

## Moves towards greater educational standardization epitomized by Common Core have done little to address the decline of American education.

*The 1960s and 1970s saw a significant decline in national average SAT achievement scores in America. Since that time, successive governments have tried to implement public school reforms, the latest iteration of which is the Common Core policy, which applies consistent national standards. **William Jeynes** argues that the Common Core policy lowers educational standards and has also had a disappointing effect on test results. He argues in order to improve educational outcomes, rather than increasing moves towards educational standardization, policymakers should encourage greater competition between public and private schools through improved school choice.*



It is undeniable that there is a strong positive relationship between educational outcomes and economic prosperity. There is also an understanding that such an association, although less explicit, also exists between educational quality and a nation's political power. With this acknowledgement in mind, the United States has been trying to reinvent its public schooling system ever since the humiliating plummet in its national average of SAT (Scholastic Achievement Test) scores for seventeen consecutive years from 1963 to 1980. The most recent attempt is by instituting yet another government initiated reform called *Common Core*, which seeks to apply consistent national standards in math, language and literature, for K-12 students. The question is, does it work?

The question of whether *Common Core* will work is especially salient, because economists, sociologists, and educators more than ever before acknowledge the almost inextricable relationship between the quality of a nation's education system and its economic prowess. I argue that the introduction of *Common Core* is not a solution to America's educational woes given its disappointing impact on test results, an associated increase in the racial achievement gap and its general lowering of standards. We should instead be encouraging greater competition between public and private schools via school choice.

### The rise and decline of American education

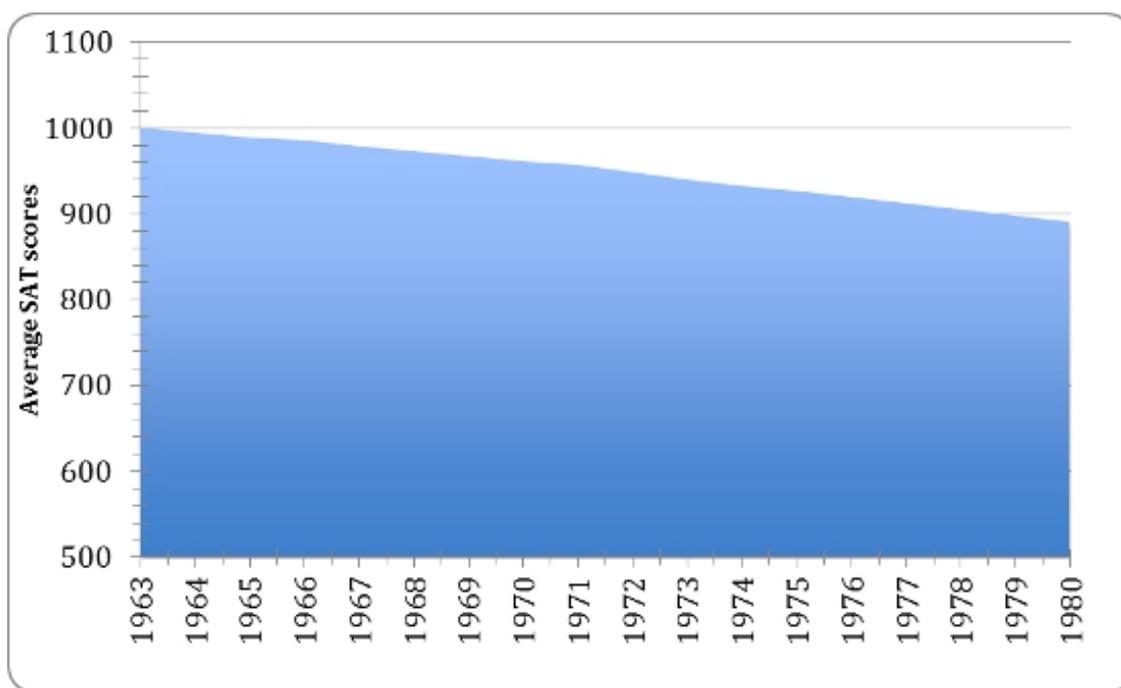
The United States, and prior to that Great Britain, [used to be the exemplar to the world about how to run a system of public schools](#). During the first sixty plus years of the twentieth century, the U.S. Department of Education published books, reports, and other documents that were in demand over most of the world, regarding how to run an elementary and secondary school system. To be sure, during the period from the 1630s to the early 1960s, there was much to emulate in the US schooling system. The education-oriented Puritans put an immense emphasis on literacy. The primary reason for such an emphasis was so that people could read the Bible. In the minds of the Puritans, the ability to read the Bible was not a prerequisite for salvation, but it sure helped. In 1635 the Puritans established the first secondary school in North America, Boston Latin School, and in 1636 founded Harvard in the town of Cambridge, in honor of the university where so many of their leaders had been educated. This emphasis on literacy contributed significantly to New England having the highest literacy rate in the world for three centuries. For example, according to the [1840 census Connecticut](#) had a literacy rate of 99.7 percent.

For a long period of time, it appeared that the United States' schooling paradigm had much to emulate. There were high literacy rates, the highest rate of students going to college, and a vigorous university system that attracted some of the finest minds in the world. One of the most unique features of the American educational landscape, particularly from 1865-1960 was that the nation benefitted from having both strong private and public sectors in education. To be sure, at both the university level and the K-12 level, America's best institutions were private ones. Nearly all of the Ivy League universities had been founded by church denominations and the same was true of the nation's private schools. Nevertheless, at the university level, the University of Virginia, the

University of Michigan, and the University of Wisconsin were among those that had a considerable amount of respect throughout the late 1800s into the present era.

As Figure 1 illustrates, from 1963, American education began signs of faltering. Average SAT scores declined for 17 consecutive years, when in the entire near-forty year history of the test, scores had never declined in even two consecutive years. In 2012 Verbal SAT scores hit another all-time low. Statistical analysis of the decline [indicates](#) that about 62 percent of the decline is due to real academic change and 38 percent is due to changing demographics. In various reports by the Educational Testing Service, the makers of the SAT, factors such as lack of self-discipline, a departure from the Protestant/Christian ethic, and changes in family- structure and - involvement were presented as the primary reasons for the decline.

**Figure 1- Decline in average SAT scores from 1963-1980**



**Note: 1963 average SAT score indexed to 1000**

### The role of Common Core

To the extent that these three factors contributed to its decline, will the *Common Core* curriculum revitalize American education? This question is especially worthy of consideration because most leaders in religious private education emphasize the salience of self-discipline, the Christian ethic, and the family in maximizing academic outcomes. It is therefore no surprise that even though private schools represent only 9 percent of the US school population, they produce about 50 percent of the National Merit Scholarship winners each year.

Unlike the US university situation in which the private and public secular have a healthy level of competition with each other's, and the system thrives, at the K-12 level public schools have a virtual monopoly. It therefore comes as no surprise that K-12 public schools, in contrast to the universities, produce sub-mediocre results. Is *Common Core* the answer or is more competition that includes private schools, as well as applying readily applicable principles recognized by private schools, the solution? A closer look at the results of the implementation of *Common Core* can provide some guidance.

If one visits schools in the United States these days, *Common Core* standards are discussed with teeming regularity. However, now that Americans are being exposed to a plethora of information about *Common Core*, support among the nation's citizenry is drooping precipitously. A recent [Rasmussen poll](#) indicates that support for *Common Core* among parents with school children has plummeted from 52 percent in November 2013 to 34 percent now. Three reasons why that support has dropped relate to the question of whether *Common Core* can solve America's educational woes.

First, the test results from *Common Core* have thus far been very disappointing. The most significant example is New York, one of the first states to implement the *Common Core* standards. The state has reported a significant drop in average test scores. This is particularly true for African American students and youth with learning disabilities. The percentage of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade African American students who scored “below standard” in English Language Arts increased from 15.5 percent before the *Common Core* standards were implemented to a stunning 50 percent afterward. For the 7<sup>th</sup> grade math test, 16.5 percent of African American students scored “below standard” before implementation compared with 70 percent afterward. Scores of those with learning disabilities also plunged so that 75 percent of 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in this category scored “below standard” in English Language Arts.

Second, the racial achievement gap has swelled under *Common Core*. In New York there was a 69 percent increase in the achievement gap between white- versus African American- students in English Language Arts test results. Among eighth grade Latino students, the achievement gap after *Common Core* was implemented increased over 7 times. For math achievement, the white- and African American- achievement gap surged 52 percent. The recent widening of the achievement gap reverses a trend of the gap either narrowing or remaining stable, over the last thirty-five years. The golden age of the gap’s reduction occurred 1) in the late 1970s in part because the achievement scores of white students slumped and 2) in the early 1980s when President Reagan insisted that teachers introduce urban children of color to more demanding material. The achievement gap has remained relatively stable since then, but in New York these early test results suggest that *Common Core* could undo all of the progress that has been made over thirty-five years.

Third, *Common Core* likely lowers standards rather than raises them. For example, although most people associate Algebra I with the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, under *Common Core* the expectations are that this course for most students will be pushed back to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. This is an especially significant development, because it means that the majority of students will not take calculus in high school, which will make them unprepared for admittance to the nation’s most selective colleges. In addition, the *Common Core* standards call for a reduction in the reading of the classics such as *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Pride & Prejudice*, *War & Peace*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo & Juliet*, and the *Brothers Karamazov*. Instead, the *Common Core* emphasizes non-fictional books that are practical for the workplace. There is certainly room for this type of practical emphasis, but most would assert that it should not be done at the expense of learning some of life’s truths through the classics of literature.

In addition to these concerns is the reality that under Presidents Clinton, G.W. Bush, and Obama there have been a series of attempts to make schooling more standardized and to increase a reliance on testing. These actions have been taken with the best of intentions and with the specific goals in mind of raising achievement and reducing the achievement gap. President George W. Bush’s *No Child Left Behind* was the most recent of these attempts. Each of these efforts yielded at best unchanged SAT score results and only minimal improvement in the achievement gap. *Common Core* might best be called *No Child Left Behind* on steroids in terms of its approach to testing and standardization and the results thus far have not been encouraging.

### **Greater school choice as a solution**

The move toward greater standardization and testing in the United States, that is most recently epitomized in the *Common Core* simply have not worked. It is time for the United States to adapt a different strategy to improving on education outcomes that focuses on strategies that are more consistent with the values and priorities that made its education system great between 1630 and 1963. To the degree that self-discipline, religious values, and an emphasis on family appear to be highly related to academic achievement in the United States, it would seem that encouraging a higher degree of competition between private and public schools via [school choice](#) would be a wise experiment. Such competition would not only increase the number of students attending private schools, but would likely cause public schools to learn from private schools and practice more of the values associated with higher scholastic outcomes. Let the competition begin.

*Featured image credit: Ben W (Flickr, CC-BY-NC-2.0)*

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1pXFWyj>

---

## **About the author**

**William Jeynes** – *California State University, Long Beach*

William Jeynes is a Professor of Education at California State University, Long Beach. His research interests cover a wide range of issues that include education, psychology, economics, history, religion, and sociology. His multidisciplinary approach has helped enable him to develop special relationships with the US and Korean governments. He has done a considerable amount of quantitative and qualitative research on how to bridge the achievement gap, parental involvement, religious commitment, historical trends, school choice, family structure, religious schools, discrimination, bullying, reading instruction, and public policy. He has written for the White House and for both the G.W. Bush and Obama administrations.



- CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 2014 LSE USAPP