the same concepts over and over again across grades until students grasp them at an abstract level and can use them across texts, questions, problems, and contexts. The school would take testing seriously as diagnostic of their students learning and a measure of their own effectiveness. During my focal year, I saw all of these things at Achievement. And yet, students largely failed.
Common Core’s Early Days at Achievement

Common Core State Standards were part of a broad set of initiatives launched by the Obama administration. As part of the post-financial crisis recovery, Obama initiated the Race to the Top grant program which gave states large grants to improve their education system. These grants were awarded based on how well states’ policies fit with an array of best-practices including encouraging charter schools, evaluating teachers and schools based on performance, implementing data tracking systems, and implementing common core (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

While few states ultimately received awards, this spurred substantial focus on educational reform at the state level. One senior administrator remembers it this way,

There was just a lot of confusion about what was going on, “is it real?” “Are we doing this?” “How is this really affecting the curriculum?” First, our message for a little while was just, “keep doing the same thing…no one knows what’s going on.” And I did not get any training and I really should have, but I shy away from powerpoint trainings that usually just don’t do anything for you. Hilary and I did attend one presentation in [nearby city] and I remember us being like, ‘this is still a waste of time’ It was for Race to the Top which is related to…I mean the whole thing is related but it had like…Race to the Top also had this AP initiative that we were really interested in. But nothing came out of it. So I would say that very little was done. The state said they were going to use PARCC, more people spent more time looking at what the common core is.

The flurry of initiatives drowned one another out early on. Some state-level initiatives survived the Race to the Top process while others did not, making the seriousness of any one of them suspect. Moreover, the state’s standardized test was still based on the previous standards making it difficult for schools and teachers to assess what was supposed to be taught.

In this initial state of uncertainty, the Math and ELA department chairs decided to do vastly different things. The ELA department went all in on the new standards while the math department held off, waiting for clarity.
Archival data from teachers’ curricula bear this history out. The following analysis was performed on the workbooks teachers created each year for each of their classes. Nearly all classes have a workbook, going back to at least 2009. And, most all of these workbooks contain a template schedule where teachers fill in the daily lesson objective(s) for that day and the state standard(s) that day in class is supposed to teach. The standards are usually copied verbatim from the state’s handbook and are thus traceable across years. I use exact matching to compare standards across each class each year.³

Figure 2: Retention Rates of Standards between Years in ELA and Math

In a normal year, the percentage of standards retained in a course for Math and ELA is a little over 80%. Only 10% of standards were retained between the end of the 2011-2012 school year and the start of the 2012-2013 school year in ELA, the year after Common Core standards

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³ More information on this analysis can be found in the methodological appendix.
were passed. In the subsequent two years, 98% of standards are retained year over year. In contrast, standards change is more gradual in math.

As one senior administrator explained it:

In the beginning, I think our math results on [state test] had always been stronger than our ELA results and I think our math department rested on their laurels a little bit. That, because we’re doing well on this, it doesn’t matter how the standards change or the outside assessment changes, we’ll continue to do well. Wherein the [ELA] department, they were actually excited about Common Core. They were saying, these are the standards we want to align to. We’ve kinda been waiting for this. There is just more excitement around that piece of it in the ELA department, where this feels real and authentic and it’s not to say there wasn’t that in the math department. There was a ‘what we’re currently doing will still get us to where we are.’

Common Core adoption at Achievement was driven by the chairs of the Math and ELA department chairs. In ELA, the chair had all teachers transition to the Common Core Standards as soon as they were adopted by the state. The math department chair left it to individual teachers to address Common Core standards on their own.

**Coupling to the Core**

Coupling is not a state one has but a state one accomplishes (Bartley & Egels-Zanden 2016). Through a sustained investment in time and resources, the school gradually became deeply coupled to the Common Core. Teachers gradually adopted the standards and developed a deep understanding of how to teach them in class. The math department hired a new chair whose primary directive was to lead common core alignment. The school was an early adopter of the new standardized test and provided external help for teachers teaching to the new standards. By the time I arrived during my focal year, they were already deeply coupled to the Common Core.
Coupling to the Standards in Practice

At Achievement, adopting Common Core standards in practice meant two things – integrating standards into their curricula and developing a deep understanding of each standard. At Achievement, the way you know whether teachers are using the right standards is whether they are written into the curriculum workbook. It is the act of writing the standards down that begins to process of making them practical.

The school practices backwards planning, meaning that teachers create their final and midterm exams first at the beginning of the year based on the standards they need to meet. Teachers then work backwards from there to design their unit and daily lesson plans. Achievement has a standardized lesson plan template teachers follow. As part of this template, each lesson plan has a standard the lesson is meant to teach and an objective that accomplishes the standard. For example, if the standard is “students should understand capitalization rules,” the objective for the day might be “Students understand how to capitalize proper names.” Putting standards into curricula meant not merely writing them down, but means teachers organized everything from daily courses to final exams around the new standards.

Qualitative review of these curricula workbooks confirmed that the entire ELA department began using the Common Core standards in their workbooks in the 2012-13 school year. And these standards are copied and pasted into the new workbook year after year. In contrast, math department workbooks show some teachers began writing some of the standards in their workbooks in 2012. In the next year, those teachers added more of the new standards and new teachers began adding the standards for the first time. While teachers in the ELA department put the new Common Core Standards in their workbooks over the summer of 2012.
teachers adopted them piecemeal. By the 2014-15 school year, every teacher in the math
department was referencing all Common Core state standards in their curriculum workbooks.

Standards are not obvious tools of education. To teachers at achievement, they had to be
understood deeply. Teachers developed this deep understanding through sustained investigations
into the meaning of standards they referred to as “deep dives.” In a deep dive, teachers gather
lesson plans, activities, and other curricular material that aligns with the standard and pour over
them to better understand what the standard really means. Teachers often reported doing these
deep dives over the summer. As one teacher said, “You gather as much material as you can and
do a standards deep-dive, but there’s really no time for that outside of the summer…I don’t have
time to sit down and spend seven hours looking at one standard.” The school gave teachers
summer funding for these deep dives. In fact, deep dives are so important to the school that,
when the school faced a budget shortfall at the end of 2014, the only summer funds available
went to teachers using the summer to work on integrating Common Core.

These individual deep dives were complemented by focused sessions facilitated by
department chairs. In ELA for example, Ellie, the chair, used department meetings to facilitate a
series of deep dives on close reading, the first anchor standard in the new reading standards. The
result of these special sessions was a template for planning, implementing, and evaluating a close
reading lesson plan to guide teachers in teaching close reading.

The school coupled to Common Core unevenly initially. They started off weakly coupled
in practice. But adopting standards and integrating them into lesson plan documents were not
enough for teachers. They had to understand the standards on a deep level. This cognitive
understanding is not the same as ideological adoption. Deep understanding is about aiding
practice. It is about turning regulation into craft and it is this degree of inhabiting the new
accountability regime in combination with the mundane integration of material practices that separates weak from strong practical coupling.

**Coupling to the Worldview of the Standards**

Ideological adoption is about understanding the worldview within which the standards make sense and are legitimate. Common Core standards conveyed four beliefs to teachers at Achievement: 1) that the standards emphasized skill development and abstract understanding over procedural knowledge and memorization and 2) a deep understanding of a few topics rather than a shallow understanding of many topics. The focus on skills, abstract understanding, and depth over breadth 3) could be applied cross-disciplinary and 4) represented an integrated progression for students’ education.

Compared to the state’s former standards, Common Core standards were portrayed by teachers as emphasizing skills and conceptual or abstract understanding over proceduralization, memorization, and broad knowledge. As one math teacher put it, “Common Core is like can you cook? Whereas everything on the state test is can you do these three steps?” One English teacher said, whereas the old state standards asked students to identify the different forms of figurative language like metaphors and similes, Common Core asked students to assess the intent of a text’s author or authors. Instead of identifying the tools of the trade, students should be able to infer why such tools were deployed.

Teachers interpreted the decrease in topics not as there being less to teach, but that they could give students more time for each standard. (Students would get more “at bats” as they would say.) Conceptually, this meant to teachers that the point of the standards was for students to “go deep” or “dig deep” on individual concepts rather than survey a vast body of knowledge.

As Matt, the math department chair told me,
When I came in for my interview, David and Kim asked me a bunch of questions [about Common Core] and I was like, “I’m new to this but this seems like good practice, you know, getting students to understand rather than just see.” Getting students to dig deep on something rather than learning about something over a small period of time. It made sense to me. It’s all kind of like, how I had taught and how I had molded my own teaching techniques towards that. So to me, it was very easy for me to buy in. I thought, at first, “Hey we’re moving to the Common Core, this is going to be a big undertaking.” And it really wasn’t.

By shifting standards from domain knowledge to deep, general skills, Common Core also shifted the understanding of the pedagogical goals of different grade levels and departments, providing common ground around a set of basic skills. Instead of learning about world history in one grade, U.S. history in another, and Biology in another; staff at Achievement saw in Common Core a continuity in teaching students to read from certain kinds of texts, write progressively better texts, and approach problems conceptually rather than procedurally. Thus, they picked up on Common Core’s ideology of cross-disciplinary and cross-grade integration.

Teachers understood Common Core to have some standards that could unify the school’s departments. The administration led school wide trainings on shareable literacy standards like having students gather evidence from texts. This school-wide awareness was complemented by department-level initiatives to teach Common Core-prescribed skills. For example, during my focal year, Ellie, the head of ELA, was also made head of the History and Social Science department and facilitated the same series of close reading workshops with those teachers. The fundamental worldview teachers picked up is that there are a set of skills that transcend fields. As one English teacher said,

I like [Common Core] because, as much as in my dream world, students walk away from school loving literature, I recognize that that’s not always going to happen … But, every single student has to be able to read critically, write clearly. And the Common Core is literally just breaking down, how to help students do that. So I like it because these are the skills that people need no matter what field they go into to be successful people. Scientists have to write. Mathematicians have to break things down and understand things.
Moreover, teachers began to see more connections between what students were doing in different grades. Common Core explicitly connects standards across grade levels. In many cases, the same skills and topics are presented with the same ID number with only slight differences across grades (though this is less palpable in math where subfields like geometry and algebra have starkly different topics). This integration projected the image of a unified intellectual progression wherein what students learned in early grades supported their learning in later grades. While this notion of progression was already present before. At the end of the year, all of the staff discussed ways to improve students’ transitions from one grade to the next. However, Common Core made this progression a central tenant of how departments approached their curriculum.

In an organization decoupled from regulatory ideology, we expect teachers to resist, demean, or simply express a distaste for the Common Core’s worldview. Instead, teachers and staff at Achievement adopted the worldview being projected by the Common Core standards and felt they were just “common sense.” They were not fanatics about it. Strong ideological coupling does not entail rabid, doctrinal faith. Instead, it can include the sophisticated, appreciative, and skeptical endorsement embodied by teachers at Achievement. They did not deny the importance procedural knowledge and the usefulness of being broadly knowledgeable. Nor did they redesign every class to teach Common Core standards. Teachers and staff understood there were trade-offs being made and believed Common Core represented a better balance. For them, the world of deep, skills-based learning as the basis for teaching across grades and departments was the ultimate goal toward which the standards were guiding them.
Teaching for the Test

The perennial critique of standardized testing is that it encourages schools to teach to the test.

For example, students are taught strategy for answering multiple choice questions rather than the causes of the American revolution. This represents a shallow view of the ways in which Achievement prepared its students for Common Core testing. Achievement was most concerned as an organization about closing the achievement gap in test scores for their mostly Black students. Thus, passing tests was the school’s primary objective. And testing itself was a central part of the life of the school.

Achievement was putting their students through standardized testing on Common Core standards before PARCC released its first test. Achievement was working with a testing company called ANet, abbreviating Achievement Network. ANet tested students at Achievement four times per year assessing their mastery of the state’s standards and providing teachers and administrators with student’s scores on each standard. The purpose of these tests was to provide no-stakes feedback on how well students met the standards and were used to adjust course content. When the state adopted Common Core standards, ANet adapted its tests to evaluate students according to the new standards. As the PARCC began releasing practice test items, ANet began adjusting its tests.

PARCC’s first practice tests were also a boon to teachers at Achievement. As one teacher said, “You think you understand [a standard] and you see something else or you see how it’s going to be assessed on PARCC and you’re like, ‘Oh, that’s really what they meant.’” Teachers in Math and ELA were given stipends to spend the summer of 2014 reviewing PARCC practice tests and interpreting what the assessments meant for their classes. In their class’s archives, four teachers document this work in the form of summaries reported to the school’s leadership. In
these reports, teachers outline the meaning of the changes made by the Common Core standards, enumerate the skills and question types emphasized in the practice tests, and assess the how to make their classes more Common Core-aligned.

When the state announced it would begin giving the PARCC exam as an option to schools during the 2014-2015 school year, the schools administrators were quick to act. The state asked schools whether they preferred to take the PARCC or the traditional state test for the grades and subjects where both tests were offered. The school’s leadership elected to participate in the PARCC test. As one senior administrator said, by being “early adopters” of PARCC, “we could practice that earlier.”

The first tests were given in late March. As they drew near, teachers began their test prep. Figure 1 shows a side-by-side comparison of mentions of “PARCC” and “Common Core” in department meeting documents in 2015. While Common Core was mentioned for most of the year, PARCC was a sprint from February to April during which time the school did the traditional teaching-to-the-test.

**Figure 3: Plot of Mentions of Common Core and PARCC Testing in 2014-15**
In the run-up to the tests, teachers focused on reviewing the standards, preparing students for PARCC-style test questions, and getting students intellectually and emotionally prepared for standardized testing. Teachers, particularly in Math, adjusted their curricula to cover missing standards or review standards on which class had performed poorly during the year. The department chair early on had encourage teachers to leave a couple extra days for review before all tests to cover such material. Teachers incorporated PARCC-style question practice into their daily lessons. Gloria, a middle school math teacher, gave her students questions from the PARCC practice test as warmup activities at the beginning of class.

Finally, teachers in ELA devoted department meeting time to putting together a skit about test taking strategies. While I never saw the final product in 2015, the skit from the prior year featured teachers slaloming (metaphorically) down a hill (staged on the school’s stair cases). Each gate represented a step in the strategy: “prepare,” “read,” “evidence,” “respond.” The first teacher missed a gate and fell, disqualifying her from the race while a second teacher passed through all four gates, winning the gold. (The 2014 Winter Olympics had just finished in Sochi, Russia.)

Faculty and staff at Achievement College Prep were committed to the PARCC. They tested their students against Common Core standards early, adapted their teaching materials to fit the new test, were early adopters of the PARCC test, and spent a substantial amount of time preparing students to take the test. Part of the reason is that Achievement was already committed to standardized testing. Their vision of closing the achievement gap meant getting students to do well on standardized tests. They were thus receptive to the ideology PARCC presented.

PARCC was supposed to be a more rigorous test that better reflected students’ readiness for college. This resonated with teachers and staff at Achievement who saw their students excel
on state tests only to then struggle on college entrance exams like the SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement tests. They believed that the state’s standards were too low and that a more rigorous test would show the tough, but necessary reality. As one teacher said,

It’s the first time we’re actually looking at… [the state test] is not rigorous. We know that. So the fact that 100 percent of students achieve proficient on [the state test] isn’t that impressive. It’s the first time we’re seeing results on a test that has the standards we want to be reaching. And they’re just not reaching them. Those are the standards students need to be reaching to get into these better schools, right?

It is important to note, to teachers, the standards did not determine the amount or quality of education students were expected to be achieve. The tests did. As one teacher said,

I think that it’s great that the bar is higher across the board. … I think it’s great. It’s a good reality check. I think it’s good for everyone to have a national standard. And I think that’s what PARCC [provides], because Common Core standards aren’t telling you how you’re being assessed and the level of rigor. So you need something like PARCC or another option to say, ‘this is actually the bar for what this looks like.’

Standards are not transparent tools. They need tests to give them a concrete, meaningful reality. Moreover you can teach whatever you want and believe students understand it, but, according to staff at Achievement, the standardized test will tell whether you are, in fact, right.

Ironically, the PARCC itself was not modelled on any of the existing college entrance exams, but was built from scratch. In fact, the theories being used to design questions on the PARCC and evaluate students’ skills were beginning to be adopted by the college entrance exams. The SAT, ACT, and AP were themselves planning to become more like the Common Core. Teachers and staff knew this. Even the state’s science curriculum was being re-written to be more like Common Core. Thus, the idea that PARCC would diagnose students’ college readiness was not based on the PARCC mimicking other collegiate tests, but based on the belief that it was a more challenging test measuring deep understanding and skills, which educators considered a better college preparation than broad knowledge and proceduralization.
You can hardly expect an organization to try harder to succeed at being regulated than Achievement College Prep. Though the math department waffled early, teachers and administrators eventually picked up the slack. During my focal year and the first year of PARCC testing, they were ideologically and practically committed to teaching their students the Common Core standards and preparing them to pass the newly designed PARCC test.

This did not seem to do them much good. Their scores were severely disappointing. Fewer than half of the school’s students received a passing grade of 4 or higher on any test. On most tests, the percentage of students passing was in the twenties and thirties. But, they did not challenge the test or the standards. They owned them as part of the ideology of the more rigorous and accurate exams. The results fit the established idea that their students are unprepared for college. They committed to working harder. As is likely only found among deep coupling organizations, their failure served only to deepen the coupling process.

The reason they performed so poorly, as they will tell you, is that incorporating the standards and preparing for the test are not enough to ensure good test performance. Students must be taught well. However, it is not clear to anyone what it means to teach Common Core standards well.

At the end of my focal year, I asked each interviewee how they thought Common Core implementation had gone. Some answered before the test results were in, a few afterward. Every person gave me a different answer. Some saw implementation as a short-term adjustment to the new law. For example, one math teacher said, “I think in math and English, we’re probably at like 80-97 percent of implementation. I think every teacher in every subject area is very aware of the Common Core standards and knows what they should be doing.”
Some saw implementation as requiring a shift in instruction. It wasn’t just teaching new things, but teaching them in new ways. One English teacher said,

I think it’s been okay. Implementing Common Core in our writing instruction has been pretty good, given that that was our focus in the past few years. So that makes sense that that would be better. I think implementing it in our reading instruction is still shaky. And I think it’s really about the teacher’s investment in really understanding how to implement specific parts of the language of the standard and not something that we’ve really focused on as a department.

Finally, others saw the new regime as requiring a shift for everyone across the school.

Teachers not only needed to teach students to understand the concepts behind linear equations and triangles, but all teachers needed to teach students that understanding was the goal of all classroom activity from sixth grade to graduation. One math teacher said,

Staff – Yeah, it’s a bit too early to tell. I think it’s a seven-year process.

Interviewer – And why seven years?

Staff – Because it’s seven grades. All of a sudden…these kids have been, for years, not asked to do the majority of the thinking, now I’m asking them and they’re like, “Just tell me what to do.” And I’m like, “No, I want you to discover it” and that was a big thing. This year’s seventh graders, after having it for a year, are going to be more used to it. So, by the time they get to upper level classes and are asked to look at a mathematical concept and develop it on their own, they’re going to have A) the math background and B) the experience of looking and [saying] “Hey, what am I doing? I’m stuck.”

Each of these points of view point to vastly different ways for succeeding in the state’s accountability regime. In the short-term view, standards adoptions and test prep is enough to reach Common Core compliance. Teaching is about more than standards, but instruction and broader school practices. In the mid-range view, teachers’ instruction needs to be more Common Core-aligned through deep understanding. Standards and instruction must be unitary. In the long-range view espoused by the math teacher, the standards require an entirely new pedagogy, or theory of education, before students are able to learn the way implied by Common Core.
The variety of responses to “how far do we have to go” is illustrative of a basic problem with Common Core and standards-based accountability: they provide no guidance on how students should be taught. This lack of guidance has been a cornerstone of accountability policy. Legislators agreed not to legislate how teachers teach. However, different standards and testing protocol implicitly favor certain forms of instruction. According to school administrators, the school’s “drill and kill” pedagogy, done largely through high volumes of quiet, independent work through packets of pre-printed problems, would not prepare students for the open-ended writing, argumentation, and abstract understanding required by Common Core. But it was unclear to them what the alternative should be. While I focus on this topic in the final chapter, this lack of guidance guarantees failure even among those most deeply coupling to the standards and test.

The Search for Common Core-Alignment
The deep dives and test preparation proved to staff the need for new instructional material early on. However, because Common Core was new, no one knew what instruction they should be using, what would work. They developed their own material as departments, but they also brought in external resources like textbooks, lesson plans, coaching, and consultants. These resources didn’t referee what was right or wrong, effective or ineffective, but what fit the “sprit” of Common Core, in their words, what was Common Core “aligned.” Teachers themselves spent a lot of time working on new lesson plans, activities, and techniques they believed would help students master the new standards. As I mentioned above, the ELA department spent several months working on a framework for teaching close reading which they would use to evaluate lesson plans and activities. Matt spent a lot of his time with teachers helping them think through how to teach a standard from different angles. This “figure it
out for yourself” approach is essential to teaching as a form of craft. Good instruction comes from the autonomous work of experts. But it takes a substantial amount of time. And there’s no guarantee that a teacher will get it right.

Teachers and chairs looked to trusted sources outside the school for shortcuts – activity ideas, lesson plan templates, and whole curricula written for Common Core that could provide the right instruction. One source for Common Core aligned material were open access clearinghouses. The one most often cited was EngageNY – a free clearinghouse of material hosted by the State of New York in 2011 to help its schools succeed under the new Common Core standards. A second source, particularly in Math, were textbooks. Matt’s first goal for the 2015 school year was to have every teacher using Common Core-aligned textbooks.

A final external source of materials for teachers and chairs was visiting other schools. The school coordinated annual visits to other schools in the area so their teachers could see how other teachers and schools worked. Moreover, working within their charter network, the school organized special visits to high performing schools in other regions for a select number of teacher and leaders to bring back effective teaching methods. Teachers did not adopt curricula and activities unthinkingly. Instead, they cherry picked what they thought would work or went to them when they needed inspiration or guidance for a particular standard. In essence, they used their expertise to make judgements about what they thought would work for their classes.

The school also brought in new staff, coaches, consultants. In my time at the school, they hired two new department chairs based on their ability to support teachers’ adjustment to Common Core instruction. This was particularly true in the History and Social Science department where the new chair hired at the end of my focal year for their expertise in teaching
literacy, but who had no background in either history or social science and had never taught children.

Teachers, chairs, and administrators worked together to hire coaches with outside expertise in Common Core-aligned teaching. They brought in coaches from ANet as well as a local nonprofit to coach teachers in writing instruction. Chairs and teachers were the ones who decided to hire coaches and administrators found the money for them. Administrators on the other hand took the lead in hiring consultants.

Consultants were the way in which the administration exerted direct control over Common Core adoption. In principle, administrators gave department chairs control over teachers’ instruction. Departments were the subject matter experts on how to teach their subject, not administrators. Consultants were the administrators check on this power. As one administrator said,

I was privy to one visit by consultants brought in to audit the Math and ELA teachers near the end of the year, between the two waves of PARCC testing. The consultants popped in and out of classes throughout the morning to evaluate teachers’ instruction. After lunch, they met with the department chairs and school administrators to debrief. In that meeting, the lead consultant recapitulated their mission this way,
We talked with David [the Dean of Instruction]. What he asked us to do is to go into the classroom thinking about Common Core especially with your [points to Ellie] priorities around questioning. Math: increasing rigor and breaking from processes. We start with EngageNY’s work where they developed a set of good actions you should see around Common Core. So, we were only in [each class] for 20 minutes, so this reflects those actions that are easy to see in 15-20 minutes and what’s challenging. So, we can’t give you feedback on everything. We translated our hand-written notes into a summary and will email that later.

The administrators set the agenda for the audit by charging the consultants with in-person evaluation of teachers’ in-class instruction. The chairs shaped that agenda by defining which aspects of instruction they wanted to ensure they got feedback on.

The substance of the audit itself revolved around what one should see if a teacher’s instruction is Common Core-aligned. I’ve been calling this the ideology of Common Core – the types of things we expect to see because of Common Core, not what has been explicitly legislated.

The person designated as their math person [let’s call her Bailey] began, “We focused on three areas 1) that the work of the lesson reflects shifts in the standards. 2) Teachers practices. And, 3) all students have the opportunity to exhibit the math practices. Our headlines, students need to be engaged in a few, rich tasks. And teachers can move from the procedural into the conceptual. Some examples are, in the classroom, the assessments, the work in the packets is really scaffolded. Where there is real-world application, but the focus the students have is still procedural.” “Which grade?” Matt asked. “It was an overall theme,” Bailey answered, “but especially 7 and 8, but some in 6 as well. Do the teachers know what the standards look like in their teaching? Do they know what the core concept is underneath the core focus? If they do, then the structure of the curriculum is holding them back. So, it’s the knowledge of the teacher or the structure of the curriculum.” Matt responds matter-of-factly, “The teachers’ knowledge is fine, so it must be the way it’s set up.”

The consultants’ feedback maps directly onto the Common Core worldview. Instruction should be deep, focused on “a few, rich tasks”; conceptual rather than just procedural, and more rigorous and less scaffolded (a term of art for making concepts easier to understand). The consultants role is not to fix these issues. They do not leave behind curricula or lesson plans. Instead, they are the referees for what instruction is Common Core-aligned.
Achievement College Prep largely sought to make its instruction fit with Common Core by going outside the school. Teachers and department chairs brought in material from textbooks and digital repositories. They hired coaches, department chairs, and consultants who could help teachers develop their classes. Few of these organizations, repositories, or instructional activities were new. They existed before Common Core and were adapting themselves for the new regime. But none of them were provably effective for Common Core. The PARCC, which could determine whether some instructional strategy or curriculum was effective, had only just been invented. Instead, they were evaluated according to whether it they were Common Core-aligned, that is, whether they fit the goals of Common Core.

**Discussion**

**Education’s Marshmallow Challenge**

The Marshmallow Challenge is a team building exercise made famous in a TED talk by Tom Wujec (2010). Teams have 18 minutes to build the tallest tower they can using only a piece of string, some tape, and a handful of uncooked spaghetti noodles. The challenge is that the tower must support a marshmallow at its peak.

The task seems feasible, if unusual. It’s clear the brittle noodles won’t sustain much weight and tape and string won’t create the strongest joinery. The fulcrum of competition too is sensible – height is clearly difficult to achieve with the heavy marshmallow at the top.

According to Wujec, a third of teams fail to create a structure that can stand. No one knows how to build marshmallow towers out of spaghetti. Stakes stifle experimentation, prototyping, and testing. It’s go big or go home and it all falls apart.

This is the problem with Common Core – teachers are given the standards and some course material (the noodles and tape) and expected to produce students who pass standardized
tests (the tower with a marshmallow at the top). But there are no instructions about how to build the tower or what kinds of noodle structures will hold together.

The flaw in the accountability system is the gap between regulation and evaluation. The accountability regime simply sets a bar and tells teachers to jump. It leaves the practice of teaching up to teachers which, in turn, means to the marketplace of consultants, textbook makers, and education researchers. This market is rife with un-tested programs, packages, and procedures, each promising to bridge the gap between Common core standards and high test scores, and no way of ascertaining their effectiveness.

In order for accountability to work, states need to build it on proven instructional methods. Schools and teachers must be given tools proven to effect student learning on the specific standards legislated. Specifically, states should regulate instruction.

Normalizing Failure

One of the founding criticisms of education leveled by the No Excuses movement is that failure is normalized in the traditional American education system. I argue failure is baked into the system. Achievement college Prep’s experience shows the game cannot be won. The task we set for schools is impossible given the means we have. But some may disagree.

Some may argue that this was a down year for Achievement. No amount of coupling could have made up for the extraordinary number of snow days, the cultural changes the school was making, or the new test itself. Perhaps this year was harder than most. Every year presents its own unique challenges. However, a failure rate of fifty to eighty percent is much too large to just be a bad year. With rates this low, it is hard to imagine a good year producing a failure rate in the single digits. Further, if it is a bad year, it should have been clear to everyone what the
problems were. If schools really have a clear means for producing Common Core-educated students, the “bad year” explanation should be apparent.

Some may argue that students at Achievement really did not know the standards. Teachers and staff at Achievement seemed to agree with this. They believed the test was generally accurate in part because it lined up with their experiences with purported collegiate tests – the SAT, ACT, and AP tests. The PARCC did what it was supposed to do: reveal what students’ really know by offering a more difficult test. Indeed, tests are meant to be diagnostic. However, this is different from tying them to accountability. We test to ensure schools teach students effectively. Punishing students, teachers, and schools for failing tests they are meant to and expected to fail is not accountability. It’s merely performing social inequality.

Moreover, the state’s analysis showed that students’ scores on the PARCC were no more correlated with college entrance exams or college grades than students’ scores on the prior state test. The notion that the test was more college-aligned has not been borne out by later studies. Moreover, the college entrance tests themselves were undergoing their own re-designs to be more Common Core aligned. In reality, college entrance test scores have historically been more indicative of a student’s social background than their potential for success in college (Grodsky, Warren, & Felts 2008).

Both responses, that even deeply coupled schools can have bad years and the test was valid, miss the point. If standards and testing are meant to drive school improvement, then schools must be able to effectively respond to them by improving. The lack of proven instructional methods makes this impossible. The goal of accountability is not perpetual mediocrity, but the policy regime we have in place guarantees it.
Conclusion: Regulating Success

Under the New Public Management, the state gives over control of its agencies to private actors in exchange for more administrative effectiveness or efficiency. Accountability mechanisms ensure these agencies meet their basic performance goals. This situation of clarity without control sets organizations up for failure if organizations cannot determine their performance. For this form of change to work, following the regulations must lead to success.

In most cases, regulatory compliance leads to success. We know how to stay within the speed limit. We have speedometers in our vehicles and, if we stay under the speed limit on our speedometer, we will also stay under the speed limit on a police officer’s radar gun. Some regulations are less certain but just as feasible. The Environmental Protection Agency requires automobile manufacturers to achieve a certain fuel efficiency standard in their fleets. Perhaps manufacturers can’t guarantee they will achieve especially ambitious goals or be very precise in what reductions are possible in a long time horizon. But they have reliable mechanisms for cutting fleet emissions which, if automakers decide to couple to the regulation, can effectively cut emissions consistently and persistently.

This is exactly what school accountability cannot do. Without predictable mechanisms for teachers to teach students to the standards, we cannot expect the school accountability regime to lead to consistent and persistent gains in student learning. The No Child Left Behind Act’s expectation that schools get 100% of students to pass their state’s standardized test in 12 years was fantasy. Clarity without control requires holding schools responsible for achieving specific goals while taking away the power to decide if those goals have been met. For this type of change to lead to effective organizations, we must be clear about what works before we hold organizations accountable for their performance.
Bibliography


