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## Why Common Core will fail

By Paul Zachos and Monica Meissner, Commentary - Updated 12:32 pm, Tuesday, December 30, 2014

### **To improve an educational program you need to know three things:**

The goals for learning;

How to determine if those goals are being reached; and

How to best help learners attain the goals.

How well learners have attained the goals is actually the most central and important piece of information. It guides our decisions and tells us whether our program is succeeding. No other information is so powerful.

A glimmering of this insight emerged at the end of the 20th century among those who initiated the standards-based educational reform movement. Educational standards are simply goals for learning. The Common Core State Standards Initiative has taken this a step further by articulating a sequence of math and English Language Arts goals that its designers believe all U.S. high school graduates should attain to succeed in college and careers.

However, the Common Core movement has not learned from the errors of its predecessors and is now falling into the same trap that has kept them from achieving substantial success: the failure to understand the nature and appropriate use of educational information.

In order to support learning, a teacher needs to know the extent to which students are attaining learning goals. To be educationally useful, this information must identify outcomes that are directly associated with specific learning goals. Contrary to intuition and popular belief, what are called "tests" do not provide this information.

Tests typically blend information from a variety of different learning goals to generate a score. As soon as diverse learning outcomes are combined into a single score, the ability to relate them back to the original learning goals is lost. The information then becomes educationally useless; it cannot be used to help a teacher,

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student or anyone else to decide what needs to be learned next and how best to support that learning.

This test information is used —to rank and compare students, and, when compounded, to generate grades, which become the basis for making life decisions. This business is referred to as high-stakes, norm-referenced testing. Although endemic to almost all schooling, it is not educationally productive. High-stakes, norm-referenced testing is a distraction from the fundamental activities of teaching and learning because it does not supply the information needed to support those activities. Yet this type of testing has been the basis for evaluating every major educational reform since the beginning of the 20th century, and continues to be so for public and charter schools and now for the Common Core for states that accepted federal Race to the Top funds. Consequently, decisions are made that will make or break the lives of students, teachers, schools and school systems on the basis of information that can't be directly used to support or improve learning.

Everyone agrees that reform of our educational institutions is needed. The standards-based movement was a good idea. The idea of not leaving any child behind was a good idea. The Common Core is filled with good ideas. But these good ideas will all drown in the high-stakes, norm-referenced environment because they are not linked to the information needed, nor protected from the misuse of information for non-educational purposes. This obstacle must be overcome to make room for true educational assessment and evaluation.

This perspective can shed light on many contemporary issues and problems in education — the nature and value of charter schools, teacher accountability, social promotion and merit pay. It also explains why the Common Core initiative will fail.

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