Chicago Tribune

Michael Casserly: The real lesson to be learned from the Common Core



High school students walk toward their classroom at Von Steuben Metropolitan Science Center in Chicago on Dec. 15, 2025. (Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune)

By Michael Casserly | Special to the Tribune

PUBLISHED: August 16, 2026 at 5:00 AM CDT

The political battles over the Common Core State Standards may feel old and settled. They are not. Critics continue to describe college- and career-ready standards as federal overreach, wasted effort and academic failure. That conclusion is too simple — and, in important ways, wrong.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress tells a more complicated story: Standards did not succeed everywhere, but where districts turned them into stronger classroom instruction, students made real gains.

The anger toward the standards was not manufactured, though. Common Core reached classrooms before many districts had the materials, training and explanations teachers and parents needed. Federal incentives attached to adoption fed the perception of coercion, even though the standards were developed outside the federal government and state adoption was voluntary. And new tests that came with the standards were often bundled with teacher evaluations, adding another layer of resistance. Those grievances were real. But they were mostly grievances about political clumsiness and rushed implementation, not proof that stronger standards were the wrong aspiration.

Did Common Core deliver everything its supporters promised? No. But disappointment is not the same as failure. The real lesson was that standards alone do not raise achievement. Standards matter when states and districts use them to raise expectations, create more rigorous and coherent curriculum, purchase better instructional materials, focus professional development, align assessments with what students are expected to learn and build the capacity of schools to teach the content well.

Chicago's results were hard to square with the claim that higher standards were an academic dead end. Between 2003 and 2019, NAEP's Trial Urban District Assessment showed that the nation's public schools gained just six points in fourth grade math and five points in eighth grade math. Large-city districts as a group did better, gaining 11 to 12 points. Chicago, which was an early adopter of the standards, did better still: 18 points in fourth grade math, 21 points in eighth grade math and 15 points in fourth grade reading — roughly triple the national math gain. Chicago's eighth grade reading scores stayed flat, a useful reminder that no reform lifts performance evenly.

Other city school systems such as Washington, San Diego, Miami-Dade County and Dallas had similar experiences with their state's versions of the standards and had among the highest achievement gains on NAEP.

Since then, the pandemic took a toll on Chicago, as it did in many places, except in eighth grade reading, where the district is actually ahead of its 2019 performance.

Chicago earned these gains by treating the standards as more than a compliance exercise. District leaders used them to rethink instruction, align classroom practice with system supports, build capacity among school supervisors and principals, and clarify what students should know and be able to do. NAEP cannot prove that standards alone caused Chicago's gains. But it can show that districts that treated standards as a foundation for

better teaching could move student achievement substantially. That sense of direction and coherence — not the standards document itself — is what the results capture.

That distinction matters now because some policymakers and advocates are moving backward, especially in math. In May, South Dakota's Board of Education Standards replaced its 91-page Common Core-based standards with a 49-page "common sense math" framework, citing stagnant proficiency as justification. The problem is not that the new document is shorter; the danger is that it is weaker, according to Sharon Vestal, the president of the state's Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Some national groups, however, are now encouraging other states to follow South Dakota's lead.

This is what mistaking simplicity for strength looks like. Teachers need standards that are clear, precise, coherent and demanding enough to prepare students for the future. Chicago and other cities are the counterexamples to the claim that the standards were a fool's errand.

The urgent task now is not to refight old political wars. At a time when the national assessment is still showing deep pandemic-era damage, this is the wrong moment to lower our expectations or dress weaker versions up in the language of commonsense. Now is the time to double down on college- and career-ready standards.

The real lesson of the Common Core was not that higher standards failed. It is that higher standards only matter when states and school systems do the hard work of making them real in classrooms.

Michael Casserly has been with the Council of the Great City Schools for almost 50 years, including nearly 30 years as its executive director.