In June 2010, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) were rolled out and applauded by a number of influential supporters, including President Obama, heads of teachers unions, Business Roundtable, Arne Duncan, and the US Chamber of Commerce, among others. Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia quickly adopted these Standards (Hess, 2014). While many Americans were unfamiliar with the Standards themselves, Arne Duncan, former US Secretary of Education, stated that “the Common Core State Standards may prove to be the single greatest thing to happen to public education in America since Brown v. Board of Education” (cited in Hess, 2014).

For the past few decades, the call for higher standards has become a mantra. However, along with an emphasis on standards came the push for more high-stakes testing, resulting in a controversial impact on how teaching and learning happen in the classroom. This issue of Language Arts revisits the focus of our 91.4 issue (March 2014) and takes a current look at the impact of CCSS on teachers and learners. In that earlier issue, LA readers were invited to submit manuscripts and commentaries based on the newly adopted CCSS. At that time, approximately 48 states and territories had adopted the CCSS. However, today that number has declined to 42 states and the District of Columbia. In this Thoughts from the Editors, we consider the CCSS two years later and examine a) the extent to which public perspectives have shifted, b) how parents and educators have responded to the CCSS, and c) how media have shaped public perceptions of the CCSS.

Public dissatisfaction with the Common Core is highly visible in the media. Since its adoption, even states like Connecticut, one of the highest scoring states on standardized tests, saw fewer than 40% of its students passing in math and just over 55% passing in language arts. Other states have reported significant changes in the passing rate on the Smarter Balanced Assessments—assessments designed for grades 3–8 and 11, and aligned to the CCSS in English language arts/literacy and mathematics. In September 2015, the Los Angeles Times reported that English and math scores “plummeted” across the state, with declines attributed to the more challenging tests associated with the CCSS (Menezes, 2015). While other states have reported better than expected scores, California posted test scores for a couple of weeks, and school officials have “said little except that parents and the public need to be realistic about their expectations.” In October 2015, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores were released with much concern in the decline in the math and reading scores of low-income children and children of color (Moser, 2015). Not attached to high-stakes testing, the NAEP is considered a “common metric” for growth in literacy and reading. While only two years ago Arne Duncan projected higher achievement with the CCSS implementation, after the release of the NAEP results, Duncan stated that “big change never happens overnight” and that historic improvements will occur if “we stay committed to this change” (Moser, 2015). We might ask, “How long and at whose expense?”

In response to the increased testing and high stakes attached to it, parents have mobilized...
through the opt-out movement, which has hit schools like a storm. We do not know exactly why parents are opting out. Have they been pushed to do so by educators who fear that low-scoring students will reflect poorly on their schools? Or are parents opting out on their own accord, fed up with the test-driven fragmentation of curriculum? Regardless of why it’s happening, the opt-out movement is undeniable and spreading quickly. The Washington Post reported that states like New York see significant numbers of students opting out, with 20% of its students, or approximately 200,000 children, not taking the Smarter Balanced Assessment (Strauss, 2015a). Other states like New Jersey, California, and Colorado are noticing increases in opting out of the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) testing, especially among high school students (Strauss, 2015a, b). We suggest that this issue is cultural—what are the norms, habits, and values of education, and are they reflected in today’s test-focused reality? Is the opt-out movement merely a symptom of an unhealthy culture?

Diane Ravitch, former US Assistant Secretary of Education under George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, suggests that mass media often ignored complaints about the CCSS (2014). She cited Arne Duncan’s comment about middle class moms who were disappointed to discover that their children might not be that smart (see Conversation Currents, this issue, p. 320); confusing federal tests that included multiple possible answers (see Taylor & Harris, 2015); and the fact that Pearson, the test publisher, imposed a gag order to keep test contents secret (see Phillips, 2014).

“Media silence” on the CCSS is calculated, says Hess (2014), author of Common Core Meets Educational Reform. In a LexisNexis search, Hess found that between 2009 and 2011, in all the American news outlets combined, only 4,500 mentions of the Common Core were made, even though more than 40 states with 40 million students had signed on. In comparison, over 5,500 mentions were made in 2011 alone regarding school vouchers, which affected fewer than 200,000 students. Hess surmises that this media silence was part of a more calculated strategy for CCSS supporters to “stay under the radar, avoid public debate, tightly coordinate their messaging, ridicule skeptics rather than respond to them, and ride the wave of support provided by the Obama administration in those years.” However, Ravitch (2014) states that when celebrities weigh in through social media sites like Twitter, mass media pay attention. When media personalities such as Jon Stewart of The Daily Show and Stephen Colbert of The Colbert Report criticize the CCSS, media listen and report. Media sources also immediately reported when comedian Louis C.K., who openly advocates for public schools in his television series Louie, tweeted, “My kids used to love math. Now it makes them cry. Thanks standardized testing and common core!” (@louisck, April 2014). One week later, Louis C.K. again tweeted, “Everything important is worth doing carefully. None of this feels careful to me” (May 2014). What and how mass media attend to in terms of the CCSS calls into question who is being listened to. Who and what is considered newsworthy? What is the agenda of mass media in shaping public opinion about the CCSS?

So what is the future of CCSS? As the test scores roll in from the Smarter Balanced Assessment and the election of a new president looms on the horizon, how children are tested and how teachers are evaluated will continue to raise critical questions about public education. Strong grassroots organizations and blogs have begun to emerge, such as Bad Ass Teachers (badassteachers.blogspot.com), an organization that arose to push back against corporate education reform and its impact on schools, teachers, and communities. Parent groups like “usagainststhecommoncore” argue that with federal monies as incentive, Standards were written too quickly and implemented without proper study. Recently, Arne Duncan resigned his position as Secretary of Education. To replace him, President Obama nominated John B. King Jr., the deputy education secretary and a former Commissioner of Education in New York State. This nomination is not without controversy, and with Obama leaving office next year and,
perhaps, a different Secretary of Education to follow, what will be the next public face of CCSS?

Articles in this issue of Language Arts address how the Common Core can be taken up critically and thoughtfully in elementary and middle school classrooms. Drawing upon philosopher Michel Foucault’s work, Sarah Bridges-Rhoads and Jessica Van Cleave take up the idea of freedom in light of mandated curriculum. They argue that a reader of the CCSS must “embrace a skepticism of the idea that freedom can be granted by an external authority” (p. 260). With this in mind, teachers can then find productive spaces in which to understand how to exercise freedom in their teaching, and find alternative ways to explore learning with their students. Terry Meier discusses the use of African American English rhetorical features in the biographical writing of children’s author Andrea Davis Pinkney. Through close readings and analyses of Pinkney’s work, students can increase their awareness of the importance of careful lexical and stylistic choices in their own writing in ways that address the CCSS. Maren Aukerman and Lorien Schuldt address the role of multiple and varied responses to texts requiring what might be considered communal reading. In addition, this issue’s theme prompted LA readers to contribute commentaries, written in a range of genres, that provide insights into their perspectives on the CCSS. Our Conversation Currents features Patrick Shannon, who contributed to our first CCSS themed issue, and Joanne Larson; these educators engage in a lively discussion of the constraints, politics, and possibilities of working in and with the CCSS. Thomas Newkirk, in his Research and Policy column, discusses text dependency and text complexity, while the Professional Book Reviews and Children’s Literature Reviews offer yet another set of wonderful titles to support teaching and learning in the classroom. We hope you find these articles and departments interesting and thought provoking.

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