

U.S.

The Schoolmaster

David Coleman is an idealistic, poetry-loving, controversy-stoking Rhodes Scholar and a former McKinsey consultant who has determined, more than almost anyone else, what kids learn in American schools. His national curriculum standards and pending overhaul of the SAT have reignited a thorny national debate over how much we should expect from students and schools, and how much is out of their control.

DANA GOLDSTEIN OCTOBER 2012 ISSUE

ON A HOT June morning in suburban Delaware, in the chintzy, windowless ballroom of a hotel casino, David Coleman stood at a podium reciting poetry. After reading Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," a classic example of the villanelle form, Coleman wanted to know why green is the only color mentioned in the poem, why Thomas uses the grammatically incorrect *go gentle* instead of *go gently*, and how the poet's expression of grief is different from Elizabeth Bishop's in her own villanelle, "One Art."

This article appears in the October 2012 issue.

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"Kids don't wonder about these things," Coleman told his audience, a collection of 300 public-school English teachers and administrators. "It is you as teachers who have this obligation" to ask students "to read like a detective and write like an investigative reporter."

The educators shifted in their ballroom chairs, sipping coffee and gossiping amongst themselves. They showed minimal interest in a pre-lunch discussion about modernist poetry. Teachers are used to these sorts of events—summer conferences to bring them up to date on the latest dictates from their state's Department of Education. That day's iteration was a training session on how to implement the new Common Core curriculum standards, which 48 states and territories are rolling out in classrooms over the next

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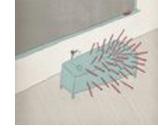


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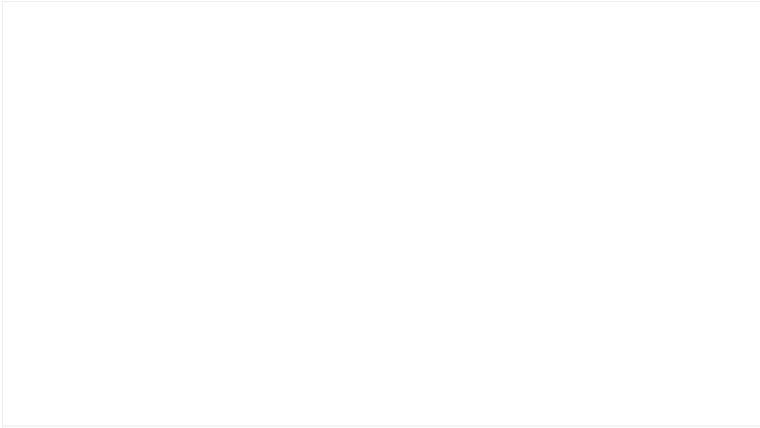
The Writing Revolution



When New Dorp High School was faced with closure, the principal launched a dramatic new writing initiative—one

model for
educational
reform.
by Peg Tyre

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FEEDBACK

The world of education policy is filled with passionate advocates for social justice, but rarely does one meet an education wonk like David Coleman, a 42-year-old former McKinsey consultant in a dark suit and tie, who is an utterly romantic believer in the power of the traditional liberal arts. A Rhodes Scholar whose conversation leaps gracefully from Plato to *Henry V*, he holds advanced degrees in English literature from Oxford and classical philosophy from Cambridge.

Coleman was a lead architect of the Common Core standards, which emphasize canonical literature—think Shakespeare, Toni Morrison, Pablo Neruda—and serious nonfiction texts across all subjects, from math (Euclid’s *Elements*), to science (medical articles by *The New Yorker’s* Atul Gawande), to social studies (the Declaration of Sentiments from the feminist Seneca Falls Convention of 1848). He has spent the past year traveling from state to state, showing English teachers how to lead a close reading of great literature.

Bud Read, the curriculum director of the Colonial School District, in New Castle, Delaware, attended Coleman’s presentation and came away impressed, though only cautiously optimistic. Sixty percent of the students in Read’s district are poor, he told me, and “the biggest resistance [among teachers] will be whether they believe kids can handle the more complex, difficult texts.”

Teacher of the Year for California in 2007, aired a common complaint on his blog: Coleman “has zero K–12 teaching experience. Should we really be learning how to cook from a person who’s never been in the kitchen?” But what has proved most controversial is Coleman’s unilateral vision for American students, of college as the goal and a college-prep curriculum as the means. In public education, a new reform is always coming down the pike. Longtime educators develop a healthy cynicism about which grand policy ideas will trickle down to classrooms and which will sputter during implementation or simply go out of fashion. But David Coleman’s ideas are not just another wonkish trend. They have been adopted by almost every state, and over the next few years, they will substantively change what goes on in many American classrooms. Soon, as Coleman steps into his new position as the head of the College Board, they may also affect who applies to college and how applicants are evaluated. David Coleman’s ideas, for better or worse, are transforming American education as we know it.

“I’M SCARED OF rewarding bullshit,” Coleman told me after the Delaware session. “I don’t think it’s costless at all.”

By bullshit, Coleman means the sort of watered-down curriculum that has become the norm in many American classrooms. For nearly two centuries, the United States resisted the idea, generally accepted abroad, that all students should share a certain body of knowledge and develop a specific set of skills. The ethos of local control is so ingrained in the American school system—and rifts over culture-war land mines such as teaching evolutionary theory are so deep—that even when the country began to slip in international academic rankings, in the 1980s, Congress could not agree on national curriculum standards.

As a result, states and school districts were largely left to their own devices, and test-makers were hesitant to ask questions about actual content. Education schools, meanwhile, were exposing several generations of English teachers to the ideas of progressive theorists like Lisa Delpit and Paulo Freire, who argued that the best way to empower children and build literacy skills—especially for students from poor or racially marginalized households—was to assign them books featuring characters similar to themselves, and to encourage them to write freely about their own lives (see Peg Tyre’s “[The Writing Revolution](#),” also in this education report).

While culturally diverse reading lists are crucial—as soon as 2020, the majority of American public-school students will be nonwhite—the blunt application of these ideas has sometimes led to reading lists curated more for inspirational potential than for literary prowess. *A Child Called “It,”* a memoir by a man who was horrifically abused as a child by his alcoholic mother, is one of the most commonly read books in American English classes. Another strand of education theory prioritizes getting kids reading rather than insisting they read high-quality books. Research by Sandra Stotsky at the University of Arkansas has found that the average American high-school student is most frequently assigned books at a middle-school reading level, and that the difficulty of assigned reading does not increase between ninth and 11th grade.

For Coleman, the problem lies not just in what kids are reading, but in how they’re taught to think about it. He told the Delaware teachers about a sample of instructional

encouraged to discuss whether they agreed or disagreed with Martin Luther King Jr.'s ideology of nonviolence as articulated in his letter from Birmingham jail, but they were rarely asked to identify a particular argument King made or evidence he marshaled to support it.

Coleman does not bother hiding his disdain for the facile opining encouraged by this approach. He took fire for noting, at a meeting of New York educators last year, that a boss would never tell an employee, "Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday, but before that, I need a compelling account of your childhood."

Coleman's faith in the traditional liberal arts is deep-rooted. A product of Manhattan public schools, he was raised by proudly intellectual parents. His father, a psychiatrist, took Coleman to art museums, where the two spent hours on end. His mother was a dean at the New School while he was growing up, and is now the president of Bennington College. She is known as a critic of academic hyper-specialization and as a defender of classic liberal-arts education.

To prepare for his bar mitzvah at age 13, Coleman learned to chant in Hebrew the story of Joseph interpreting the pharaoh's dreams. He recalls debating the parable's many interpretations with his family rabbi, telling me proudly, "There's no watered-down version of the Bible."

As an undergraduate at Yale, Coleman launched a program in which college students volunteered to tutor at New Haven's James Hillhouse High School, which was predominantly black and poor. While working with the teenagers on poetry, Coleman was frustrated by the fact that "30 years after the civil-rights movement, none of these students were close—not even close—to being ready for Yale. They'd had so little practice with commanding difficult text."

After his Rhodes scholarship in England, Coleman was turned down for a job teaching public high school in New York. So he accepted a job at McKinsey that involved advising urban school districts. He went on to co-found the Grow Network, a company that sliced and diced standardized test scores for analysis during the rollout of No Child Left Behind (it was sold to McGraw-Hill in 2004). But Coleman felt an increasing desire to focus on what kids were actually learning. In 2007, with two partners, he launched the nonprofit consultancy Student Achievement Partners to promote national curriculum standards as a means to finally close the academic achievement gaps he had observed throughout his career, beginning in that New Haven classroom with the kids who weren't ready for Yale.

Previous national-curriculum movements had percolated through Washington, but the Common Core was the result of a novel political strategy. In 2009, the bipartisan National Governors' Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, a coalition of superintendents, hired Student Achievement Partners to lead the process of researching, writing, and disseminating a voluntary set of curriculum standards in English and math. (Common Core standards are recommendations; states and school districts retain the ability to define their own reading lists and student assignments, as long as they are of equal or greater rigor.) The hope was that if enough states opted in, the standards would effectively become national—and that is essentially what happened

students using standardized exams designed to match the Common Core standards.

Coleman drew on more than just a classicist's affection for tradition when marketing the Common Core to state policy makers across the country. He often cites data from ACT scores, which this year showed that only one in every four American high-school graduates is ready to do college-level reading, writing, science, and computation. He also refers to research by the Minnesota College Readiness Center's Paul Carney, who found that almost a third of college students enrolled in his college's remedial writing courses had actually earned above-average grades in high-school English. The gap was partly due to the different types of writing valued by high schools and colleges: while high-school teachers rewarded students for the organization and wording of their essays, college professors placed greater value on strong thesis statements backed by evidence from the curriculum. This mismatch of expectations helps explain why 20 percent of incoming freshmen at four-year colleges, and about half at community colleges, are assigned to non-credit-bearing remedial courses.

To bring K–12 writing standards in line with college requirements, the Common Core, beginning in the elementary grades, asks students to write about specific reading assignments, and to cite textual evidence to back their ideas; in later grades, writing about personal feelings, opinions, and experiences is discouraged. High-school juniors and seniors, according to Common Core instructional materials, should be able to:

analyze Thomas Jefferson's 'Declaration of Independence,' identifying its purpose and evaluating rhetorical features such as the listing of grievances ... [and] compare and contrast the themes and argument found there to those of other U.S. documents of historical and literary significance, such as the Olive Branch Petition.

With the Common Core, Coleman worked to reshape public education from kindergarten up. Now, as the incoming president of the College Board—the nonprofit that administers the SAT, the Advanced Placement program, and a number of other testing regimens—he hopes to effect change from the top down, by shifting what is expected of students applying to college and, he hopes, by increasing the number of students who apply in the first place. Coleman's most radical idea is to redesign the SAT, transforming it from an aptitude test intended to control for varying levels of school quality, to a knowledge test aligned with the Common Core. He describes this change as a way to put applicants on an equal playing field, a message to “poor children and all children that their finest practice will be rewarded.”

To critics of standardized testing, this thinking is willfully naive. Whether because of expensive tutors, savvier parents, or more-effective schools, any rejiggering of the SAT is unlikely to close the large test-score gap between affluent and poor students. “It's hard to use the SAT as a driver of social justice, because tests tend to reproduce, not upend, social hierarchies,” says Nicholas Lemann, the author of *The Big Test*, a history of the SAT, and the dean of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. “Everybody is always looking for the test on which people from different races and classes do the same, but it doesn't exist.”

THE TENSION BETWEEN Coleman's idealistic vision of a college-prep curriculum for all

lightbulb moment at Hillhouse High is compelling on a social-justice level, but does preparing students for the Ivy League make sense as a universal priority for education reform?

Anthony Carnevale, the director of the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, thinks not. Carnevale is intimately acquainted with the inner workings of the College Board: for 10 years, he served as a vice president at ETS, the organization that partners with the Board to develop the SAT. Any K–12 curriculum whose goal is to prepare all students for four-year colleges is “one size fits all,” Carnevale told me, and so will leave behind the majority of students who don’t feel particularly engaged by academics, or whose socioeconomic disadvantages make success in the liberal arts unlikely. If Coleman’s College Board really wants to prevent high-school students from dropping out—a focus of the organization’s latest advocacy campaign—it ought to develop an occupationally focused corollary to its Advanced Placement program, Carnevale suggests: not “Math for Harvard” but “Math for Heating, Ventilation, and Air-Conditioning.”

This type of tracking is anathema to many education reformers, and for good reason: As recently as the 1970s, most high schools expected to send only a small minority of their graduates to college, typically white students from well-educated families. Vocational programs were a decent alternative to the academic track when a booming manufacturing economy could guarantee a living wage to non-college-educated workers, and an opportunity for their children to achieve at higher levels than they did. But those ladders have collapsed over the past several decades. In response, policy makers have proposed an educational ideology of “college for all”—whether a four-year bachelor’s degree or a two-year occupational license, both following a uniformly rigorous high-school curriculum.

The problem is that by waiting until college to begin tracking students according to their career interests, the American education system may be consigning more and more young people to poverty. Youth unemployment is at a staggering 17.1 percent in the U.S., compared with less than 8 percent in Germany and Switzerland. These nations link high-school curriculum directly to the world of work, placing students in private-sector internships that typically lead to full-time, paying jobs. The Common Core, on the other hand, has a blanket definition of “college and career ready,” which, according to Carnevale, ignores the reality that each student has different strengths and weaknesses, and that every job requires a specific set of skills—some of which are best taught in the workplace, not in the classroom. Not to mention that with almost 54 percent of recent college graduates jobless or underemployed, and with total student debt surpassing \$1 trillion, college has become a much riskier investment than it once was.

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Coleman counters this critique with the classic case for a liberal-arts education: that it teaches students how to think, providing a powerful intellectual foundation for any line of work. “Students need to be ready for their jobs to change,” he says, “and in order to be ready for change, students need the core tools of building knowledge: literacy and math.”

Perhaps the deepest political obstacle to raising academic standards for *all* students is that, at least initially, large majorities of those students will likely fail. Most experts believe that faithfully testing the Common Core standards would result in only a small minority of American children being declared “on track” for college or a career. Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, a critic of teachers unions and supporter of online learning, is a hero in many education-reform circles. He is also one of the Common Core’s most vocal Republican champions. Like the pundits who argue that banks should have been allowed to fail in 2008, as a cautionary tale for world markets, Bush believes that many children, teachers, and schools may have to be declared “failing” before the public understands the urgency of school reform.

“The big fight will be coming in 2014, when we begin to implement and assess these standards,” Bush told me. “If a third are ready, what will the response of states be then? Will they do what they historically have done, which is to pull back and say ‘Oh my God, that’s not fair, excuse, excuse, excuse’? Or will they accept responsibility to say ‘That’s the fact, that’s where we are now. Maybe 40 percent of our kids are ready if we benchmark them against the world?’”

Bush’s tough-love position is easy for a former politician to take, but less so for a current elected official. After all, no governor or legislator wants to preside over plummeting test scores. Pressure to roll back the Common Core or to relax the tests may be intense.

Coleman admits that the Core will probably lead to “a short-term reduction in [test] scores,” but he seems to have made peace with this reality as a necessary hardship on the road to his academic utopia. And that utopia—where classrooms are intellectually stimulating havens, where dreams of college motivate all students, where college itself is a smart investment—is deeply appealing, especially to those of us who have found the liberal arts to be inspiring and central to our own lives. Yet for many American students, perhaps even the majority, that may never be the case. Coleman’s refusal to acknowledge this possibility comes from a place of optimism, but that sentiment will not ease the way for these students when they emerge into a world for which, despite David Coleman’s best intentions, they are woefully underprepared.

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