

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.

30 Kelly then takes questions from the staff. She explains the new scale: the state's
31 traditional qualitative levels of passing, needs improvement, failing, and so on have been
32 replaced with a 5 point scale in which 4s and 5s are satisfactory and 1s, 2s, and 3s are
33 underperforming. One teacher asks how they're calculating student growth (one of the
34 scores shown on the PowerPoint) given there was no PARCC last year. Kim answers that
35 they're using a formula comparing prior scores on the state test to current PARCC scores
36 to create a cross-test growth score.

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

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

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

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

55 However, the school accountability regime is fatally flawed. It cannot lead to more
56 effective schools in a reasonable time horizon. Achievement College Prep is the perfect example

57 of this flaw. The logic behind the accountability regime is to provide schools with a clear system
58 for success, the standards in this case, while taking the ability to define success away from
59 schools through standardized testing. This regulatory paradigm only works if there are reliable
60 means for using the system to achieve the prescribed outcomes. As I find in my observations of
61 Achievement College Prep, there is a gap here that no amount of coupling can fill. They can
62 implement the standards and prepare students for the test, but there is no predictably effective
63 way of teaching the standards. If we want an accountability regime that improves schools, we
64 need to offer instructional methods proven to work for the standards given. In general, if we want
65 to legislate effectiveness, we must first provide organizations the means to be effective.

66 **Emergence of The School Accountability Regime**

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

74 School accountability is an example of a broader type of change in the way we see the
75 role of government in a neoliberal society, called the New Public Management (NPM). NPM
76 sees the role of government as maximize social impact while minimizing financial costs
77 (Barzelay 1992; Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2005; James and Manning, 1996).
78 Agencies should be more like corporations than bureaucracies. Part of this shift is privatization,
79 shifting government services from government-run agencies to government-regulated

80 corporations. Accountability replaces administration with monitoring, evaluation, and ultimately
81 capital mobility to ensure services are delivered effectively and efficiently. In the language of
82 clarity and control, the government provides service providers with clarity in the form of rules
83 and regulations but retains control over whether the provider has successfully met its goals.

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

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

100 Reformers realized the difficulty of such a project early on (Cohen 1990). Standards
101 would not change teaching overnight. The connection between a standard and whether and how
102 best to assess a students' mastery of it was unclear. Moreover, states could legislate standards,

103 but getting teacher training programs to prepare students to teach the standards and rewarding
104 schools based on test scores were all controversial.

105 Initial accountability systems themselves were inconsistent (Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin
106 2004; Diamond 2007). Some states had their own standardized tests while others used tests from
107 other states. The standards and curricula teachers were supposed to implement were sometimes
108 defined by states and sometimes by local districts. There were often inconsistencies between
109 curriculum, standards, and test. Moreover, standards and curricula prescribed content but not
110 instruction or pedagogy. Teachers had to teach the Civil War and calculating the area of shapes,
111 but they could teach them however they wanted.

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

121 Successive waves of policy-making have largely tightened the connection between the
122 various aspects of accountability and increased the punishment for schools that failed to perform.
123 Rather than just send failing students to summer school and putting schools on probation;
124 students would be allowed to move to better schools and, eventually, failing schools would be
125 shuttered altogether. Common Core was formulated with explicit though not mandated

126 pedagogical preferences for active learning, abstract understanding, and skill acquisition rather
127 than proceduralization.

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

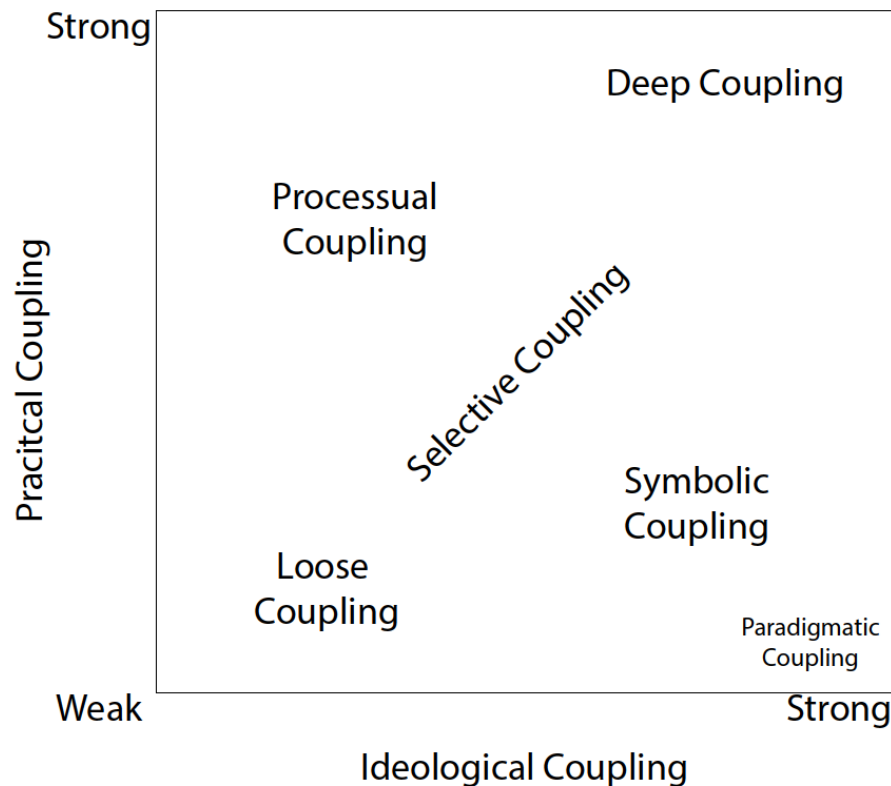
132 **Two Dimensions of Coupling**

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

138 Coupling occurs along two dimensions: practical and ideological (see Figure 1). Most
139 studies of regulation focus on the practical dimension: the extent to which an organization
140 behaves in a way consistent with the regulation. Do they actually follow the regulations? The
141 second dimension, ideological coupling, refers to the extent to which members of an
142 organization adopt the worldview underlying the regulation. When there is weak ideological
143 coupling, few people understand or believe in the regulation.

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Figure 1: Types of Coupling

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149 Ideological and practical coupling are independent dimensions. Organizations can adopt
 150 the worldview of a regime without its practices. In their seminal article, Meyer & Rowan (1977)
 151 argue that organizations are only coupled to policy symbolically. Leaders adopt new structures or
 152 programs as a show of good faith to regulators, collaborators, and customers. But these are only
 153 myths about how the organization operates. The daily work of employees flows from the
 154 technical requirements of the job. There is strong ideological coupling by organizational elites,
 155 but everyone else goes about their business. In the extreme case, you can have what Jal Mehta
 156 calls “paradigmatic” coupling in which organizational members adopt a worldview without any
 157 specific practices having yet been defined (Mehta, 2013).

158 Organizations can also adopt the practices of a regime without also adopting its
159 worldview (Snellman, 2012). In an extreme case, carrying out the practices leads to a regime.
160 For example, Kelly & Dobbin (1998) find that affirmative action compliance offices, created in
161 American corporations during the 1970s, galvanized the creation of diversity management in the
162 1980s after federal enforcement of workplace discrimination waned. In the absence of a
163 worldview legitimizing their role, these offices continued their work until they could put one
164 together.

165 These cases of decoupling appear to be rare (Bromley, Hwang, & Powell, 2012; Coburn,
166 2004). More often than not, coupling is selective, partially occurring on both dimensions (Pache
167 & Santos 2013). Bromley & Powell (2012) argue that “audit culture” has forced organizations
168 today to respond to pressures from many constituencies, leading them to pick and choose
169 different programs, practices, and structures to couple to. Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui (2005) show
170 how early policy commitments were used as leverage by social movements to gradually develop
171 countries’ human rights compliance regimes. Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert (2012) detail the
172 coevolution of practical and ideological coupling among companies adopting corporate
173 responsibility.

174 These studies demonstrate that coupling is a process in two senses. One, it unfolds over
175 time. At one moment in time, an organization may be loosely coupled or symbolically coupled.
176 However internal and external forces are regularly pushing or resisting policies, practices, and
177 ideas. Organizations change their coupling over time. Moreover, coupling is a process in the
178 sense that it is the result of concerted social action. People work to convince one another of
179 ideas, formulate practices, and hold one another accountable. It is an achievement. Over the past

180 thirty years, school accountability advocates have achieved much by creating a regime that can
181 be coupled to.

182 The ideal case for accountability advocates is what I call deep coupling – when
183 organizations adopt both the worldview and practices of a regulation. Deep coupling is symbolic
184 of an organization’s willingness to go along with policy, but it is also perpetuates itself. Research
185 shows that when organizations have groups of people who believe in a policy and practice it, the
186 organization as a whole becomes more aligned to that policy in practice and in worldview
187 (Lounsbury 2001; Dobbin 2011). Deep coupling often occurs among early adopters who adopt a
188 policy to accomplish their a pre-existing goal (Westphal & Zajac 1994; Westphal, Gulati, &
189 Shortell, 1997; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983). For those who adopt a policy later, deep coupling is
190 driven by embeddedness in expert networks who can provide technical support for adopting the
191 practices and can explain the worldview (Kostova & Roth, 2002; Simmons, Dobbin, & Garret,
192 2006; Weber, Davis, & Lounsbury, 2009).

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

198 **The Common Core Worldview**

199 In his book, *Street Level Bureaucracy*, Michael Lipsky argued that government programs
200 work by shaping the ways in which the workers who carry out these programs, whom he called
201 “street-level bureaucrats,” understand and implement the programs they oversee. Public agencies
202 and officials have significant latitude in defining the ways in which social programs are carried

203 out, laws enforced, and benefits doled out. Government leaders, administration officials,
204 politicians, and policy activists project a worldview with sets of beliefs, values, and norms about
205 how these programs should work and provide cohesion to street-level bureaucrats' discretion.
206 These worldviews, in tandem with the daily life of the program and organizational policies
207 constitute institutions these street-level bureaucrats inhabit (Hallet & Ventresca, 2006).

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

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

221 Common Core was meant to be a sea change in the curriculum. First, it replaced the
222 specifically American commitment to a wide but shallow curriculum with one that is narrow, but
223 deep common to high-performing European and Asian countries. Students would repeatedly
224 engage a smaller number of topics throughout their education. This repetition would lead to
225 conceptual understanding rather than proceduralization and rote memorization. In English

226 Language Arts, students would learn to read a variety of texts and pull out relevant information
227 from the text itself rather than relying on background knowledge or simply spotting techniques
228 like figurative language. In Math, students would learn to identify the types of concepts involved
229 in a specific problem or real-world situation and using a variety of procedures to work towards a
230 solution.

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

240 **Common Core Practices**

241 Common Core, in practice, means three things – adopting standards, taking standardized
242 testing, and changing instruction. The ideology of the new standards was made real in the form
243 of new standards in Math and English Language Arts from kindergarten through the end of
244 secondary school. As before, the standards set out what students should know in each grade
245 level. Compared to prior standards, the Common Core defined fewer standards per grade and
246 largely repeated the same standards from one year to the next. Teachers would teach fewer topics
247 per year and revisiting them repeatedly during the course.

248 For example, the Language Arts standards cover four domains: reading, writing,
249 speaking/listening, and language (i.e. grammar and vocabulary). These four domains are
250 repeated every year through grade-appropriate “anchor standards.”¹ For example, one anchor
251 standard is “Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization,
252 punctuation, and spelling when writing.” In kindergarten, one grade-appropriate standard is
253 “Capitalize dates and names of people” and in grades 11 and 12, one standard is “Observe
254 hyphenation conventions.”² In the minds of their creators these standards represented a sea
255 change in educational curricula, emphasizing depth over breadth; conceptual understanding over
256 memorization.

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

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.

264 accountable. States were given the choice of which tests to administer and when and, during my
265 focal year, students were given the two summative tests.

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

278 **The Accountable School**

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

286 Common Core’s Early Days at Achievement

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

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

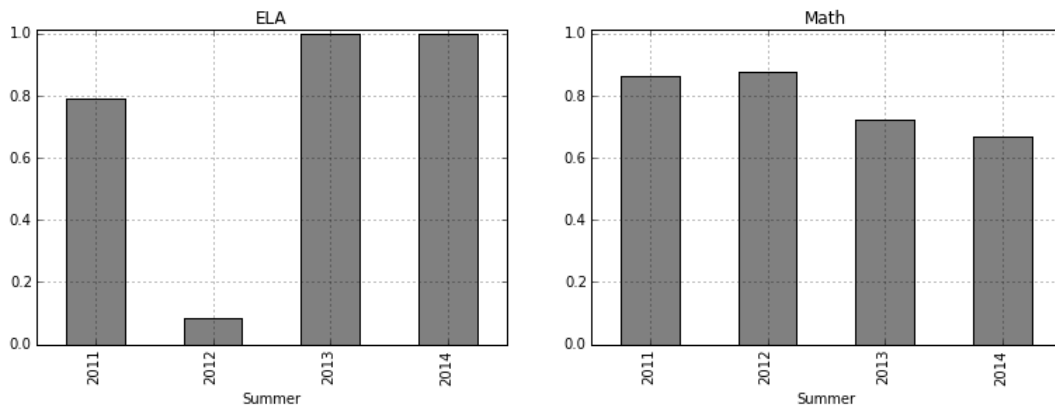
296 There was just a lot of confusion about what was going on, “is it real?” “Are we doing
297 this?” “How is this really affecting the curriculum?” First, our message for a little while
298 was just, “keep doing the same thing...no one knows what’s going on.” And I did not get
299 any training and I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

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

310 In this initial state of uncertainty, the Math and ELA department chairs decided to do
311 vastly different things. The ELA department went all in on the new standards while the math
312 department held off, waiting for clarity.

313 Archival data from teachers’ curricula bear this history out. The following analysis was
 314 performed on the workbooks teachers created each year for each of their classes. Nearly all
 315 classes have a workbook, going back to at least 2009. And, most all of these workbooks contain
 316 a template schedule where teachers fill in the daily lesson objective(s) for that day and the state
 317 standard(s) that day in class is supposed to teach. The standards are usually copied verbatim
 318 from the state’s handbook and are thus traceable across years. I use exact matching to compare
 319 standards across each class each year.³

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 321



322

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

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

³ More information on this analysis can be found in the methodological appendix.

327 were passed. In the subsequent two years, 98% of standards are retained year over year. In
328 contrast, standards change is more gradual in math.

329 As one senior administrator explained it:

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

339

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

344 **Coupling to the Core**

345 Coupling is not a state one has but a state one accomplishes (Bartley & Egels-Zanden 2016).

346 Through a sustained investment in time and resources, the school gradually became deeply
347 coupled to the Common Core. Teachers gradually adopted the standards and developed a deep
348 understanding of how to teach them in class. The math department hired a new chair whose
349 primary directive was to lead common core alignment. The school was an early adopter of the
350 new standardized test and provided external help for teachers teaching to the new standards. By
351 the time I arrived during my focal year, they were already deeply coupled to the Common Core.

352 **Coupling to the Standards in Practice**

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

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

367 Qualitative review of these curricula workbooks confirmed that the entire ELA
368 department began using the Common Core standards in their workbooks in the 2012-13 school
369 year. And these standards are copied and pasted into the new workbook year after year. In
370 contrast, math department workbooks show some teachers began writing some of the standards
371 in their workbooks in 2012. In the next year, those teachers added more of the new standards and
372 new teachers began adding the standards for the first time. While teachers in the ELA department
373 put the new Common Core Standards in their workbooks over the summer of 2012. In math,

374 teachers adopted them piecemeal. By the 2014-15 school year, every teacher in the math
375 department was referencing all Common Core state standards in their curriculum workbooks.

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

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

392 The school coupled to Common Core unevenly initially. They started off weakly coupled
393 in practice. But adopting standards and integrating them into lesson plan documents were not
394 enough for teachers. They had to understand the standards on a deep level. This cognitive
395 understanding is not the same as ideological adoption. Deep understanding is about aiding
396 practice. It is about turning regulation into craft and it is this degree of inhabiting the new

397 accountability regime in combination with the mundane integration of material practices that
398 separates weak from strong practical coupling.

399 **Coupling to the Worldview of the Standards**

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

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

415 Teachers interpreted the decrease in topics not as there being less to teach, but that they
416 could give students more time for each standard. (Students would get more "at bats" as they
417 would say.) Conceptually, this meant to teachers that the point of the standards was for students
418 to "go deep" or "dig deep" on individual concepts rather than survey a vast body of knowledge.
419 As Matt, the math department chair told me,

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

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

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

443 I like [Common Core] because, as much as in my dream world, students walk away from
444 school loving literature, I recognize that that’s not always going to happen ... But, every
445 single student has to be able to read critically, write clearly. And the Common Core is
446 literally just breaking down, how to help students do that. So I like it because these are
447 the skills that people need no matter what field they go into to be successful people.
448 Scientists have to write. Mathematicians have to break things down and understand
449 things.

450 Moreover, teachers began to see more connections between what students were doing in
451 different grades. Common Core explicitly connects standards across grade levels. In many cases,
452 the same skills and topics are presented with the same ID number with only slight differences
453 across grades (though this is less palpable in math where subfields like geometry and algebra
454 have starkly different topics). This integration projected the image of a unified intellectual
455 progression wherein what students learned in early grades supported their learning in later
456 grades. While this notion of progression was already present before. At the end of the year, all
457 of the staff discussed ways to improve students’ transitions from one grade to the next. However,
458 Common Core made this progression a central tenant of how departments approached their
459 curriculum.

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

471 Teaching for the Test

472 The perennial critique of standardized testing is that it encourages schools to teach to the test.
473 For example, students are taught strategy for answering multiple choice questions rather than the
474 causes of the American revolution. This represents a shallow view of the ways in which
475 Achievement prepared its students for Common Core testing. Achievement was most concerned
476 as an organization about closing the achievement gap in test scores for their mostly Black
477 students. Thus, passing tests was the school’s primary objective. And testing itself was a central
478 part of the life of the school.

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

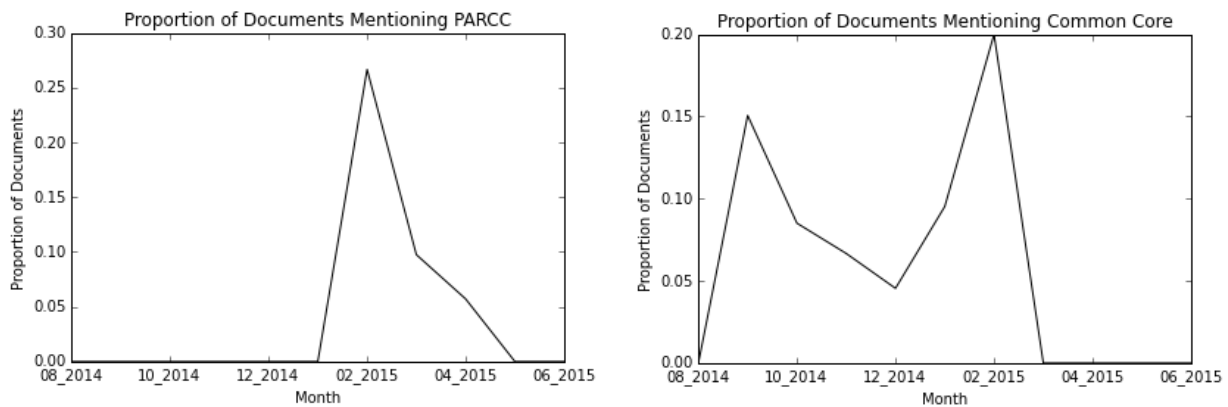
488 PARCC’s first practice tests were also a boon to teachers at Achievement. As one teacher
489 said, “You think you understand [a standard] and you see something else or you see how it’s
490 going to be assessed on PARCC and you’re like, ‘Oh, that’s really what they meant.’” Teachers
491 in Math and ELA were given stipends to spend the summer of 2014 reviewing PARCC practice
492 tests and interpreting what the assessments meant for their classes. In their class’s archives, four
493 teachers document this work in the form of summaries reported to the school’s leadership. In

494 these reports, teachers outline the meaning of the changes made by the Common Core standards,
 495 enumerate the skills and question types emphasized in the practice tests, and assess the how to
 496 make their classes more Common Core-aligned.

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

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

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Figure 3: Plot of Mentions of Common Core and PARCC Testing in 2014-15

511

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

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

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

533 PARCC was supposed to be a more rigorous test that better reflected students’ readiness
534 for college. This resonated with teachers and staff at Achievement who saw their students excel

535 on state tests only to then struggle on college entrance exams like the SAT, ACT, and Advanced
536 Placement tests. They believed that the state's standards were too low and that a more rigorous
537 test would show the tough, but necessary reality. As one teacher said,

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

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

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

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

553 Ironically, the PARCC itself was not modelled on any of the existing college entrance
554 exams, but was built from scratch. In fact, the theories being used to design questions on the
555 PARCC and evaluate students' skills were beginning to be adopted by the college entrance
556 exams. The SAT, ACT, and AP were themselves planning to become more like the Common
557 Core. Teachers and staff knew this. Even the state's science curriculum was being re-written to
558 be more like Common Core. Thus, the idea that PARCC would diagnose students' college
559 readiness was not based on the PARCC mimicking other collegiate tests, but based on the belief
560 that it was a more challenging test measuring deep understanding and skills, which educators
561 considered a better college preparation than broad knowledge and proceduralization.

562 Outcome

563 You can hardly expect an organization to try harder to succeed at being regulated than
564 Achievement College Prep. Though the math department waffled early, teachers and
565 administrators eventually picked up the slack. During my focal year and the first year of PARCC
566 testing, they were ideologically and practically committed to teaching their students the Common
567 Core standards and preparing them to pass the newly designed PARCC test.

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

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

579 At the end of my focal year, I asked each interviewee how they thought Common Core
580 implementation had gone. Some answered before the test results were in, a few afterward. Every
581 person gave me a different answer. Some saw implementation as a short-term adjustment to the
582 new law. For example, one math teacher said, “I think in math and English, we’re probably at
583 like 80-97 percent of implementation. I think every teacher in every subject area is very aware
584 of the Common Core standards and knows what they should be doing.”

585 Some saw implementation as requiring a shift in instruction. It wasn't just teaching new
586 things, but teaching them in new ways. One English teacher said,

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

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

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

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

598 Interviewer – And why seven years?

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

606 Each of these points of view point to vastly different ways for succeeding in the state's
607 accountability regime. In the short-term view, standards adoptions and test prep is enough to
608 reach Common Core compliance. Teaching is about more than standards, but instruction and
609 broader school practices. In the mid-range view, teachers' instruction needs to be more Common
610 Core-aligned through deep understanding. Standards and instruction must be unitary. In the long-
611 range view espoused by the math teacher, the standards require an entirely new pedagogy, or
612 theory of education, before students are able to learn the way implied by Common Core.

613 The variety of responses to “how far do we have to go” is illustrative of a basic problem
614 with Common Core and standards-based accountability: they provide no guidance on how
615 students should be taught. This lack of guidance has been a cornerstone of accountability policy.
616 Legislators agreed not to legislate how teachers teach. However, different standards and testing
617 protocol implicitly favor certain forms of instruction. According to school administrators, the
618 school’s “drill and kill” pedagogy, done largely through high volumes of quiet, independent
619 work through packets of pre-printed problems, would not prepare students for the open-ended
620 writing, argumentation, and abstract understanding required by Common Core. But it was
621 unclear to them what the alternative should be. While I focus on this topic in the final chapter,
622 this lack of guidance guarantees failure even among those most deeply coupling to the standards
623 and test.

624 **The Search for Common Core-Alignment**

625 The deep dives and test preparation proved to staff the need for new instructional material early
626 on. However, because Common Core was new, no one knew what instruction they should be
627 using, what would work. They developed their own material as departments, but they also
628 brought in external resources like textbooks, lesson plans, coaching, and consultants. These
629 resources didn’t referee what was right or wrong, effective or ineffective, but what fit the “spirit”
630 of Common Core, in their words, what was Common Core “aligned.”

631 Teachers themselves spent a lot of time working on new lesson plans, activities, and
632 techniques they believed would help students master the new standards. As I mentioned above,
633 the ELA department spent several months working on a framework for teaching close reading
634 which they would use to evaluate lesson plans and activities. Matt spent a lot of his time with
635 teachers helping them think through how to teach a standard from different angles. This “figure it

636 out for yourself” approach is essential to teaching as a form of craft. Good instruction comes
637 from the autonomous work of experts. But it takes a substantial amount of time. And there’s no
638 guarantee that a teacher will get it right.

639 Teachers and chairs looked to trusted sources outside the school for shortcuts – activity
640 ideas, lesson plan templates, and whole curricula written for Common Core that could provide
641 the right instruction. One source for Common Core aligned material were open access
642 clearinghouses. The one most often cited was EngageNY – a free clearinghouse of material
643 hosted by the State of New York in 2011 to help its schools succeed under the new Common
644 Core standards. A second source, particularly in Math, were textbooks. Matt’s first goal for the
645 2015 school year was to have every teacher using Common Core-aligned textbooks.

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

654 The school also brought in new staff, coaches, consultants. In my time at the school, they
655 hired two new department chairs based on their ability to support teachers’ adjustment to
656 Common Core instruction. This was particularly true in the History and Social Science
657 department where the new chair hired at the end of my focal year for their expertise in teaching

658 literacy, but who had no background in either history or social science and had never taught
659 children.

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

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

670 Listening to the math experts in the building at the time, there was this sense that what
671 we're doing now is okay but [in]getting smarter on that side of the house and talking to
672 other people and looking at their curriculum and looking at what was going on around
673 [city], having these outside individuals come in and do audits of our curriculum and have
674 them say, it's not close to where it needs to be, lit the fire under...[trails off]. And it just
675 happened that it was at a transition point that really gave a clean slate to say, 'we really
676 need a new department chair and we need that person to charge forward on this.'

677 This administrator's own knowledge was not enough to challenge the math department chair.
678 They needed to have other experts who could say that the curriculum wasn't right.

679 I was privy to one visit by consultants brought in to audit the Math and ELA teachers
680 near the end of the year, between the two waves of PARCC testing. The consultants popped in
681 and out of classes throughout the morning to evaluate teachers' instruction. After lunch, they met
682 with the department chairs and school administrators to debrief. In that meeting, the lead
683 consultant recapitulated their mission this way,

684 We talked with David [the Dean of Instruction]. What he asked us to do is to go into the
685 classroom thinking about Common Core especially with your [points to Ellie] priorities
686 around questioning. Math: increasing rigor and breaking from processes. We start with
687 EngageNY’s work where they developed a set of good actions you should see around
688 Common Core. So, we were only in [each class] for 20 minutes, so this reflects those
689 actions that are easy to see in 15-20 minutes and what’s challenging. So, we can’t give
690 you feedback on everything. We translated our hand-written notes into a summary and
691 will email that later.

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

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

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

712 The consultants’ feedback maps directly onto the Common Core worldview. Instruction should
713 be deep, focused on “a few, rich tasks”; conceptual rather than just procedural, and more
714 rigorous and less scaffolded (a term of art for making concepts easier to understand). The
715 consultants role is not to fix these issues. They do not leave behind curricula or lesson plans.
716 Instead, they are the referees for what instruction is Common Core-aligned.

717 Achievement College Prep largely sought to make its instruction fit with Common Core
718 by going outside the school. Teachers and department chairs brought in material from textbooks
719 and digital repositories. They hired coaches, department chairs, and consultants who could help
720 teachers develop their classes. Few of these organizations, repositories, or instructional activities
721 were new. They existed before Common Core and were adapting themselves for the new regime.
722 But none of them were provably effective for Common Core. The PARCC, which could
723 determine whether some instructional strategy or curriculum was effective, had only just been
724 invented. Instead, they were evaluated according to whether it they were Common Core-aligned,
725 that is, whether they fit the goals of Common Core.

726 **Discussion**

727 **Education’s Marshmallow Challenge**

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

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

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

738 This is the problem with Common Core – teachers are given the standards and some
739 course material (the noodles and tape) and expected to produce students who pass standardized

740 tests (the tower with a marshmallow at the top). But there are no instructions about how to build
741 the tower or what kinds of noodle structures will hold together.

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

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

751 **Normalizing Failure**

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

756 Some may argue that this was a down year for Achievement. No amount of coupling
757 could have made up for the extraordinary number of snow days, the cultural changes the school
758 was making, or the new test itself. Perhaps this year was harder than most. Every year presents
759 its own unique challenges. However, a failure rate of fifty to eighty percent is much too large to
760 just be a bad year. With rates this low, it is hard to imagine a good year producing a failure rate
761 in the single digits. Further, if it is a bad year, it should have been clear to everyone what the

762 problems were. If schools really have a clear means for producing Common Core-educated
763 students, the “bad year” explanation should be apparent.

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

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

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

784 Conclusion: Regulating Success

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

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

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

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