A Crisis of Confidence: How Educators Can Restore Faith in Public Education

By Jason Turner, Malbert Smith III, Ph.D. and Steve Lattanzio
In 2012, *Education Week* reported that confidence in public schools had fallen to an all-time low of 29 percent (Smith, Turner, & Lattanzio, Public Schools: Glass Half Full or Half Empty, 2012; Jones, 2012). A year later, the annual Gallup poll reported that confidence in public schools was up slightly to 32 percent (Mendes & Wilke, 2013). With a standard error of measurement of +/- 4 percent, confidence was basically unchanged from the previous year. Unfortunately, the most recent Gallup poll, released in June of 2014, indicates that public confidence in our schools has slipped to 26 percent (Riffkin, 2014).

The continuing erosion of public confidence in an institution such as public education—an institution vital to our country’s future—should be of critical concern to us all. As a country, the U.S. educates approximately 50 million students per year, across 15,000 school districts and in close to 100,000 schools. Yet despite this massive undertaking, only 26 percent of our citizens express confidence in the work public schools are doing.

In 2012, when Gallup first reported that confidence in our public schools was at an all-time low, we decided to examine whether this perception was justified and warranted (Smith, Turner, & Lattanzio, Restoring Faith in Public Education, 2012). In “Restoring Faith in Public Education” and the 2013 follow up, “Miles to Go Before We sleep: The Successes of U.S. Education and the Promises Left to Keep”, we argued that a variety of student outcome measures indicate that, while our schools can and need to improve, the abysmal lack of public confidence is wholly unwarranted. In our previous papers we have examined the public’s plummeting confidence against empirical student measures such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress Long Term Trend (NAEP LTT), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS).

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1 The change in confidence in public schools from 2012 (29%) to 2013 (32%) was +3%. Estimated standard errors (SE) are 1.4% (n = 1,004) and 1.2% (n = 1,529) respectively, resulting in a joint SE of 1.9%, and a 95% confidence interval (CI) of +/-3.6%, or a one-sided 95% CI of +3.1%. +3% is within both bounds, which means that there was no significant change or increase in public confidence between 2012 and 2013, although the lack of precision in Gallup’s reported percentages should be noted. The change in confidence in public schools from 2013 (32%) to 2014 (26%) was -6%. Estimated SEs are 1.2% (n = 1,529) and 1.4% (n = 1,027) respectively, resulting in a joint SE of 1.8%, and a 95% CI of +/-3.6%, or a one-sided 95% CI of -3.0%.-6% is outside of both bounds, which means that there was a significant change and decrease in public confidence between 2013 and 2014. The change in confidence in public schools from 2012 (29% and the previous low) to 2014 (26%) was -3%. Estimated SEs are 1.4% (n = 1,004) and 1.4% (n = 1,027) respectively, resulting in a joint SE of 2.0%, and a 95% CI of +/-3.3%, or a one-sided 95% CI of -3.3%. -3% is inside of both bounds, which means that there was no significant change or decrease in public confidence between 2012 and 2014.
We also analyzed additional trends like graduation and dropout rates. Since there is no new student data from NAEP LTT (the next assessment is scheduled for 2016), PIRLS (scheduled for 2016) or TIMSS (scheduled for 2015), we will not be able to update these trends. However, we have updated our analysis this year with data from AP assessments and post-secondary matriculation.

**A GROWING CYNICISM**

Before addressing the issue of public confidence in education, we think it is important to step back and view confidence across all of the institutions included in Gallup’s survey. In taking this macro view it is fairly obvious that the public is growing increasingly cynical. Gallup recently released the results of their 2014 annual survey gauging public confidence in 16 U.S. institutions. Gallup has conducted the influential survey since 1973, and taken as a whole, the annual report captures a revealing snapshot of Americans’ attitudes on their government, businesses and other bedrock institutions of society. The most provocative finding from the recent survey is the severe decline in public confidence for the U.S. Congress. Only 7 percent of respondents reported having ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in our legislative body. It is worth noting that not only is a 7 percent confidence level the lowest level of confidence that Congress has ever received, but that 7 percent is the lowest level that any of the institutions included in the Gallup survey have ever received. In fact, as the Gallup report makes clear, Congress is thus far the only institution to ever receive a confidence rating in the single digits (Riffkin, 2014).

Congress’ arrival at their current nadir is clearly just the latest stop for the institution’s long slide toward diminished confidence. Since its highest level of confidence of 42 percent in 1973, Congress has been sliding downward each passing year with but a few brief blips and surges over the past four decades. Stepping back from Congress’ failure to inspire even moderate levels of confidence, we can see a disturbing trend emerge for reported confidence in public institutions as a whole. With a few notable exceptions, U.S. confidence in just about all public institutions has been trending downward with each passing year (Gallup, 2014).
The full table of historical data can be found here. In Figure 1 we have compiled a truncated version that details the percentage decline in public confidence for each institution.

**FIGURE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>% Drop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small Business</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet News</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical System</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Business</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>% Drop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organized Labor</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supreme Court</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Schools</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banks</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidency</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV News</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While there are a few notable exceptions, overall public confidence in U.S. institutions has been steadily eroding for decades. Only three of the 16 institutions (military, police and small business) demonstrate relatively stable levels of public confidence. Other institutions that remain moderately stable only remain so because they were remarkably low to begin with. For example, confidence in the criminal justice system has actually risen, but only to 23 percent from an already distressing low of 17 percent. The exception to the trend, American confidence in military, police and small business has been historically high. Confidence in the military, after slipping in years past, has risen dramatically since 2002 (Gallup, 2014).

Unfortunately for most of our institutions, public confidence continues to erode. The dismal level of confidence in our legislative body is just one indicative example of a larger downward trend. While the reasons for this decline are multi-faceted and various, viewing the data as a larger portrait paints a clear picture of a populace on a steady march into deepening cynicism.

*The Atlantic/Aspen Institute Survey also reveals a related cynicism. The most recent Aspen Institute Survey found that almost 60 percent of the respondents believe the U.S. is headed in the *wrong* direction. A full 66 percent of the respondents expect the wealth gap in the U.S. to grow even larger over the next ten years. Additionally, 67 percent answered that they believe money will play an even large role in elections than it currently does (Graham, 2014).*
Consideration of the various reasons for growing disillusionment with our institutions is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the question of why Americans have lost confidence in such a wide swath of our institutions across cultural and political lines is certainly worth considering and is a question that needs asking.

**LOSING FAITH IN PUBLIC EDUCATION**

Evidence of growing cynicism extends all the way down to some of our most cherished institutions, including public schools. Perhaps lost in all the brouhaha over what declining public confidence in Congress portends for the country’s future, confidence in public education has also reached an all-time low. Only 26 percent of Gallup participants indicate a ‘great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in public education—a 6 percent decrease from 2013 and a 29 percent drop from 1973 when public confidence in education was expressed by 58 percent of citizens. This negative trend has been remarkably consistent. As Figure 2 illustrates, confidence in public education has been on the decline ever since Gallup first began their survey in the early 1970s (Gallup, 2014).

**FIGURE 2**

Confidence in Public Schools

In our earlier paper, “Restoring Faith in Public Education”, we argued that a close examination of the data reveals that by many important markers public schools are improving—and in some cases dramatically. Public perceptions regarding the efficacy of public schools may not be tethered to the reality of the progress public education has made. In Figure 3 we mapped the NAEP LTT math and reading performances and the high school dropout rate onto the public confidence graph to offer a contrast between academic performance and public perception (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Although new long-term trends from NAEP data will not be available until 2016, figure 3 illustrates performance for both 9-year-old and 13-year-old students has been rising and trending upward since the 1970s. Despite small dips throughout the 1980s, scores for 9- and 13-year-old students rebounded in the 1990s and have been steadily rising ever since to currently sit at an all-time high for both reading and mathematics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

**FIGURE 3**

Confidence in Public Schools vs. Student Performance

Graduation rates provide even more evidence of success. While graduation rates are not the only measure of the success of an educational system, they are certainly a key metric in assessing educational outcomes. In 1999 the graduation rate was 66 percent. By 2009 it rose to 73.4 percent and by 2012 the national graduation rate was 81 percent, a 15 percent jump in less than 20 years. According to some estimates, at the present rate of growth graduation rates may hit 90 percent by 2020 (Simon, 2014). Considering that educators are being asked to educate more students than ever before—students with increasingly diverse backgrounds and levels of home support—the increase in high school graduation rates should be commended (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; Education Week, 2014).

Not only are more students completing high school, but a greater number of them are enrolled in AP courses and completing AP examinations. According to the AP Report to the Nation by College Board, over a million students took one or more AP exams in 2013, almost doubling the amount from ten years earlier. The number of low-income students taking AP examinations rose to 275,864 in 2013, compared to only 58,489 in 2003. Even more compelling is the fact that the students who elect to take an AP examination are performing better than ever before. As of 2013, 20 percent of U.S. high school students scored a 3 or higher on an AP exam, up from only 12 percent with a score of 3 or higher in 2003 (College Board, 2014).

In addition to a higher graduation rate, the U.S. has a steadily rising percentage of young people enrolling in post-secondary institutions. For example, in 1990, 32 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds were enrolled in a degree granting post-secondary institution. By 2000 that percentage had inched up to 35 percent. By 2011, 42 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in a post-secondary institution (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Admittedly the U.S. still has more work to do to ensure that all students graduate college and career ready, but by a number of essential metrics public education has made remarkable progress over the last forty years. In considering performance on the NAEP LTT, rising graduation rates, higher AP enrollment and a greater percentage of students moving on to
post-secondary education, we are clearly performing better than we were in the 1970s when confidence in public schools was at an all-time high. Yet, despite ample evidence indicating that public schools are moving in the right direction, public confidence in education continues to decline. So what accounts for this erosion of confidence?

**IT’S A SMALL WORLD**

Beyond the cynicism of our populace is the growing awareness of our place and role on the international stage. Over the last few decades, the U.S. has become a less insular, globally competitive, cosmopolitan society. While it is easier to commend our educational progress when considered against the backdrop of our own internal achievement, it is far more difficult to regard our progress with satisfaction when considered against our international peers. When seen through the prism of international educational progress, the U.S. appears to be making incremental gains in some areas, while losing ground in others.

A review of the TIMSS data reveals that the absolute score in mathematics for U.S. eighth grade students has risen only slightly (between 500 and 508) from 1995 through 2007. That fact becomes even more troubling when considered alongside our international ranking. In 1999, the U.S. ranked a disappointing 19th in mathematics out of 38 nations. In 2003 we ranked 15th, and by 2007 we finally jumped to a promising ninth place among participating nations. That is good news. Still the perception that the U.S. leads the world in education is hard to justify when considered against the wider backdrop of our international performance. While we have demonstrated progress in mathematics achievement, many other nations continue to consistently outperform our students. For example, China, Singapore and Hong Kong have ranked in the top five performing nations in mathematics from 1999 to 2007 (National Center for Education Statistics).

The emerging trend in reading is not encouraging. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) found that in 2001, U.S. fourth grade students had an average scale score of 542. By 2006 that score dropped to 540 and our rank among participating
nations dropped from ninth place in 2001 to 12th place in 2006. This reflects that our international peers are demonstrating clear progress and growing achievement at a rate faster than the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics).

**FIGURE 4**

**U.S. Student Performance on the PIRLS and TIMSS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Scale Score</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Percentile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>28/41</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>19/38</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>15/45</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>9/48</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>9/42</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>9/35</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>18/45</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>556</td>
<td>6/45</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Growing awareness of our global ranking in education has taken a toll on public confidence. The view that we enjoy a dominant position on the world stage is no longer sustainable. As Elliot Gerson writes in *The Atlantic*, “In college attendance, our previous preeminence has long faded; we are now 9th in percentage of younger workers with two-year or four-year degrees, and 12th in college graduation rate” (Gerson, 2012). These trends point to significant cause for concern as many U.S. students graduate unprepared for the challenges they will likely face in college and careers. This unpreparedness not only portends significant academic challenges, but increasingly dire consequences at both the individual and macro-economic levels. At the individual level, students may find themselves unable to compete academically and miss out on employment opportunities in some of the world’s fastest growing career sectors.

At the macro level, below average academic performance suggests a troubling outlook for our country’s competitiveness in the international arena. In response to the 2009 NCES report, Education Secretary Arne Duncan said, “We are lagging the rest of the world, and we are
lagging it in pretty substantial ways. I think we have become complacent. We've sort of lost our way” (Holland, 2009). Duncan is right. A growing number of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) doctoral students matriculate from outside the U.S. They return to their native countries, leaving the U.S. with a shortage of qualified graduates in the STEM fields. The National Science Board’s Science and Engineering Indicators: 2010 report stated that only 15.6 percent of bachelor’s degrees were awarded in STEM fields (Business Higher Education Forum).

Given that by a number of important benchmarks we are lagging the rest of the world in some significant ways, it is no surprise that many Americans view the effectiveness of K-12 public education with increasing skepticism. While public education has shown green shoots of educational progress, these budding indicators fail to garner the attention of the press as compared to the disappointing news of our slippage in international ranks. It is difficult to recall a national news story or national press release celebrating any of the signs of positive progress in K-12 education.

**THE BACKLASH**

The Gallup public confidence survey does not typically ask follow up questions establishing the reasons for a respondent’s answers, so we have to look elsewhere for an explanation. An additional explanation for declining confidence in public education is the recent conflagration in many states over the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Drafted in 2010 and rapidly adopted by 46 states, the CCSS were quickly integrated into school districts throughout the U.S. and implementation efforts were underway before parents and media ever took notice. In 2011, there were 86 mainstream news stories written on the Common Core. In 2012 that number rose to 252 stories, which is still a miniscule amount relative to other stories populating the news cycle. In 2013 the CCSS began to take on a political hue as the existence and implementation of the CCSS began to filter down to parents, local media and local political leaders. As parents and political leaders became aware of the CCSS and implementation efforts were underway in earnest, that number rose to over 2,700 stories. By
June of this year, there have already been over 2,600 stories (Access World News, June 30th, 2014).

Some have argued that the CCSS are simply a clever way to implement national standards, wrestling education from state and local control. Others worry that the CCSS will lead to unfair methods for assessing teacher effectiveness and that seasoned educators will be forced out in the transition. Though the CCSS was a non-partisan effort authored by the National Governor’s Association, the College Board and partially financed through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the standards have proven to be a flashpoint for many school districts and state legislators have felt the heat.

Many state lawmakers, acting on pressure from their constituents and local political groups, have responded by authoring bills to repeal implementation of the CCSS. Clearly signaling their disapproval with state boards of education and governors, some state legislators have taken even more drastic measures to ensure that boards and governors are unable to approve standards without legislative approval.

As a recent Education Week article points out:

In just the past year and a half, 10 states have enacted laws that place new restrictions or specifications on how state boards may adopt academic expectations. Altogether, 50 bills have been introduced in 22 states during that time period that seek to change the procedures by which standards are developed, reviewed, or adopted, according to a special analysis conducted for Education Week by the National Conference of State Legislatures, which tracks state legislative activity. ...

Several states took preemptive strikes at common standards. Texas enacted a law in 2013 that prohibited the board from adopting the Common Core State Standards. In March of this year, South Dakota enacted a law forbidding the state board from adopting any standards “drafted by a multistate consortium which are intended for
adoption in two or more states.” …A Tennessee proposal that became law in May says the state may not adopt common standards in any subject other than math and English/language arts (Gewertz, 2014).

In a short amount of time, the CCSS went from a non-partisan educational document outlining what students should know in order to be college and career ready to a political lightning rod, igniting fierce debate between state legislators and departments of education. Even popular comedians, like Stephen Colbert, have gotten in on the pile-on (Colbert Report, April, 8th, 2014). A sample of national headlines reveals just how negative the coverage has gotten:

- New State Standards, Prompted by Common Core, Complicate School Accreditation, Teacher Evaluations
  - Kansas City Star – June 25, 2014
- Upstaters in Poll Find Fault with Rollout of Common Core – 82% Think State Rushed Its Implementation
  - Buffalo News – June 16, 2014
- By Any Name You Call It, Common Core A Loser
  - Sun Sentinel – June 9, 2014
- 3rd-Grader’s Grandmother: Common Core Hurts Students
  - Greenwood Commonwealth – June 4, 2014
- Widely Misunderstood, Common Core is a Major Risk for Students
  - Naples Daily News – May 16, 2014
- Our Common Core Math Mess
  - News & Observer – May 11, 2014
- Common Core’s Problems
  - Charlotte Observer – May 10, 2014
- Math Under Common Core Has Even Parents Stumbling
Most of media scrutiny has not focused on the rigor of the Common Core or the standards as written, but on the political circus playing out in states around the country. With so much negative media coverage, it does not take much imagination to surmise how the general public can arrive at the conclusion that public education is headed in the wrong direction. A 2010 survey found that 75 percent of the general public receives their news on education topics from families and friends (Camara & Shaw, 2012). The recent headlines have dedicated little attention to the educational progress we are making, instead they focus more on the chaotic debate between those supporting the CCSS and those calling for its repeal. Then, when citizens are asked to rate their confidence in public education, it is hardly surprising that they have heard so little in which to find confidence.

**GRADE LEVEL BY THIRD GRADE….OR ELSE**

Complicating matters even further is the growing recognition of the disproportionate amount of growth that takes place in grades K-3, and that students not reading on level by third grade are at a higher risk of not graduating or reaching college and career readiness. In order to place students on a trajectory of college and career readiness, many states are now explicitly addressing this critical window of time. Through either acts of legislation or policy decisions, many states have articulated the importance of reading on grade level by the end of third grade through a combination of laws and/or district and statewide educational policies that aim to ensure every student is reading on grade level by fourth grade. Over 32 states and the District of Columbia now monitor third grade reading progress, with nineteen of those states testing students from grades K-3 (Rose, 2012). Some states have gone even further mandating that students be proficient in reading as measured by a standardized exam, or risk retention. Fifteen states now mandate that students meet a defined literacy benchmark in order to be promoted to fourth grade. In 2014, North Carolina legislators passed “Read to Achieve” into law as a way to ensure that all students are reading on grade level by the end of third grade. The “Read to Achieve” legislation mandates that students who fail to meet the minimum third grade reading requirement be slated for a wide variety of intervention measures, including summer school and possible retention (Wagner, 2014).
Various other states, including Arizona, California, Florida, Maryland and Ohio, adopted similar initiatives mandating that students not reading on grade level by the end of third grade either be retained, enrolled in summer sessions designed to accelerate their reading growth or participate in remedial reading efforts as they enter fourth grade (Rose, 2012).

For parents uninitiated in reading research, such drastic measures can seem draconian and punitive. Headlines like “NC Schools Bracing for Impact of Read to Achieve Law”, “Couple Thousand CMS 3rd Graders Begin Mandatory Reading Camps”, “1 in 8 Clark, Champaign Students Don’t Pass 3rd Grade Reading Test” and “Four of Five Athens County Public Schools Score Below Reading Average” further the perception that schools are not only failing to prepare students for future academic demands, but harshly penalizing eight- and nine-year old students who fail to meet certain benchmarks.

Again, perception matters. For parents in a large number of states, headlines feed the perception that many public schools are failing to adequately prepare students for the literacy demands of secondary schools. Even for those parents not directly affected by third grade reading initiatives, policies requiring all parents be notified of the retention policy ensures the impression that drastic steps have become necessary to prevent public education’s failures. Additional media stories about the logistical and financial challenges associated with retaining a large number of students further exacerbate the impression that schools are failing.

CHANGING THE PERCEPTION: RESTORING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE

As previously mentioned, the exact reasons for declining confidence in public schools are various and layered. It is difficult to point to a single cause. However it is easy to imagine that the negative press around the CCSS—standards which 46 states voluntarily adopted—has played a role in fostering the sense that public education has become hopelessly politicized and misguided. If that is the case, how can public educators, administrators, thought leaders and political leaders restore confidence in public education? Especially when public education is faring so well by several essential markers.
Educators and policy makers need to remind the public that the CCSS were created for the purpose of ensuring that no matter which state, every student would reach college and career readiness. Much has been written before on the fact that many students are graduating high school unprepared for the demands of the post-secondary world. In “Bridging the Readiness Gap”, we argued that an alarmingly high percentage of high school graduates are required to take remedial courses upon entering technical schools, community colleges and universities (Smith, 2011). According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, 42 percent of freshmen at community colleges and 20 percent of freshmen at four-year institutions enroll in at least one remedial course (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006). Additionally, surveys of educators across the P-20 spectrum reveal a pronounced schism between high school and college expectations. ACT has reported that 91 percent of high school educators believe they are adequately preparing their students for college, whereas only 26 percent of college instructors believe students have been sufficiently prepared (ACT, 2009).

Within this context, the CCSS is an attempt to advocate and adopt standards that help prepare students for life after high school. The implementation of the CCSS has been an attempt to ensure that all students are graduating college and career ready. While there has been much hand-wringing about hidden agendas and national standards, less attention has been paid to the fact that many of today's students are not graduating reading at an adequate post-secondary level. In his examination of post-secondary text demands, Gary Williamson, Senior Research Scientist at MetaMetrics®, analyzed broad samples of texts from colleges, military, citizenship and workplace domains. Williamson found the median text demand (measured with The Lexile® Framework) for post-secondary two-year institutions was 1295L, and 1395L for four-year institutions. Unfortunately, studies have shown that the level of text complexity in the K-12 sphere has actually declined over the past fifty years (Chall, Conrad, & Harris, 1977; Hayes, Wolfer, & Michael, 1996). Meanwhile the reading demands of college, careers and citizenship have remained the same or increased over the same time period (Hayes, Wolfer, & Michael, 1996).
In other words, the level of texts students are reading in high school are at a lower level (sometimes by 200L) than the same students will be expected to read when they arrive at the university. After the nurturing environments of secondary institutions—where forms of scaffolding, differentiation and other supports exists—students may be surprised to find universities offer far fewer forms of support for the struggling student.

In all the political wrangling over the CCSS, what has been notably absent is the reminder that the CCSS, at its heart, is about college and career readiness and preparing students for life after high school. The CCSS articulate what students need to know and to be able to do in order to succeed. Attempts to repeal the CCSS do little in the way of addressing the chief concern that far too many students are graduating unprepared for the rigors of college and career. States may take any number of actions vis-à-vis the CCSS. States can repeal it, replace the standards with state-authored standards, return to previous state standards or even leave the CCSS in place while relabeling them as something less politically charged. However, none of that will matter as the median text demand for college level textbooks will still be above 1300L. Students will still be expected to utilize technology in the classroom. Students will still be expected to display high degrees of reading stamina. Students will still be expected to show facility with informational text and comfort across genres. Students will still be expected to write across disciplines and reflect the writing styles of those disciplines. Which is to say, in the absence of the Common Core, not a single thing will change about what is expected of a matriculating freshman or the job requirements within a career.

What may change, however, is a return to state proficiency standards. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) allowed each state to define and set their own internal standards for proficiency. All 50 states determining their own proficiency standards, combined with proficiency standards associated with the NAEP, resulted in an academic Tower of Babel and made the monitoring of progress in reading and math near impossible. The failure to establish clear, unified standards of proficiency led to highly disparate definitions of proficiency and, in practice, to radically different conceptions of what it means
to be proficient in reading and math. The unintended consequence of allowing states to set their own proficiency standards was that a Mississippi fourth grade student labeled proficient in reading was not reading at the same level as a Connecticut fourth grade student with the same label. Proficiency is not the same as college and career ready. Far too many states passed students along as proficient, only to find that those students were not ready for the academic rigor of the post-secondary world (Smith & Turner, 2013).

Pulling the CCSS from the political web in which it is currently entangled means that educators must be tireless in educating and then reminding parents and the community of four critical points. First, historically, there has been a gap between proficiency and college and career readiness. Second, many students are continuing to graduate unprepared for college and career demands. Third, the CCSS are an attempt to remedy that lack of preparedness by proposing a unified set of standards that establish what a student needs to know in order to be college and career ready. Fourth, a return to state proficiency standards is likely to result in proficiency benchmarks (itself a hopelessly politicized process) misaligned with college readiness standards. Educators should remind political leaders, the community and parents that, with or without the Common Core, the standards of college and career will not likely be lowered. College and career readiness standards will remain high regardless of the political fate of the CCSS (Smith & Turner, 2013).

A second step that educators can take to increase confidence in public education is to disabuse parents and community leaders of the notion that third grade reading initiatives are a sign of the failure of public education. Rather, the proliferation of so many third grade reading initiatives across so many states is a signal that educators and political leaders are finally taking notice of what educational researchers have known for decades— that third grade reading level is an excellent predictor of future academic success (Smith & Turner, 2013).

North Carolina provides an instructive illustration of the importance of third grade reading. MetaMetrics conducted an analysis of a wide range of variables—such as economic variables,
health and wellness indicators and educational achievement—from each county within North Carolina and correlated those variables with performance on the ACT. While one should never confuse correlation with causation, the results were startling. The highest single correlation within the data set for ACT performance was third grade reading. While other variables associated with poverty were also highly correlated, third grade reading was the most predictive of future academic preparedness. In fact, third grade reading scores were more highly correlated to ACT performance than was student performance in Algebra 1 (Smith, Turner, & Lattanzio, 2014).

We have known for years that there are large and significant differences in the precursor academic skills of our students before they even arrive at school. Free and reduced lunch students arrive not only with a poverty of income, but a poverty of vocabulary, academic preparedness and literacy skills. In other words, many students begin school already at a disadvantage, academically behind their more affluent peers. Exacerbating the fact that students begin from different starting points is that much of a student’s reading growth occurs in the early years. As Figure 4 illustrates, in examining longitudinal growth in reading, one can see that a tremendous amount of growth takes place before third grade—as much as 50 percent.

**FIGURE 5**

**Extrapolated Growth Curve with Median Postsecondary Text Measures**

![Extrapolated Growth Curve with Median Postsecondary Text Measures](image)
Given that the vast majority of a student’s reading growth occurs between the ages of four and twelve, it is easy to argue that a focus on early literacy is critical and supported by research. Furthermore, if the end goal is to have every student college and career ready (1300L +) by the end of high school, then approximately 50 to 60 percent of that reading growth has occurred by the end of third grade. For students not reading on grade level by the end of third grade, playing catch-up becomes increasingly difficult with each passing year. Though not impossible, improving the reading ability of older students requires a tremendous amount of time, resources and remediation.

As lawmakers and educators have become aware of the issue, many have responded with legislation or policies designed to emphasize the importance of reading on grade level by the end of third grade. They have tried to enact policies to ensure that all students are reading on level, or are given the necessary support to do so, before it becomes too late.

While there is room to debate the merits and perils of each piece of legislation, the minutia of each various state effort is beyond the scope of this paper and is better left to the educators, policy analysts and political leaders of each respective state. What is clear, however, is that efforts to combat the achievement gap through a focus on third grade reading levels are a step in the right direction.

As educators, we will need to do more to ensure that message is clearly heard by the media, parents and larger community. First, educators would be well advised to inform parents and community leaders of the research on third grade reading and its correlation to future academic achievement. Second, educators should explain—in plain, accessible language—the trajectory that is needed for students to achieve college and career readiness by the end of high school. Educators and school leaders can also explain how a large amount of reading growth occurs in the early years and that failure to reach grade level reading by third grade, while not a fatalistic prophecy of doom, means that efforts to catch up become more difficult with each passing year.
By communicating the research, the reasoning and the plan of action behind legislative and policy decisions, educators and school leaders have the opportunity to cast third grade reading initiatives in a positive light. Determined and concerted efforts are being taken to reduce the achievement gap and ensure that all students are on track for college and career readiness.

CONCLUSION

Though we may not know all of the various reasons that public confidence in education has fallen so dramatically over the past four decades, it is safe to say that the public’s confidence is not tied to empirical measures of academic achievement as the measures mostly appear to be headed in the right direction. It also seems safe to say that much of the public’s lack of confidence is tied to perception. In recent years, growing awareness of our role on the international stage, controversies over the CCSS and the proliferation of third grade reading initiatives have led to overtly negative media coverage. This has fueled the perception that education has taken a wrong turn. The Holy Grail of U.S. public education, as expressed by Secretary Arne Duncan, is to graduate all students college and career ready (Duncan, 2009).

Continuing to insist on higher standards, continuing to aim for graduating every student college and career ready will require courage and tremendous political will. It will also require a far better job of communicating successes with the American public than has heretofore been done. Bolstered by sensational headlines, the initial perception that U.S. students are faring worse will make it difficult for political and education leaders to stay the course on raising and upholding standards, but moving all students toward college and career readiness is an investment worth making.
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ABOUT METAMETRICS®

MetaMetrics, founded in 1984, is an educational measurement and technology organization whose mission is to connect assessment with instruction. The company’s distinctive frameworks for English and mathematics bring meaning to measurement and are used by millions to differentiate instruction, individualize practice and improve learning across all levels of education.
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