



Flying under the Radar? Analyzing Common Core Media Coverage

By Michael Q. McShane and Frederick M. Hess

Key points in this *Outlook*:

- An analysis of media coverage of the Common Core State Standards Initiative shows the effort largely flew under the radar until recently, despite the large number of students affected.
- As media coverage has increased and the public has become more educated about the Common Core, the controversy surrounding it has intensified.
- The analysis of Common Core coverage illustrates the important role of the media in educating the public about issues that affect them.

When US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan spoke to the Society of News Editors in June 2013, he opened by saying, “Traditionally, this event has been an opportunity for federal leaders to talk about touchy subjects. For example, you asked President Kennedy to talk about the Bay of Pigs. So, thanks for having me here to talk about the Common Core State Standards.”¹

To an outsider, this might sound extreme. After all, the Common Core is simply a set of expectations about what teachers will teach and students will learn in grades K–12. They are not standards for the amount of lead that can be in paint or the ambient radiation that nuclear power plants can release. How could they be as touchy a subject as the Bay of Pigs?

There is more to the Common Core than just standards. Standards are just words on a page, but it is the end-of-year assessments aligned to them that

make them real for teachers and students. As part of the economic stimulus package, the government provided \$330 million to two multistate consortia to develop assessments aligned to the standards. The results of these assessments will become the basis for both school and teacher evaluation systems. The exams are designed to be taken online, which will require upgrades to hardware, software, and Internet bandwidth in many school systems. All of these require new resources in tight financial times and intricate implementation that will necessitate controversial tradeoffs.

Not only did these complicating factors see little discussion in the popular press in the early years of the Common Core, but the Common Core received hardly any attention at all. The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers rolled out the standards in 2009, and in 2010 they were rather quietly included as a scoring item in the Department of Education’s rubric for Race to the Top, a state-level competitive grant program for \$4.35 billion in stimulus dollars. Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia

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adopted in the standards in 2010, another five adopted them in 2011, and Wyoming joined the party in 2012. By the end of 2012, more than 41 million students attended school in states that had adopted the Common Core.

Large enrollment numbers, though, have not led to widespread national understanding of the Common Core. In 2013, 62 percent of Americans and 55 percent of public school parents had never heard of the Common Core, according to the annual Gallup/*Phi Delta Kappan* poll. Of those who had heard of the Common Core, only 15 percent of Americans and 14 percent of public school parents stated that they were “very knowledgeable” about the standards.²

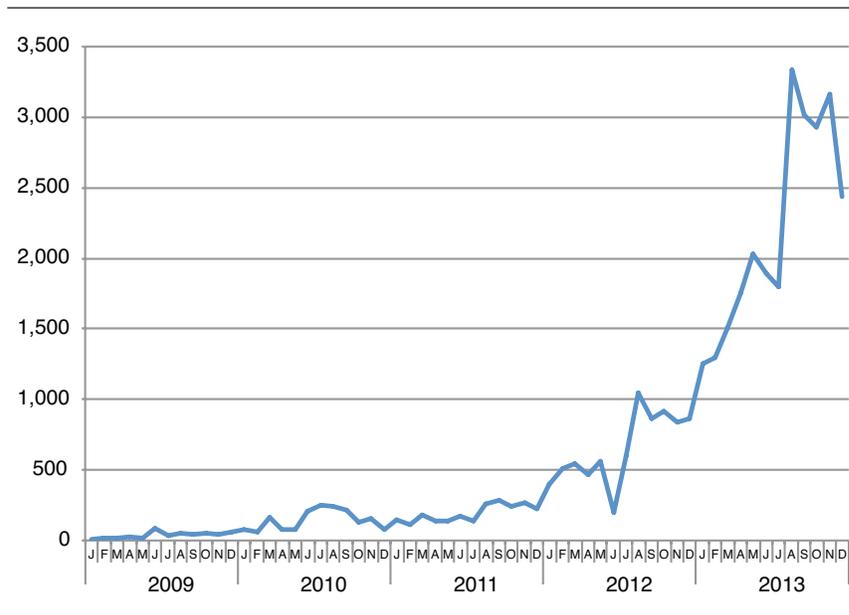
Digging into the data on media coverage sheds light onto how such an enormous undertaking could stay under the radar and how lingering issues could ferment into such potent opposition. In a LexisNexis search of articles mentioning the term “Common Core,” two stark patterns emerge. First, the Common Core received very little coverage, even when states across the country were adopting the standards. Second, that coverage rarely, if ever, mentioned that the Common Core was or could be controversial.

Before we continue, a quick methodological note. Any project like this one is limited by the tools at researchers’ disposal to analyze the data available. We used LexisNexis because it is a consistent, stable, and reliable source of aggregation of news stories and wire reports. It is not, however, an exhaustive source for everything written about a topic in a given time period. Numerous blogs and trade press also wrote about the Common Core, most notably *Education Week*, which had several admirable stories covering the Common Core and its looming implementation challenges. These, however, were mostly designed for the education community and had a limited effect on the broader public discourse (or lack thereof) regarding the Common Core.

Coverage of the Common Core

The current push for the Common Core started with the National Governors Association’s report *Benchmarking for Success*, released in December 2008. Its first

FIGURE 1
Common Core Referenced in Articles, by Month, 2009–13



Source: LexisNexis search by month: term “Common Core” and category “US Publications.”

recommendation was to “upgrade state standards by adopting a common core of internationally benchmarked standards in math and language arts for grades K–12.”³

Using the next month as the beginning of our tracking, we see generally minor coverage of the Common Core for the remainder of 2009, with a peak of 83 articles in June (figure 1). Even when the Race to the Top was launched in late July 2009, there was no appreciable bump. July of that year saw 37 articles mentioning the Common Core, and August saw 48. In January 2010, when the first Race to the Top applications were due, 74 articles mentioned the Common Core.

The first bump in coverage occurred in March 2010, when the finalists and winners of Round 1 of Race to the Top were announced. In that month, 167 articles were written mentioning the Common Core. June, July, and August all saw more than 200 articles written. The Round 2 winners were announced in August 2010.

The next major jolt to the coverage of the Common Core occurred in 2012. President Obama referenced the standards in his State of the Union on January 24; 399 articles were written that month and 500 in February, essentially doubling the rate of coverage for the previous four months. Late 2012 saw the serious uptick begin.

The back-to-school period in 2012 and 2013 saw the biggest jumps in coverage, with August of each of those years doubling the story count of the month before. The peak occurred in August 2013, when more than 3,300

articles were written about the Common Core.

Common Core vs. Vouchers: Covering a Controversy

It is hard to fully understand what these numbers mean in isolation. To get some idea of how other education policy topics are handled, we will compare coverage of the Common Core to coverage of another controversial education policy, school vouchers.

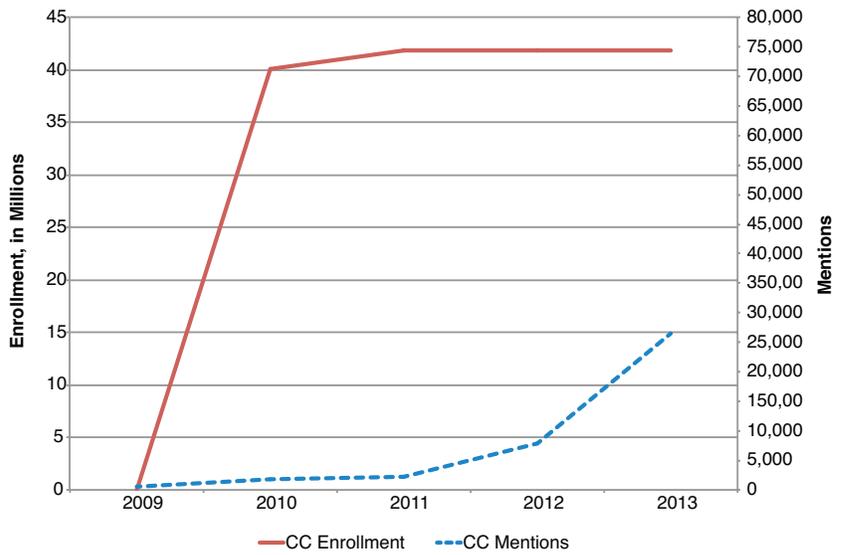
Let's start by looking at a graph for Common Core mentions and enrollment in states that adopted the Common Core. The graph shows a huge jump in enrollment in 2010, when 39 states, educating more than 40 million students, signed on (figure 2). After that, the upticks were, relatively, much smaller.

We see adoption of the standards spiking long before media coverage caught up. Year-by-year, 453 articles were written about the Common Core in 2009; 1,729 in 2010; 2,313 in 2011; 7,800 in 2012; and 26,401 in 2013. In 2010, that means that an article was written about the Common Core for about every 23,000 students enrolled in a state that had adopted the standards. By 2013, the large increase in media coverage brought that number down to one article for about every 1,600 students. In total, 38,696 articles were written through 2013 about the Common Core, or one article for approximately every 1,100 students.

Now, compare that graph to the coverage of school vouchers (figure 3). To take into account the much-smaller number of students enrolled in the program and the smaller number of articles written, particularly in 2013, we have divided both axes by 10 as compared to figure 2.

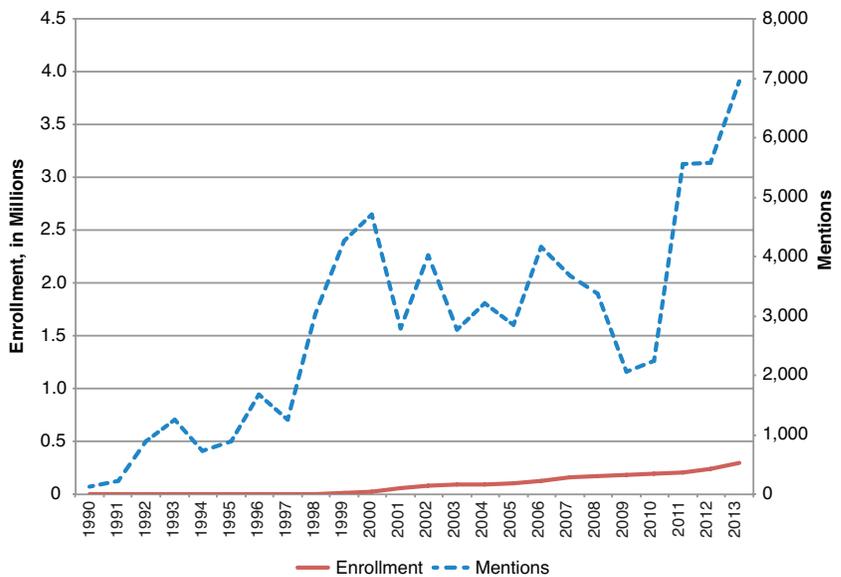
Vouchers, as currently understood, started in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1990. That year, 341 students used vouchers to attend seven different schools. The nation's

FIGURE 2
Enrollment in Common Core and Mentions



Source: LexisNexis search by month: term "Common Core" and category "US Publications." Common Core adoption dates from map of Common Core adoption at www.commoncore.org; enrollment figures from National Center on Education Statistics.

FIGURE 3
Enrollment in School Vouchers and Article Mentions



Source: LexisNexis search by year: term "School Vouchers" and Category "US Publications." Enrollment figures from Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, *The ABCs of School Choice*, 2014 edition, www.edchoice.org/School-Choice/The-ABCs-of-School-Choice.

second voucher program, in Cleveland, Ohio, started with a small number of students in 1995. After 10 years of voucher programs, in 2000, there were only four programs in the country in total and just under 30,000 students participating.

In 1990, a LexisNexis search of the term “school vouchers” yields 130 articles—one article for every three students in the country enrolled in a voucher program. In 1993, when there were still only several hundred students in one city participating in a voucher program, there were 1,249 articles.

From 1990 through 2013, 68,346 articles were written about school vouchers. In the 2013–14 school year, just over 300,000 students participated in a private school voucher or tuition tax credit program, meaning that for every four students then participating in a private school choice program, one article was written about school vouchers.

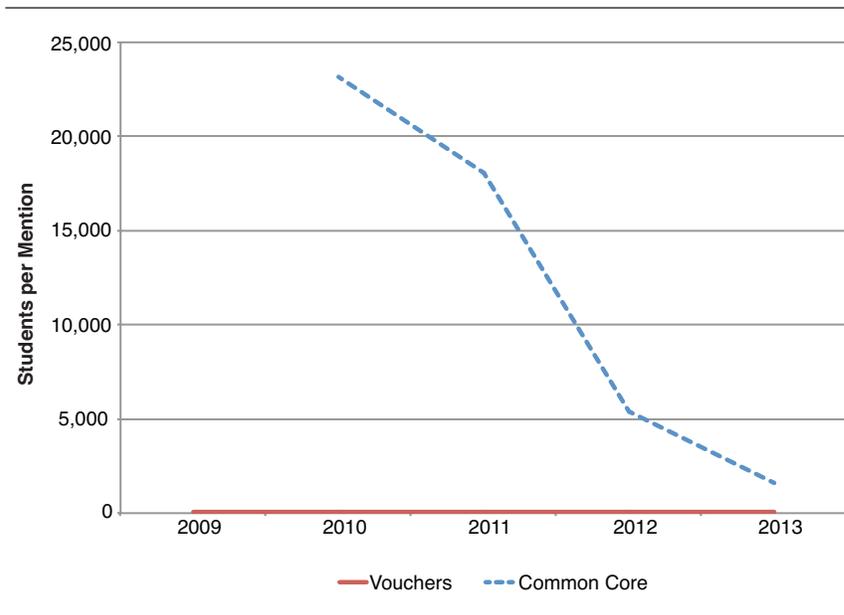
In contrast to the pattern of Common Core coverage, thousands of articles were written about school vouchers, even when only a small number of students were enrolled in voucher programs. The raw number comparison is pretty staggering. More articles were written about school vouchers in every year from 1998 forward than were written about the Common Core even in 2010 or 2011, though enrollment was orders of magnitude smaller. The combined coverage of the Common Core in 2009, 2010, and 2011 was still less than the coverage of vouchers in 1999 alone.

In figure 4, we graph Common Core and voucher mentions in articles per student affected from 2009 to 2013. In 2010, one article was written for every 23,000 students in Common Core states, and one article was written for every 84 students in a private school choice program. By 2013, Common Core had made serious headway, with one article for every 1,600 students or so, but in that year vouchers had one mention for every 43 students affected. Hence, while we see a large amount of movement on the Common Core trend, students affected per mention for vouchers hugs the x-axis.

How the Common Core Was Covered

To examine *how* the Common Core was covered, not just *how much* it was, we searched LexisNexis for “Common Core” paired with terms usually associated with political conflict, like “supporter” and “opponent,” and with some of the terms most likely linked to criticism of the standards, such as “controversy,” “critic,” and “federal.”

FIGURE 4
Students Affected, per Article Mention, 2009–13



Source: Combined data from figures 2 and 3.

Examining the results of all five of these searches leads to a straightforward conclusion: the coverage of the standards at the outset was generally glowing, rarely referencing any kind of conflict until it had already bubbled over.

Figure 5 shows the prevalence of “Common Core” with the terms “supporter” and “opponent.” In 2009, zero articles mentioned the words “supporter” or “opponent.” In 2010, 2 articles mentioned supporters, and none mentioned opponents. In 2012, 7 mentioned supporters and 12 opponents; by 2013, 124 mentioned supporters and 167 opponents.

Figure 6 links “Common Core” with the general terms “controversy” and “critic” and with “federal,” a word linked to the most central criticism of the standards. “Controversy” did not emerge from the search until 2012, when it was mentioned once. “Critic” saw one mention in 2010 but then did not reemerge until 2012, with four mentions. It jumped to 97 references in 2013. “Federal” was found once in 2010, once in 2011, eight times in 2012, and 63 times in 2013.

The Effect of Media Silence

In 2010, as Chester Finn and Michael Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute stated of the Common Core, “This profound . . . shift in American education is occurring with little outcry from the right, save for a half-dozen libertarians who don’t much care for government to start

with.”⁴ Both major teachers unions endorsed the standards, as did prominent Republican governors and former governors like Mitch Daniels and Jeb Bush.

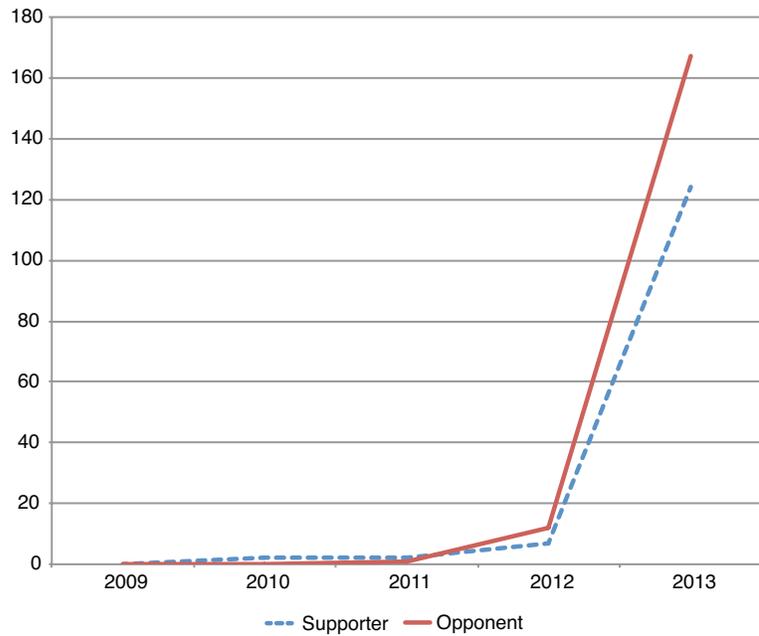
By 2014, all of this had changed. Newspaper headlines were splashed with bold-faced text declaring, “A Fight Is Brewing over Tests in the Common Core Age” (*Washington Post*) and “Common Core Curriculum Now Has Critics on the Left” (*New York Times*).⁵ Alabama, Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Utah all either left the consortia developing tests for the standards or indicated that they would develop their own tests in 2013.

Opposition to the standards, which had previously been found mostly on the political right, ticked up among liberals, most notably with the New York State teachers union withdrawing its support of the standards. After states released cost estimates ranging from \$6 million in Louisiana to \$100 million in Maryland to get schools up to speed with the technology necessary to administer Common Core-aligned tests, organizations questioned the wisdom of the Common Core effort.⁶

Pairing our analysis with observation of the evolving debate on the Common Core yields several conclusions as to how everything got so controversial.

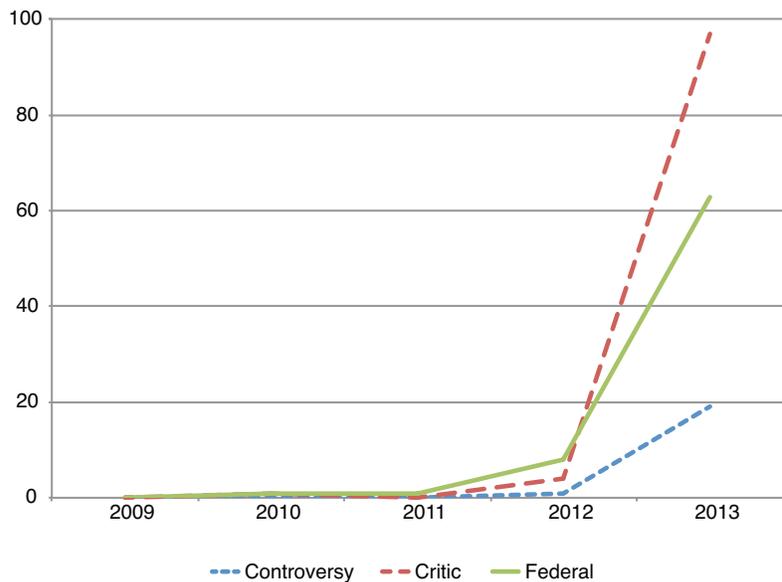
First, the Obama administration and the Democratic Party politicized the issue in the run-up to the 2012 election. President Obama mentioned the Common Core in his 2012 State of the Union address, stating, “For less than 1 percent of what our nation spends on education each year, we’ve convinced nearly every state in the country to raise their standards for teaching and learning—the first time that’s happened in a generation.”⁷ The Democratic National Committee’s platform for the 2012 election read, “The President challenged and encouraged states to raise their standards so students graduate ready for college or career

FIGURE 5
“Common Core” Linked with “Supporter” and “Opponent,” 2009–13



Source: LexisNexis search by year: terms “Common Core” and “Supporter” and “Opponent” in “Terms and Connectors”; category “US Publications.”

FIGURE 6
“Common Core” Linked with Other Terms, 2009–13



Source: LexisNexis search by year: terms “Common Core” and “Controversy” and “Critic” and “Federal” in “Terms and Connectors”; category “US Publications.”

and can succeed in a dynamic global economy. Forty-six states responded, leading groundbreaking reforms that will deliver better education to millions of American

students.”⁸ This allowed the Common Core, which around this time gained the “Obamacore” moniker, to get grafted onto broader political arguments taking place in an intensely partisan environment.

Second, several prominent backers made controversial comments in support of the standards. Most notably, Secretary Duncan, in a speech to a group of state superintendents of education, said that opposition to the Common Core sprung from “white suburban moms who—all of a sudden—[realized] their child isn’t as brilliant as they thought they were.”⁹ Former Massachusetts secretary of education Paul Reville asked a panel at a Center for American Progress event, “Why should some towns in cities or states have no standards or low standards and others have extremely high standards when the children belong to all of us and would move [to different states in their educational lives]?”¹⁰

But a lot of issues are political, and a lot of politicians have foot-in-mouth disease. What made the Common Core’s sudden uptick in controversy so stark?

These issues were exacerbated by the fact that most people simply did not know much about the Common Core until the standards were already being integrated into state education systems. By the time they found out, many felt like they were being taken for a ride. This angered them.

In a refrain echoed by numerous Common Core opponents, Heather Crossin, an Indiana mother who became a prominent Common Core opponent, said of the process, “They [the Indiana Board of Education] brought in David Coleman, the architect of the standards, to give a presentation, they asked a few questions, there was no debate, no cost analysis, just a sales job, and everybody rubber-stamped it.”¹¹

Conclusions

So what lessons can we learn from this process?

First, it is hard to look at these numbers and not conclude that the mainstream media dropped the ball on covering the Common Core. Not only were the standards not mentioned even though tens of millions of students were going to be affected by them, but also the coverage in no way anticipated any of the controversy that is inevitable with changes to teacher and school evaluation policy. This lack of coverage only fomented opposition to the standards. When parents and taxpayers found out that the standards had already been adopted, they thought the wool had been pulled over their eyes.

Second, it is similarly hard not to conclude that Common Core supporters were making an effort to stay below the radar in the early years of the standards’ adoption. After convincing the necessary policy elites, they did not make the case for the standards in the outlets that the average American reads, nor did they anticipate and head off possible criticisms. This might have been the correct strategy in the short term to get the standards adopted, but that stealth fueled backlash and ultimately teed up criticism of the standards. The wise course in the short term may very well have undermined the effort in the long term. It is also possible that they were making an effort that simply was not covered in the media, but we think this is reasonably unlikely.

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Third, our democratic process, for good or ill, relies on information. Looking at the coverage of school voucher programs, it seems likely that when new proposals are under discussion in statehouses or become issues in elections, voters know what issues are under debate. Some people take this information and advocate for vouchers, and some oppose them. Whatever side of that debate one comes down on, it is clear that people should know what they are talking about.

What’s more, helping people make informed decisions makes policies more durable. When real majorities supporting policies emerge, policies endure. When their support is a mile wide and an inch deep, even small amounts of discord can sink them.

Fourth, the media does deserve credit for making up for lost time. More than 25,000 articles written in 2013 did help catch parents and taxpayers up on the issues and outline the points of contention.

Fifth, there is a conspicuous disparity in the amount of coverage on school vouchers versus on the Common Core. It is not just that the Common Core count was low; the school voucher count was also high. Perhaps if vouchers were seen to be more important than the Common Core, that would justify more coverage. But it is hard to argue that programs serving 300,000 students versus 41 million students are more important to the audience of popular news outlets.

Maybe the increased coverage is because national political figures support vouchers and funding for their advocacy comes from foundations that often grab headlines. But much the same could be said about the Common Core. It is hard not to see a political dimension here. The media appears to be more apt to find controversy with conservative education reforms than progressive ones.

Notes

1. Arne Duncan, "Remarks at the American Society of News Editors Annual Convention" (Capitol Hilton, Washington, DC, June 25, 2013).
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3. National Governors Association, *Benchmarking for Success* (Washington, DC: National Governors Association, 2008).
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6. Lauren McGaughy, "Louisiana Schools Need at Least \$6 Million in Tech Upgrades to Administer Tests Tied to the Common Core," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, January 15, 2014; and Valerie Strauss, "Maryland Schools Need \$100 Million for Online Common Core Tests, Says Report," *Washington Post*, January 17, 2014.
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8. Democratic National Committee, *Moving America Forward: 2012 Democratic National Platform*, 2012, www.democrats.org/democratic-national-platform.
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