How’d we get here?

During the 2010 National Governors Association meeting in Washington D.C., President Obama offered the rationale for the official common core standards:

[Asian nations] want their kids to excel because they understand that whichever country out-educates the other is going to out-compete us in the future. So that’s what we’re up against. That’s what’s at stake -- nothing less than our primacy in the world. And I want to commend all of you for acting collectively through the National Governors Association to develop common academic standards that will better position our students for success.

And at the 2009 National Conference of State Legislatures in Philadelphia, Bill Gates explained how the standards would do their work:

Identifying common standards is just the starting point. We’ll only know if this effort has succeeded, when the curriculum and the tests are aligned to these standards. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently announced that $350 million of the stimulus package will be used to create just these kinds of tests – next generation assessments aligned with the common core. When the tests are aligned with the common standards, the curriculum will line up as well, and it will unleash a
powerful market of people providing services for better teaching. For the first time, there will be a large uniform base of customers looking at using products that can help every kid learn and every teacher get better.

In these two statements, the two most powerful voices on American education present the promise and the peril of common core standards. They show that state officials want our kids to excel for personal success and U. S. leadership in the world. The common core standards (CCS) represent that we are forward thinking people, with shared core values, who are capable of working our way out of the Great Recession in order to face continuous global economic challenges. The promise of America, then, is to be found in the enhanced education of our citizens. Sign me up!

Yet, the President and Mr. Gates are national figures cajoling state officials about public education – a state’s right. In order to explain their interpretation of America’s apparent decline, both assume that schools lack standards and that teachers don’t teach well. Moreover, the President implies (“common standards that will better position”), and Gates explains directly, the mechanism for enhancing education (“we’ll only know if this effort has succeeded”) is to be found in the tight alignment from standards to learning through national testing and national markets for teaching tools. In my father’s terms, “they put their money where their mouth is,” offering cash strapped states and districts financial incentives to accept “the solution.” This suggests, at least to me, that our collectivity and shared core might be more economic, and less altruistic, in character. Might I borrow an eraser?
In this chapter, I take up the context of the common core standards, discussing their history, rationale, and development in order to provide some understanding of how three powerful discourses represented in President Obama’s and Bill Gates’ statements swirl around and through the lives of teachers and students. After a brief review of the common core lineage, I examine the scientific evidentiary base for the rationale, the role of business within their development, and the federal government’s involvement in their implementation. Rather than the closed rational representation presented in the quotations above, I see CCS as a value laden, open project in continuous development – just waiting for teachers, parents, and students to step forward in order to negotiate their design as well as their enactment in classrooms.

CCS History

Advocates connect the common core standards with over sixty-years of sincere efforts to improve the performance of public schools. For example, the Council on Foreign Relations (Klein & Rice, 2012) recommend the common core standards in order to prepare citizens to serve and protect the United States’ interests around the world in a manner reminiscent of the National Defense Act of 1958 – to lead the world in math, science and foreign language. Linda Darling Hammond (2010) understands a carefully implemented common core as a lynch pin in a more equitable distribution of school benefits across social class (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965), race (Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, KS, 1954), and (dis)ability (Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975). Through its Developing Futures in Education initiative (2012), the GE Foundation funds the implementation of CCS in seven cities and exhorts business leader to
promote the standards as the means to increase citizens’ economic productivity and competitiveness (Smith Hughes Act of 1917, Servicemen Readjustment Act of 1944; No Child Left Behind, 2002). In these ways, CCS are intended to further historic missions of national security, equal opportunity, and human capital development.

In a slightly different light, CCS can be seen as a culmination of thirty years of direct calls to increase the academic rigor of failing American schools. The *A Nation At Risk* report (1983) told us, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war” (p. 7). Accordingly, state officials were to raise graduation requirements for all students, develop more robust curricula within all disciplines, and improve their teaching core through better training and higher salaries. Standing before members of the National Governors Association, philanthropic organizations, and large corporations in 1991, President Bush announced the America 2000 educational policy initiative, which challenged schools to graduate 90 percent of their students after they demonstrated competence in challenging subject matter at the end of primary grades, middle school, and high school. A clear champion of these actions at the time, Diane Ravitch (1995) explained, “These goals implied the need for some kind of national standards and national testing” (p. 58).

In 1992, the Department of Education awarded the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the Center for the Study of Reading a $3 million grant to develop just such standards for English language arts. Eighteen months into the project, however, government officials terminated the project for lack of “substantial progress.” The IRA and NCTE eventually published their version of
English language arts standards ([http://www.ncte.org/standards/ncte-ira](http://www.ncte.org/standards/ncte-ira)) - a 12-statement document that did not include the “specification of content – what students should know and be able to do” that the federal government sought (National Council of Education Standards and Testing, 1992, p. 3). Direct federal involvement in the development of national academic standards ended with Congress’ vote to condemn the national history standards in 1994. In President Clinton’s proposal for, and then, President Bush’s version of the reauthorization of the ESEA, states were required to produce rigorous standards and examinations (and submit them to the federal government for approval) in order to verify each student’s adequate yearly progress toward proficiency in English language arts and math.

At the 1996 Education Summit, representatives of the National Governors Association, philanthropic foundations, and business established Achieve to broker support for rigorous state academic standards. Funded generously by the Battelle, Gates, Cisco, GE, JP Morgan and Hewitt Foundations and the Boeing, IBM, Lumina, and State Farm corporations, Achieve’s effectiveness can be demonstrated through its Academic Standards and Assessment Benchmarking Pilot Project and the American Diploma Project that culminated in the *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts* report in 2004. In that report, Achieve identified what it labeled the “common core of English and mathematics academic knowledge or skills, (or benchmarks) that American high school students need for success in college and the workforce.” ([www.achieve.org/history-achieve](http://www.achieve.org/history-achieve)). In its subsequent work, Achieve established an annual review of states’ progress toward developing grade level standards leading to that common core (*Closing the Expectations Gap – 2006 through 2012*). In 2008, Achieve discovered, “a remarkable
degree of consistency in English and mathematics requirements” among states for high school graduation (Out of Many, One, 2008). In 2009, Achieve partnered with the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers in the formal production of the common core standards at each grade level, serving as the project manager as well. In 2010, Achieve became the project manager for Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), one of the two organizations federally funded to produce common core assessments by 2014. In 2011, Achieve began work on Next Generation (K-12) Science Standards.

The final versions of common core standards for English language arts and mathematics were produced within 11 months (June 2009 to June 2, 2010). According to its blue ribbon Validation Committee (2010), the CCS process exceeded the principles the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers set for standards development. Members of a writing team negotiated drafts with a separate working group of English language arts experts, circulating drafts through state departments of education and one public review. According to the Common Core website, the writers fielded over 10,000 comments. In its final report, the Validation Committee concluded, “Unlike past standards-setting efforts, the Common Core State Standards are based on best practices in national and international education, as well as research and input from numerous sources” (p. 4). Although not formally credited in the CCS documents, David Coleman, a member of the English Language Arts Work Team, is acknowledged as the “quiet” architect of those standards (Hess, 2012; Ravitch, 2012; Rotherham, 2011; Toppo, 2012). [Coleman’s (2011) demonstrations of curricular choices
and lesson design are instructive in understanding the developers’ expectations for implementation in classrooms.]

Throughout the development process and into current implementation efforts, CCS officials have insisted that the federal government “had no role in the development of the common core state standards and will not have a role in their implementation.” Yet from the beginning, two states (Texas and Alaska) declined to participate because their governors feared a loss of state control over educational matters. Currently, four states (add Minnesota and Virginia) have yet to adopt the CCS as the model for their state standards. These and other concerned parties point to four federal moves “intended” to compel states to adopt the common core standards.

1) In the same speech to the National Governors Association quoted at the beginning of this chapter, President Obama announced that he would like to make federal Title 1 funding contingent on states adopting the common core standards (Klein, 2010).

2) In Race to the Top regulations, states that adopted the common core standards by August 2, 2010 were awarded extra points in the competition for a portion of $4.5 billion in federal funding (Lewin, 2010).

3) In exchange for agreeing to adopt the common core standards and other favored policies, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan granted states waivers from adequate yearly progress quotas set under the No Child Left Behind law, saving many schools from being categorized as “failing” (Perez-Pena, 2012).

4) As Bill Gates mentioned in the quote cited at the beginning of this chapter, the federal government provided $350 million to two agencies (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium SBAC and PARCC) to develop common core assessments.
Critics argue that each of these incentives made (and make) it difficult for state officials to “choose” not to adopt the common core standards. In their eyes, these acts turn CCS into de facto national standards – an illegality under the original ESEA statute, if mandated by federal authorities.

Creating another concern about “national standards, curriculum and assessment,” David Coleman became the president of the College Board in the Fall of 2012 with the expressed intention to base the SAT and Advanced Placement curricula and tests on the CCS. This is precisely part of Gates’ steps for aligning schooling around the CCS. Although the PARCC and SBAC assessments in all subjects could eventually render the SAT moot, common core curricula for all Advanced Placement courses and evaluations would add academic leverage to the federal and philanthropic financial incentives, inveigling states to adopt and maintain the common core against their better judgments.

The ongoing nature of history is a challenge to anyone attempting to provide context for an event or artifact – history just keeps happening, and as more people consider that context, they find new connections in the past as well. At this moment (Fall 2012), the CCS straddle the tensions within schooling for economic development, equality of opportunity, and global standing. Advocates explain that CCS will meliorate the tensions, and they work strategically to complete the positioning of students for success (Obama) by aligning standards with curricula and assessments (Gates). They worry because, although 46 states have adopted CCS at this point, there are no guarantees that officials from even these states will produce or purchase common curricula, adopt common assessments or set common passing scores. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the standards are still open to
interpretation, and the alignment project is still being negotiated. These are wide-open spaces for teachers, students, and community member to step into in order to participate in the decisions that affect public education.

Evidence for CCS Rationales

In their statements, President Obama and Bill Gates provide two connected rationales for common core standards. First and foremost, they argue that the United States is falling behind other countries in the new global innovation economy, and it’s because our educational system is failing. Second, they locate the remedy for that situation in the realignment of the education system according to a single set of world-class standards that will improve individual and national performance, productivity, and competitiveness. Even governors critical of the “federal” CCS seem to accept these two rationales as evidence-based and accurate (e.g., Mark Dayton, Nikki Haley, and Rick Perry). Yet, others examine that same evidence and ask questions about whether it offers a sufficient basis for the great expense of standards production and school alignment.

Is America falling behind economically? These are decidedly hard economic times for many in the United States. However, few can point with justification toward schools as the cause of these hardships or as the immediate remedy for our sluggish economy. And things aren’t too much better elsewhere. In international comparisons, Americans enjoy (perhaps not equally) the world’s largest economy – still twice as large as its nearest competitor, China. Goldin and Katz (2008) give schools partial credit for the expansion of the U. S. economy during the first half of the twentieth century, but offer no credit to
schools for the continuation of America’s economic growth during the second half or into the 21st century.

We must face facts though. Eventually, China will catch the United States economically - not because the United States is declining - but because China’s workforce is four times larger. Currently, Chinese workers need only be one quarter as productive as their American counterparts in order to maintain its relative status. Any increase in Chinese productivity, and their economy gains ground regardless of American productivity. Since the 1950s, American workers’ productivity has increased steadily, accelerating rather sharply after 1995. Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich (2011) attributes the increase to the rise of technology in the workplace (often displacing workers) and explains that many other countries have relatively the same access to such technology as the United States. Eventually, he reports that America’s 20th century economic advantages will vanish in a competitive world.

Is education responsible for worker productivity? Economist Ha-Joon Chang (2010) doesn’t think so. “What really matters in the determination of national prosperity is not the educational level of individuals, but the nation’s ability to organize individuals into enterprises with high productivity” (p. 179). The ability to organize productively relies on governments’ capacity to provide a range of institutions that encourage investment and risk-taking – a trade regime that protects infant industries; a financial system that provides for patent capitalization; good bankruptcy laws to protect capitalists and a good social safety net to support workers in times of trouble; and public subsidies and regulation for research, development, and training. These are the changes that led to the economic success in the Asian countries that President Obama mentioned. During the last half
In the 21st century, each has realigned its government in order to provide these institutions and policies. Their education systems are a consequence, not the cause of this realignment and rise. Truth be told, the American government facilitated many of these international changes and provided incentives for American business to participate in the expansions at the expense of American labor (Reich, 2011).

Certainly, global economic policy is beyond the reach of American education. Although many from all political stripes argue that the design of American schools was (is) organized to teach workers appropriate dispositions (Bowles and Gintus, 1976; Callahan, 1962; Hess, 2010; Ravitch, 2010), most school subjects were (are) never intended to raise worker productivity directly – I’m thinking the arts, literature, and history. Does that limit their value? Some think so. For example, both Obama and Gates call for more attention to math, science, and technology, and the CCS increases the informational text load for students at every grade in order to ready workers for careers and college (then careers). But even those work “related” academic subjects do not have strong associations with economic development (Wolf, 2002), and we can see that in the very test scores to which Obama and Gates point (Loveless, 2012).

Consider the international rankings among countries according to reading and math scores. On the 2009 PISA for reading, American students were listed 17th among nations - behind the Asian nations as President Obama mentioned, but also behind Poland, Iceland and Estonia. In math, American students were slotted 31st behind Slovenia, United Kingdom, and Portugal. It’s difficult to imagine an economic rubric that would rank all these economies higher than ours. Chang (2010) reports that the amount and quality of schooling is not even highly correlated with worker productivity - let alone causally linked.
Does that mean that we should deemphasize traditional school subjects? Not if we believe those subjects will enrich students’ lives and help them to become good citizens.

*Does the global innovation economy require workers to acquire new skills?*

Remember the knowledge economy is not new. Command over knowledge has always provided economic advantage through technologies. Think China in the first century with paper, movable type, gunpowder, and the compass; Britain in the 19th; or the United States in the first half of the 20th century. These advantaged positions, however, do not mean that every worker in those circumstances commanded that valued knowledge or enjoyed its benefits equally. Thomas Friedman (2012) makes this point indirectly, but clearly. He calls for the U.S. Congress to abandon its efforts to bring Internet access to rural America, diverting those resources in order to provide “ultra high speed bandwidth to the top 5 percent in university towns, which invent the future.” The smart cities around universities, he tells us, must have “an educated populace” with “abundant human intellectual capital,” who will “engage in high performance knowledge exchanges,” using “intelligent objects” to mine data, analyze it, and discover new goods and services. The remaining 95 percent, he continues, must learn to accommodate the flows of resources into smart cities and to support the distribution of the innovations out from their borders. Friedman claims this is America’s only hope to preserve its middle class lives.

In this way, the combination of employing technology to improve productivity and redeployment of resources to support the innovative 5 percent does not translate into new skill demands or the need for more education among all the 95 percent who are to service this economy. (Of course, that’s only true, if we continue to buy the rationale that the primary purpose of schooling is to make all students career or college ready.) The U.S.
Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) represents this reality in its estimate of the 30 fastest growing jobs between 2010 and 2020. Twenty-one of the jobs require a high school diploma perhaps (e.g., a variety of heath aides, construction laborers of many types, and bicycle repair?), six require a BA (health educator, marriage therapist, and event planner), and only three require professional training (veterinarian, biomedical engineer, and physical therapist). All of these occupations and many of the ones that are not growing as fast could require new dispositions perhaps in order to manage more independence from direct supervision, but they don’t seem to require new academic knowledge and skills as claimed in the rationales for CCS. And if it’s new independent dispositions that we need, then will an aligned forced system of education help us to develop them?

Are American schools failing? During the Reagan Administration, the A Nation at Risk report claimed that students were not reaching the same levels of literacy as their parents and grandparents, and therefore, school reform was urgently needed. In a government-sponsored report, the Sandia Laboratory proved the claim to be false – student test scores in the 1980s were higher than during the 1960s or 1940s. Although President George H. W. Bush never released the report, the findings were circulated and published in The Manufactured Crisis (Berliner and Biddle, 1995). And at least some scores are still rising – for 9 year olds, NAEP scores were 12 points higher between 1978 and 2008; but for 17 year olds, the scores remained about the same (Drum, 2012). Not overwhelming successful, but certainly not failing.

Comparisons of international reading scores (Berliner, 2009; Bracey, 2009; Krashen, Lee & McQuillan, 2010) demonstrate that there are two American public school systems - one for the middle class and one for the poor. American schools with few students eligible
for free or reduced lunch score at or above the top international scores, and schools with
high concentrations of eligible students place among the lowest scoring nations. This
achievement gap between rich and poor school systems has increased by 40 percent since
1970 (Reardon, 2011) as income segregation within metropolitan areas has doubled
(Reardon & Bischoff, 2011) and the incomes of 80 percent of American families have
stagnated (U. S. Census Bureau/The New York Times, 2012). Although these findings make
it clear that American public schools do not serve all citizens well, these researchers do not
conclude that the public school system is a failure. Rather they identify out-of-school
factors and inadequate social policies as well as in-school factors that explain the gap
between the two systems. They call for coordinated strategies, reminiscent of the War on
Poverty, to address poverty, segregation, and school achievement simultaneously.

Are common standards a key to closing the differences among these scores? In the
Brown Center Report on American Education, Tom Loveless (2012) reminds us that
countries scoring above and below the United States on international tests employ national
standards, and therefore, common standards cannot be the sole cause of high achievement.
Although Gates could be correct and common standards aligned with curricula and testing
explain high scores, Finland’s scores and system confounded that conclusion. Finnish
schools “produce” high scores, but de-emphasize standardized testing (Sahlberg, 2011).
Like all factors, standards appear to be woven into a network that explains (or doesn’t) a
country’s academic performance. Pulling one strand, like common core standards, as the
cause of success or failure, is arbitrary at best and misleading at worst. Why not choose the
social safety net for families as “the factor” – after all, 80 percent of students in Singapore
qualify for and live in public housing, and their scores are higher than ours?
Note also that the income achievement gap persists in every state in the union. This remains true despite the No Child Left Behind requirement that each state develop and enact rigorous academic standards. Early in the NCLB process, the Bush Administration checked and proclaimed each state to have rigorous standards. If uniformity of standards (a common core) were a solution, then the gap within states should have narrowed markedly over the last decade. According to Reardon (2011), the racial achievement gap has narrowed slightly, however the income gap widened during that period. Neither standards nor commonality seem to be key.

*Are standards likely to raise student achievement overall?* The second rationale for CCS assumes that the quality of the standards and the rigor with which they are applied will raise every student’s achievement and reduce the gaps that exist among social groups. Building on Whitehurst’s (2009) earlier study of the impact of state standards on NAEP scores, however, Loveless (2012) doubts the likely impact of CCS on student achievement beyond what state standards have already achieved. He shows that the quality of the state standards as judged by experts does not predict student achievement; that the rigor of setting high cutoff scores to demonstrate proficiency does not predict student achievement; and that a combination of the two does not predict the narrowing of the gaps. Loveless explains, “Within state variation is four or five times larger than the variation between states” (p. 4 emphasis added). He adopts a popular CCS metaphor to explain this statistical finding. While advocates claim that CCS will overcome the achievement differences between Massachusetts and Mississippi students, Loveless shows that every state already has mini Massachusetts and Mississippi contrasts within its borders.
Are the CCS rationales evidence based? No – at least not as President Obama and Bill Gates have articulated them, although the English language arts standards themselves could be evidenced based. The United States is not behind economically, although all citizens do not share in its success equally. The “new” global innovation economy does not demand new skills for all or even most workers. American schools are not failing generally, although American policies and institutions do not and have not historically served all social groups well. Standards are not easily discernable as a key to difference in academic outcomes among nations or states. And the quality of standards and rigor of alignment are not likely to have the desired effects. In summary, we lack a compelling evidentiary base for the idea of CCS or the subsequent national alignment of curriculum and assessment.

Why, then, did the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State Education Officers, and four administrations spend so much time, energy, and money to create the common core standards? And why do so many philanthropic foundations, think tanks, and business groups push them and fund them? Larry Cuban suggests that answers to such questions can be found in the pragmatics of policy making (see larrycuban.wordpress.com). Policy makers focus on solving problems, but they don’t have ready solutions to apply (or it wouldn’t be a considered a problem). To begin, policy makers and their associates (this can be a large group--from citizens to support staff to lobbyist of all stripes) struggle to name the problem and to propose possible solutions. Before policy makers try any, they compare and contrast these alternatives in terms of probable cost and benefits until they decide on which one(s) to test in the real world. As Cuban (2010) states, “a policy is both a hypothesis and argument that a particular action should be taken to solve a problem. That action, however, has to be politically acceptable
and economically feasible.” Although policy making might appear to be a rational process, policy makers must work within established political priorities.

CCS as politically acceptable and economically feasible policy

Stripped of their claims of a declining economy, failing schools, and an apparent solution, all that’s left in President Obama’s and Bill Gates’ statements is the development of a national market for technological tools in order to reorganize teaching and learning. “When the tests are aligned with the common standards, the curriculum will line up as well, and it will unleash a powerful market of people providing services for better teaching. For the first time, there will be a large uniform base of customers looking at using products that can help every kid learn and every teacher get better.” This is a remarkably candid statement that lets political ideology shine through the representation of CCS as a rational solution and their frame of CCS as the means to develop America’s human capital in order to compete in the global innovation economy.

An ideology is a shared set of ideas and beliefs that serve to justify and support the interests of a particular group. Gates tells us that national alignment will serve as the catalyst for “a powerful market of people providing services for better teaching” that will invent the future of education. Within this change, schools and teachers become “customers looking at using products” once these innovators complete their designs. It doesn’t take a linguist to recognize the relative power of the agents in Gates’ hypothesis and argument for CCS. In fact, Gates offers a smaller scale of Friedman’s proposal. Public resources currently devoted to public education should be (are being) redirected to private businesses ready to discover new technologies for schools, teachers, and then, students to
consume. In this way, Gates engages in the ideological practice of naming positions for participants through his articulation of apparently normal everyday activities – production and consumption of commodities. And with these positions come expected dispositions – encoded in the standards and modeled in the official demonstrations of CCS practices.

Gates assigns government officials positions as well. Previously (“for the first time”), government regulation of public education as a state right prevented these innovators from producing the needed technologies because the markets were too small and varied. Now, however, with federal backing and state “choice,” CCS erases state lines and empowers business to invest and take risks while anticipating sizeable profits through economies of scale. This position fits well with Chang’s (2010) explanation of how government action can actually increase a nation’s prosperity by organizing actors into productive enterprises. With Gates’ phrase and his recommended actions, one hundred and fifty years of normal governmental practice surrounding public education becomes the barrier that stands (stood) in the way of this powerful market and profits.

That’s the political ideology of neoliberalism seeping through. Neoliberals pursue traditional liberal goals – individual liberty, equality before the law, and protection of property - using market relations rather than government policies, uniting business, philanthropy, think tanks, government officials, educational experts, taxpayers, school officials, teachers, and students through market solutions. All the key concepts of neoliberalism are included: rule of the market, deregulation, privatization, reduction of public expenditures and individualism. According to this ideology, by opening public education to market forces, competition among private companies will replace current teaching practices with the most efficient and effective technologies available in a never-
ending cycle of creative destruction. This is what "powerful" means in Gates’ remarks. In search of profits, businesses ("people providing services for better teaching") will continuously compete to find new ways to meet market demand. If left free from government regulation, these market efficiencies will reduce the labor costs of public education while they improve its effective services to all those individuals, who choose to use it as the means to acquire credentials in order to raise personal income potential.

Through this ideological lens, then, the primary problem to be addressed is not how to equalize the two public school systems that serve the better off and poor, but rather how to create, maintain and nurture market forces in American public schools (as well as all other aspects of life). CCS and alignment are the hypothesis and the argument to address that problem. In this light, the 30 years of calls for “school reform” from A Nation At Risk to Race to the Top can be understood simply as ideological practices to make the creation of this market and these positions appear normal to the general public and all the participants (despite the history of state and local control). And it seem to have been successful; think about the last time you heard someone or some group with power speak against the neoliberal mantra that American schools are in dire need of reform if we are to compete in the global innovation economy.

Although this market will bring jobs and innovation, the market is not a good set of organizing principles for public education, - that is, if you seek policy and action to rectify the existing inequalities. Demand in the market around CCS will create private jobs (and profits) in the design and marketing of new teaching tools (including the tests of course), and at a different income level, it will spawn employment in their manufacture, delivery, and maintenance as well. Each state will need workers to facilitate and to monitor
teachers’ and students’ access to and use of these new technologies, with national companies vying to prepare both groups for measured success. And if the specific demand appears lucrative enough, then niche markets will emerge to provide new tools to address the income and other achievement gaps. In these ways, CCS can have a direct, but not a dramatic, effect on the American economy, although more school funding will likely flow out of or bypass local economies.

Markets are good at distributing resources efficiently to the producers of commodities for which there is the most demand. Producers seek profits and competitive advantage to secure those profits, and consumers seek use and status through their purchase. Self-regulating exchange is a dispassionate individual cash transaction without regard for history, tradition, externalities (location or consequences for people beyond the exchange), or need. The competition among producers pushes continuous innovation for advantage and cost controls to insure profits within the limits of what consumers are willing (not necessarily able) to pay. Within markets, however, there is little security or stability for the producer, the consumer or the workers and communities in between them. Innovation can render commodities, companies, and skills (workers) moot with severe short-term consequences for all involved. Fluctuation in price, income/wealth and credit determine who can and cannot consume regardless of their human needs. Although markets produce innovation and jobs (somewhere for someone), even Adam Smith (1776) acknowledged that markets cannot and do not keep people in mind, and therefore, they must be tempered with moral regulations of fairness and justice.

That temperance is somewhat evident in President Obama’s and Bill Gates’ rhetorical representation and frame for CCS, but only the “powerful market” remains in the
light of evidence. CCS insures only that public schools will have continuous innovation and a redistribution of public resources to private businesses competing for market advantage with their focus on profit. And as Whitehurst (2009) and Loveless (2012) demonstrated, there is little reason to believe that innovation and profit will translate into more fair or just distributions of the benefits of schooling. So this is how we got here. The ideology of neoliberalism - with its faith in the market to solve all social problems - makes CCS a politically acceptable and economically feasible policy to address the problem of how to improve the performance of schools.

But, is this the way we wish to live together?

Public schools could be and should be the American institution to promote fairness and justice - places where citizens learn to appreciate what markets can do and what they cannot do – what they have done and what they have not done. Part of this curriculum would be to understand the fact that markets are neither natural nor free (Chang, 2010). They are a human artifact that people brought into existence, work to maintain, and are therefore, changeable, if so desired. As Smith phrased it, markets can be and should be tempered in order to keep people in mind more often. After all, that’s what an economy is supposed to be for in a democracy – to serve people’s needs fairly and justly.

I want to believe that President Obama, Bill Gates and other advocates of CCS believe this to true as well. However, their neoliberal ideology insures that we can’t get there from here by forcing dispassionate market principles into schools - not through CCS and aligned systems (Loveless, 2012), turn around school improvement grants (Trujillo & Renee, 2012), teacher financial incentives (Berry, Eckert & Bauries, 2012), charter schools...
(Baker & Ferris, 2011; Miron, Urshchel, Mathis & Tornquist, 2010) or Teach for America (Heilig & Jez, 2010). And we can’t get there by subtracting the human caring from the curriculum as David Coleman suggested when promoting CCS to the New York State Department of Education (April, 2011).

Do people know the two most popular forms of writing in the American high school today? ...It is either the exposition of a personal opinion or it is the presentation of a personal matter. The only problem, forgive me for saying this so bluntly, the only problem with those two forms of writing is as you grow up in this world you realize people really don’t give a shit about what you feel or what you think. What they instead care about is can you make an argument with evidence, is there something verifiable behind what you’re saying or what you think or feel that you can demonstrate to me. It is rare in a working environment that someone says, “Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday, but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood.” That is rare.

If Mr. Coleman’s criterion were true, then no one should care for or accept the official argument for CCS because the only substantial evidence is that metaphorical analysis from “Johnson” concerning the CCS potential for a national market for new teaching and learning tools. Nor should teachers, students and school communities accept the positions of consumers that Gates offers them because there is little evidence that attests to the effectiveness of CCS, the examinations, or the tools to help all students learn more. And the only “something verifiable behind” the official argument is an opinion among powerful groups that the world and all that’s in it should be run like a self-regulating market and that
people are little more than human capital. The evidence of the Great Recession and its aftermath certainly brings that opinion into question here and around the world.

This lack of evidence for CCS opens spaces for teachers, students and communities to step forward as agents in the ongoing developments of school reform. Public schools do need reform based on ideologies that connect schoolwork with fairness and justice in our civil society (as well as with our economy). In Mr. Coleman’s terms, these steps would demonstrate that teachers, students, and communities “give a shit” about the feelings, thoughts, and lives of all in America – particularly the circumstances of their childhoods. Caring about those circumstance refocuses reform on the imbalance in the learning outcomes among income segregated schools, but without the limitations of neoliberal ideology. While some of the content within the CCS might be helpful in this endeavor, there are 40 years of failed neoliberal social policy to renegotiate as well. Reform of schooling must take place outside as well as inside schools. We all might ask the advocates of CCS, “What are your common core standards for fairness and justice for our students’ lives outside our classrooms?”

Former Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich, argues that such questions are necessary because,

Nothing good happens in Washington, or for that matter, in state capitals, unless good people outside Washington and those state capitals make it happen. Unless they push very hard. Unless they’re organized, mobilized, and energized to force the political system to respond. (as quoted in Cook, 2012, 36)