

**Why Common Core’s College Readiness Standards  
Will Weaken the K-12 and College Curriculum**

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I begin by addressing what I call a seductive argument and slippery logic. Most state standards were poor-to-mediocre, as judged by several rounds of review by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in the 1990s and 2000s. Instead of figuring out why state standards were generally so poor (after all, state departments of education weren’t *trying* to create poor standards),<sup>1</sup> a number of educational policy makers yearning to be “central planners” reasoned that one set of common standards would improve the situation. Sounds like a logical inference, doesn’t it? But, it isn’t. It takes an unwarranted leap of faith to believe that no matter who wrote them and no matter how Common Core’s English language arts (ELA) and mathematics standards turned out, they would necessarily be better than most state standards.

In fact, there was no reason to expect them to be much better, if at all, since many of the same education experts and organizations (e.g., IRA, NCTE, NCTM) that developed those poor-to-mediocre state standards in mathematics and ELA also helped the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA) with Common Core’s standards—usually from behind the scenes. On the other hand, California’s, Indiana’s, and Massachusetts’ acknowledged first-rate standards in ELA, mathematics, and science were designed by academic, not pedagogical, experts, and not one of these experts was asked to serve on Common Core’s standards-writing teams. A few may have served as reviewers, but no one knows what their advice was or whether it was listened to.

There is no documentation of the process CCSSO/NGA used either in the choice of personnel for standards-writing or in the incorporation of feedback to a succession of secret drafts since the procedures a state department of education would have to follow didn’t apply to those two NGOs. But, since most CCSSO officials were at one time state education officials, it was quite natural for them to draw on the so-called expertise of those they had used in developing state standards in the 1990s and 2000s. It would never have occurred to most of them to look to academic experts (e.g., mathematicians, literary scholars) for guidance on the content of mathematics or English; it was unlikely they knew them or had been exposed to them in their professional training.

Despite the strong possibility that Common Core’s standards were unlikely to turn out to be very different from the mediocre state standards they were to replace, *mirabile dictu*, they were judged very highly by all the organizations funded by the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation to review them and to compare them with those in Massachusetts. Achieve, Inc., heavily supported by Gates funds, found them, overall, better than any set of state ELA and mathematics standards. WestEd, using Gates funds passed through the James B. Hunt Institute in North Carolina to the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, found little difference overall between Common Core’s standards and the Bay State’s own state standards. The Fordham Institute, also generously subsidized by Gates, found Common Core’s mathematics and ELA standards superior to most states’ standards using an evaluation form that was quite different from the forms used in its previous reviews of state mathematics and ELA standards.<sup>2</sup> However, there is a major disconnect here in all the evaluations of Common Core’s standards conducted by organizations receiving Gates funds.

Common Core's unique claim was that all students are college-ready when they can pass tests based on what it calls "college-readiness" standards in mathematics and ELA. How its college-readiness standards differ from the high school standards currently used for state tests to determine competency for a high school diploma was never explained or examined. Not one of the organizations evaluating Common Core's standards positively, including a recent, equivocal study by Andrew Porter et al, published in an American Educational Research Association (AERA) journal (that attempted to compare Common Core's standards to those in several other countries as well as in Massachusetts) asked the central question: Do Common Core's college readiness standards prepare students for authentic college-level work? That was the only claim that made Common Core's so-called college readiness standards different from all other states' K-12 standards, since all state tests based on their high school standards sought to determine student competency for a high school diploma, not for post-secondary education. Common Core's claim to having so-called college-readiness standards has been given a free pass by every educational research or policy-making organization in the country, except for the co-sponsors of this event.

And so the question that must be explored as soon as possible by independently funded academic experts, here and abroad, is to what extent Common Core's standards differ from what many states already had, despite the rave reviews given by the organizations funded by Gates. This is a more urgent question than one may imagine because teachers and administrators across the country have been telling a former Ohio Superintendent of Instruction now serving as a national consultant to the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) that they see little or no difference between the mediocre standards they had and those they are now told they must turn all of K-12 upside down for, with no possibility for local adjustment or revision.<sup>3</sup>

Worse yet, in a few years, they will be no exit possible for states that change their mind about the worth and usefulness of these particular standards and all the related material and programs that lock these standards in. That is why I suggest the following two points as the central problems with Common Core's standards.

#### **I. MEDIOCRE NATIONAL STANDARDS ARE WORSE THAN 46 SETS OF MEDIOCRE STATE STANDARDS**

The first problem in having mediocre national standards is that all the other components of public education are getting aligned to them—tests, professional development, textbooks, and other curriculum materials. The entire public school system is today being glued together by mediocre standards, and ESEA funds (depending on the language in its re-authorization) may flow only to professional development providers, textbook publishers, and curriculum developers who proclaim alignment to Common Core's standards. On the other hand, before Common Core's standards were released, even if most states had mediocre standards (each set mediocre in its own way), a few states were nationally recognized as having first-rate standards, thus enabling a few dissident publishers to cater to something other than mediocrity, especially in California, a textbook-adoption state with millions of schoolchildren.

#### **II. COMMON CORE'S SECONDARY COLLEGE READINESS STANDARDS WERE NOT DESIGNED TO PREPARE STUDENTS FOR AUTHENTIC COLLEGE-LEVEL WORK**

The second, more important problem in having Common Core's standards as our national standards is that they were not designed to prepare any student for authentic college-level work. Neither Common Core's grade-level standards for 6-12 nor its "college readiness" standards make allowance for fast learners or high achievers in the secondary grades. No alternative high school course sequences are presented, no acceleration for fast learners or class groupings based

on achievement are encouraged, even though in mathematics and reading the differences in achievement among students increasingly widen through the grades. Common Core seemingly wants all higher-achieving students to be taught to the grade level standards their slower learning peers are taught to, like minimal competencies. Despite the rhetoric, Common Core’s “college readiness” standards on which tests to determine college readiness will be based at best may prepare students for exactly what the states have always tried to prepare students for—and for what their previous state standards by law aimed—a high school diploma. This is as true for ELA as for mathematics.

Here are examples of evidence for the above assertions. In a paper I am giving to administrators in Arkansas on August 2, I show how one can backmap from Common Core’s grades 11/12 ELA standards a curriculum sequence for both imaginative and informational texts from grades 6 on that is completely recognizable as a traditional high school English curriculum.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, as a member of Common Core’s mathematics standards-writing committee told the Massachusetts Board of Education in March 2010, Common Core’s college-readiness standards in mathematics prepare students for admission to non-selective community colleges (i.e., the tests based on them will function like a high school diploma). This was confirmed by the new director of one of the two testing consortia funded by the U.S. Department of Education to develop tests based on Common Core’s standards, in a talk to a Boston audience in October 2010; Common Core’s college-readiness standards, he indicated, prepare students for College Algebra. In other words, Common Core’s college-readiness standards in mathematics prepare students for a credit-bearing course at the college level that college mathematicians see as similar to Algebra II. Why are students to be prepared for a course they could and should take while in high school?

### **Concluding Remarks**

Evaluations of Common Core’s standards were done by organizations heavily funded by the Gates Foundation, which funded the development and promotion of the Common Core project and helped to select members of its standards-writing committees. Most of the members of its college-readiness standards development committee were in fact connected to assessment organizations or to Marc Tucker’s National Center for Education and the Economy (also heavily subsidized by Gates). Not one of the evaluation reports raised eyebrows about the lack of credentials of the standards writers (e.g., Phil Daro, a member of the three-person committee writing mathematics standards, was an English major, and of the other two mathematics team members, only one had any experience writing K-12 mathematics standards and it was minimal and not impressive; the two active ELA team members were not English majors and had no experience teaching English).

Many of Common Core’s standards may be better than many poor-to-mediocre state standards; a grade of C is better than a grade of F, to be sure. But what our public schools needed and still need is a set of first-class standards that are internationally benchmarked and research-based—that strengthen the high school curriculum instead of weakening it, if we are to have national standards at all. Common Core’s high school standards are about lowering ceilings, not raising floors. And, in fact, the first major achievement of the national standards movement was the elimination—on political grounds—of the first-class ELA and mathematics standards that once existed in CA, MA, and IN. It remains to be seen whether Achieve’s “national science standards” will lead to the demise of CA’s first-class science standards—a constant thorn in the sides of science pedagogues.

There needs to be more public attention to the quality of Common Core’s ELA (and mathematics) standards. There also needs to be public attention to the methodology of the reports of several national organizations all claiming to show that Common Core’s ELA standards were far better

than most of the state standards in this country, reports used to sway the votes of clueless state boards of education who typically do not read standards documents and cannot evaluate their quality. As of now, we have a set of “national” ELA standards that seriously misinforms teachers about what an English curriculum is or should be in this country. It is not an incoherent sequence of literary and non-literary readings idiosyncratically selected by a large group of unknown “experts” advising the two testing consortia funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Even if the selections are expected to increase in complexity through the grades and students are expected to do close, or analytical, reading of them, Common Core’s college- and career-readiness ELA standards do not guide development of coherent curricula that build literary and civic knowledge systematically from grade to grade, as well as student understanding of the subtleties of the English language. Common Core’s standards do not warrant the status of national standards, and the reasons for their limitations suggest that the whole idea of national standards should be junked. There are other initiatives that would strengthen our ailing public school system and for which we can easily find research and international support.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Ralph Raimi’s chapter “Judging State Standards for K-12 Mathematics Education,” in S. Stotsky, ed., *What’s at Stake in the K-12 Standards Wars*, Peter Lang, 2000; Raimi documents the negative influence of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics 1989 standards on state mathematics standards in the 1980s and 1990s. See also the review of state mathematics standards in D. Klein et al, *The State of State Math Standards*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2005 (pp.23-25). This review discusses the negative influence of both NCTM’s 1989 and 2000 standards on state mathematics standards.

<sup>2</sup> For details on the inconsistencies between Fordham’s comments on Common Core’s standards and its review of Massachusetts’ standards, see <http://jaypgreene.com/2010/07/29/stotsky-on-the-common-core-vote-in-ma/>

<sup>3</sup> See Catherine Gewertz’s blog on June 29 in *Education Week* titled “Educators Don’t Understand Common Standards, Boards Told.” [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2011/06/educators\\_dont\\_understand\\_comm.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2011/06/educators_dont_understand_comm.html)

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Stotsky, “How to Implement Common Core’s Literacy Standards To Enhance Civic Literacy in Arkansas,” paper to be presented at the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators, Little Rock, Arkansas, August 2, 2011. This paper incorporates material from a paper I gave at the March 2011 Annual Meeting of the Arkansas Political Science Association and from Chapter Eight in “Toward 21<sup>st</sup> Century Secondary Literature Programs,” by Sandra Stotsky, to be published by Rowman Littlefield in 2012.