



Citation Cartels, Dismissive Literature Reviews, and Big Money Dominate US Education Policy*

Richard P. Phelps†

Abstract

US education policy research is dominated by copiously funded ‘strategic authors’ who utilize methods that showcase their work and suppress the work of others. Dismissive literature reviews declare that previous research is either nonexistent or no good and is not referenced. Citation cartels reference the research conducted among cartel members and ignore that conducted by others. Education journalists, the federal government, and wealthy foundations support this effort in information reduction. Adoption of the Common Core Standards serves as a case study of information narrowing on a grand scale.

Keyphrases

Education policy, standardized testing, dismissive review, citation cartel, censorship.

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Introduction

Most of you work in the hard sciences. I work in the soft social sciences and, some would argue, education is the softest of them all—article

retractions are rare; deliberately misleading research claims are common; censorship is rife. Much US education research simply should not be trusted, especially that produced by some of its most celebrated scholars. Some say that the biggest problem with our current politics is the winner-take-all electoral system and the winner-take-all mentality it supports. Politicians want to win, rather than lead. Much the same problem afflicts US education research. Many researchers want to win, rather than cooperate in growing our base of knowledge.

Dismissive Literature Reviews

I start with *dismissive literature reviews*. At the beginning of a research article a scholar is expected to summarize the pre-existing research. Many researchers take the easy way out. A key aspect is the dismissed research and researchers are not identified — so there’s no debate and the public is given no information for finding the other research. There exist three general types: simple dismissals, firstness claims, and denigrations. You can see for yourself how common these are by entering some common dismissive phrases into an internet search engine, such as: “there is very little research on ...,” “this is the first study to ...,” or “earlier studies had major deficiencies.” The benefits to the dismitter include: saves lots of time doing unrewarded literature searches and reviews; adds to one’s own citation totals, or those of one’s cooperating colleagues, while not adding to rivals’ totals; gains attention by allegedly being *first*, *original*, or a *pioneer*; increases the likelihood of press coverage and grant funding or the same reason. Meanwhile, the costs of dismissive reviews accrue to society: society loses information; remaining information is skewed in favor of the powerful; policy decisions are based on information that is limited and skewed; government and foundations may pay again for research that has already been done.

Citation Cartels

A *citation cartel* is a group of researchers who frequently cite each other and ignore or dismiss work from outside their group. Here’s a simple model of the advantage. Assume twenty researchers with ten publications a year, each with ten citations. Ten *strategic* scholars cite only each other’s work. Ten *sincere* scholars cite everyone’s work. The result: Strategic scholars triple sincere scholars’ citation numbers. See Figure 1. Citation numbers are prominently considered in many hiring, promotion, and award decisions. The scientific study of educational standards and standardized testing dates to the 1890s. By 1942, a pop-

*Report presented 2025-10-09, *Guardians 2025*, 4th BHAVI Guardians Conference.

†Correspondence to richard@nonpartisaneducation.org.

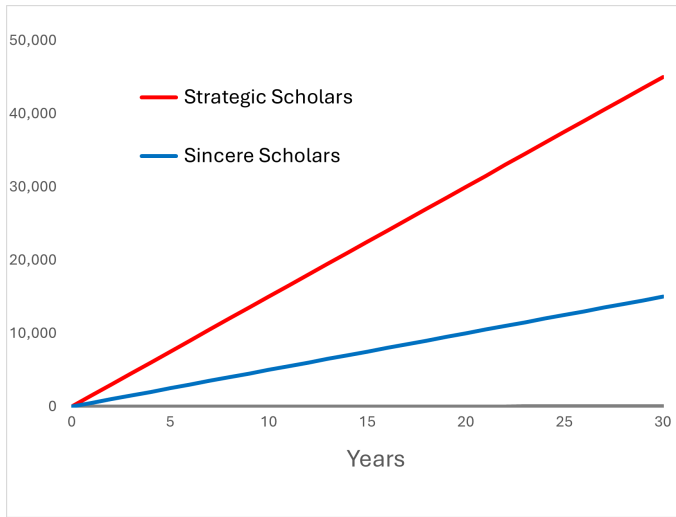


Figure 1: Comparing Strategic and Sincere Scholarship: Citation accumulation over time.

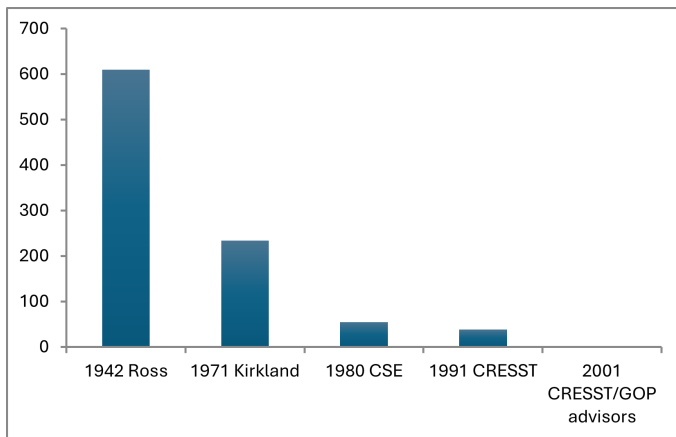


Figure 2: Disappearing research on testing in schools.

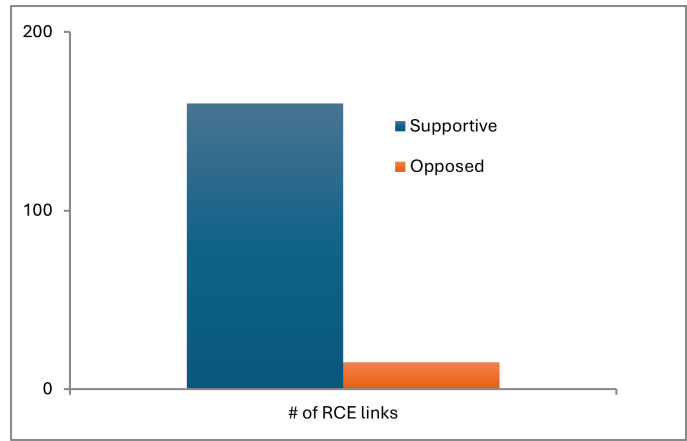


Figure 3: Number of links to articles supportive or opposed to Common Core Initiative.

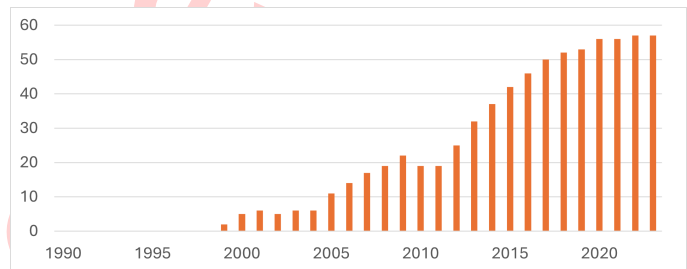


Figure 4: Number of US education journalists working in organizations largely subsidized by the Gates and Walton Foundations, 1990 to 2023 (out of 72 total).

eral government under both Presidents Bush and Obama then joined the Gates Foundation and its allies. The standards themselves were written in secret by private entities. After an extraordinarily one-sided propaganda campaign 45 states adopted the Common Core Standards, sight unseen. Measured in dollars alone, Standards proponents vastly outspent opponents. \$16 billion came from the federal government and at least another \$330 million from the Gates and allied foundations. Opponents raised less than \$100 thousand. Figure 3 shows my accounting of a couple of years' worth of coverage of the Common Core Standards in just one online education publication, Real Clear Education.

I compared the number of mentions and links to sources openly advocating in favor or against. *In favor* wins by several hundred mentions. In this case, the editor at the time also headed an organization receiving many millions from the Gates and allied foundations. Bias may explain some of journalists' favoritism. But there seem to be structural professional issues as well. The Appendix lists some of the topics on which journalists at just two organizations presented a certain think tank president (Mr. X) as an expert source. Not expecting you to dwell on the details.

I will summarize for you: First, the topics spread all over the education domain: K-12, higher ed, school choice, finance, gifted education, tracking, scholarship programs, medications for students, testing, and on and on. Second, this think tank president has specific training or work experience in no more than a couple of these topics. So, how did he become the most frequently sourced expert across several national publications? Largely convenience. His Gates-funded think tank

ular textbook on the topic contained citations to hundreds of sources. Around 1980 and for a few decades after, the US government funded a single research center on the topic and awarded it millions in funds. The research center peppered its taxpayer-funded publications and conference presentations with hundreds—probably over a thousand—dismissive literature reviews, denying the existence of others' work on the topic. Then, in 2001, when the US government chose to design a new national testing program, politicians were told there was no research to help guide them. With that, the acknowledged quantity of a century's worth of research on educational testing declined to zero. See Figure 2. Believing there was no relevant research on testing program design or testing effects, in 2002 the federal administration and US Congress chose to adapt the oddly idiosyncratic Texas testing program of newly elected President George W. Bush.

The Common Core Standards

The billionaire Bill Gates decided to push the country to adopt national content standards after meeting with two individual partisans for one hour. He then recruited all the opinion leaders he could buy, which was just about all of those who mattered in education policy. The fed-

markets full time for media coverage. Next, I studied the resumes and LinkedIn profiles of 72 US education journalists. See Figure 4.

One overarching trend dominates the results: a migration en masse from traditional independent news outlets to education-only publications heavily subsidized by the Gates and allied foundations. 10 out of the total 72 journalists now work at a particular online education newspaper — The 74 — that is heavily subsidized by Common Core promoters. It writes stories based in pro Common Core beliefs and propaganda. It chooses stories based on Common Core proponents' concerns. It is 'pack funded' — one or two leading foundations go one way and then dozens of others follow. Other journalists now work for Gates-funded think tanks and advocacy groups.

Here is one of the most famous quotes about information dissemination, attributed apparently falsely, to Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels: "If you repeat a lie often enough, people will believe it, and you will even come to believe it yourself." Regardless of who coined the phrase, psychologists' experiments have affirmed the quotation's validity. Some will resist misinformation when they hear it 70% of the time, fewer will resist when they hear it 80% of the time, even fewer will resist when they hear it 90% of the time, and very few will resist misinformation when they hear it 99% of the time and from 99% of the people they know.

Conclusion

Judge scholars by their net contribution to society's collective working memory. We should honor and reward scholars based on their net contributions. Many scholars march to the top of their profession along a scorched earth path. They may, indeed, contribute new, useful knowledge. But they do so at the expense of ignoring, misrepresenting, and suppressing the work of other scholars. Their subtractions from society's working memory should be considered along with their additions. A scholar can only add knowledge one study at a time. With each study, however, a scholar can ignore, misrepresent, or suppress entire research literatures. When the federal government and private foundations give gobs of money to certain research groups they help disseminate certain perspectives. But, in many cases they also help to suppress other information, evidence, and opinions. Society is better served by considering all the information and evidence, not just the portion the rich and powerful prefer.

Citation

Brainiacs Journal 2025 Volume 6 Issue 3 Edoc P8E114K32.

Title: "Citation Cartels, Dismissive Literature Reviews, and Big Money Dominate US Education Policy".

Authors: Richard P. Phelps.

Dates: created 2025-05-01, presented 2025-10-09, updated 2025-12-28, published 2025-12-29, revised 2026-04-05

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Contact: richard@nonpartisaneducation.org

NPDS: [LINKS/Brainiacs/Phelps2025CCDLRBMD](#)

DOI: [10.48085/P8E114K32](#)

Affiliations

Nonpartisan Education Review, ISSN 2150-6477, Iowa, USA.

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Appendix

141 Topics on which Mr. X has been sourced as an expert in USA Today
 and at the Education Writers Association: Academic tracking; ADHD
 144 and stimulant medication use; Charter schools, vouchers; Civil rights de-
 bates; College student loan forgiveness; Common Core testing success
 or failure; Congressional sequestration, federal budget; COVID relief
 147 funds; Culture wars, school boards, CRT; Desegregation and education
 reform; DeVos troubles; Gifted education; Homework; How TN and DE
 won Race to the Top funds; Linking home and classroom in Oakland;
 Local educational spending disparities; Los Angeles superintendent
 150 controversy; Media coverage of Chicago teacher strike; NAEP math
 and reading score trends; NEA and charter schools; Out-of-School fac-
 153 tors and opportunities; Parenting versus poverty issues; Pell Grant and
 Scholarship rules; Policies of NYC chancellor; Rate of change with Com-
 mon Core; Rock star superintendents; School Accountability; Schools
 156 re-opening after COVID; State grading systems; State takeovers in Mis-
 sissippi; Understanding opponents of Common Core; Urban middle
 class and diversity.