

Rebuttal to the GaDOE remarks regarding the July 13, 2013 report, *Comparison of the Common Core and 2008 Georgia English Language Arts Standards*

Sandra Stotsky
August 15, 2013

It is understandable that the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) was embarrassed by the finding in my July 13, 2013 report that its staff recommended a transition to Common Core's standards without completing a two-directional "crosswalk" between Georgia's 2008 English language arts (ELA) standards and Common Core's. In failing to do a two-directional crosswalk, it missed the opportunity to point out the superior quality of Georgia's 2008 standards. But, it is surprising that the GaDOE chose, in its response to my report, to question my credentials for writing such a report. I am considered the leading expert on English language arts standards,¹ and there is no one else with national stature or published analyses that the GaDOE was able to point to. Thus, the bulk of my references were to my own extensive writings, which have never been criticized in any published peer-reviewed professional source that I am aware of.

The major methodological criticism of my report by the GaDOE was the claim that the evaluation instrument I used was biased. Since evaluation instruments almost always reflect subjective judgments about what is worth evaluating, education researchers have in recent decades relied upon triangulation of independent sources of evaluation (or correlations with other measures) as a means of validating the results of any one evaluation instrument. Triangulation of the results of independent sources of information as support (or disconfirmation) of an evaluation's results is a common procedure in qualitative research.

That is why I brought in the two sets of comments made by other evaluators using their own evaluation instruments as confirmation of the results of my own ratings. The purpose in my referring to the comments in the Fordham Institute's 2010 review of Georgia's and Common Core's ELA standards was to show that the evaluation instrument I used produced similar results to two independent sources. Fordham's evaluative comments on Georgia's 2008 ELA standards made clear that these standards were superior to Common Core's. Fordham's evaluative comments on Common Core's ELA standards made clear that these standards were grossly inferior to Georgia's previous standards—and to many other sets of state standards in ELA. The fact that Fordham gave Georgia's and Common Core's standards the same grade of B+ should have aroused some skepticism about the validity of Fordham's grading system. It makes little sense. The comments, however, stand or fall on the examples chosen to support them and on what one can see with one's own eyes in the documents themselves.

I will address the other criticisms or comments by the GaDOE in the approximate order in which they are made. In many cases, the GaDOE criticizes me for saying something I did not say or addresses my criticism with irrelevant remarks. In other cases, the GaDOE simply did not read fully what I had written.

1. The GaDOE claims that "**there is no direction [in Common Core] as to use of these skills [decoding skills] in context or independent of context**" as a criticism of my rating. However, in my evaluative comments, I specifically noted:

¹ <http://dianeravitch.net/2012/12/11/sandra-stotsky-the-leading-critic-of-common-core/>

Only in grades 4 and 5 are students expected to read accurately unfamiliar words “in context and out of context.” The placement of this standard at only grades 4 and 5 badly misinforms teachers in the primary grades.

The GaDOE may not have read my entire comment. I purposely gave this example to support my rating.

2. The GaDOE claims that my criticism of Common Core’s ELA standards on the question of decline in literary study is based on one Reading Anchor Standard, and that I claim that literary study is abandoned by Common Core. Again, the GaDOE may not have read my comment on this issue, which is as follows:

Nonfiction or informational reading has been weighted more than imaginative literature in ELA at all grade levels—with ten standards for the former and nine for the latter at each grade level. This proportion augurs a drastic decline in literary study in grades 6-12.

It is quite clear here that my comment is on a decline in literary study (not abandonment) and that it is based on the division of reading instruction in Common Core into about 50% of the reading standards for informational reading and about 50% for literary study. There is no mention of the Anchor standards at all. It is common sense that restricting literary study to about 50% of reading instructional time in an English class represents a huge decline in literary study, at the high school level, in particular.

3. The GaDOE staff criticizes me for things I did not say. I said there are no criteria for selecting informational or literary texts, nor a recommended list. Their comments on the fact that specific texts are to be chosen at the school level are irrelevant. I did not criticize Common Core for failing to spell out specific texts to teach. Criteria for selecting texts is not the same as specifying the texts to use. In the 2001 Massachusetts ELA standards, criteria are offered for selecting texts. No specific texts are mentioned.

Nor are lists of texts showing increasing levels of text complexity the same thing as criteria for selecting texts. Worse yet, the GaDOE seems to think: “**To then create specific cultural and historical requirements would be imposing on local control regarding a sensitive and cultural based decision.**” This is precisely what good ELA standards do, and what English professors like Mark Bauerlein at Emory University have criticized Common Core for failing to do.² Common Core’s ELA standards are for American high schools, and that is why its few content-rich standards (one on American literature, two others on our seminal political documents) are real academic standards. And why Georgia’s previous standards mentioned American, British, and Georgia literature. No one accused the old set of standards of imposing on local control. They were in fact adopted by the Georgia Board of Education in 2008.

4. The GaDOE staff claims that I say that Common Core does not promote American literature. The fact is that I rated down Common Core on the grounds that it does not address American literature adequately, and I explained my rating clearly, as follows:

² Mark Bauerlein and Sandra Stotsky. How Common Core's ELA Standards Place College Readiness at Risk. Pioneer Institute White Paper No. 89, September 2012.
<http://pioneerinstitute.org/download/how-common-cores-ela-standards-place-college-readiness-at-risk/>

They do so only in two standards in grades 11/12. It is not mentioned in earlier grades where it would be appropriate (e.g., for American folktales or tall tales), and there is no mention of authors who were born in or wrote about the state or region.

Moreover, whether or not the Georgia Board of Education mandates the study of American literature is irrelevant to an evaluation of what is in the Common Core. And I clearly note that Common Core does so in two standards in grades 11/12—no more than that.

5. The GaDOE claims that I don't provide research or scholarship to criticize Common Core's organization of the reading standards. This is putting the cart before the horse. My criticism is that Common Core doesn't provide research or scholarship to justify its 50/50 division of reading instruction or its organization of the reading standards. The burden is on Common Core, and that is indeed why the Validation Committee was asked to ensure that Common Core provided the research base and the international benchmarking to justify its standards. It was not up to the Validation Committee to provide the research base for Common Core's standards writers, who chose to reduce literary study to 50% of the reading curriculum from K-12.

6. The GaDOE claims that Appendix A provides all the research evidence Common Core needs: "Appendix A cites 32 different research studies, publications, and papers supporting the structure and content of the reading standards." I suggest that the GaDOE try to locate one research study in that list that supports a 50/50 division of reading instruction in the English class (between informational and literary texts). Boards, commissioners, and departments of education may be impressed by this long list of citations, but there is no research to support Common Core's division of reading instruction, as I pointed out.

7. The GaDOE has an unclear comment on my rating of Common Core's handling of reading standards for informational texts. The GaDOE doesn't seem to understand why knowing the differences between modes of organization and structural elements matters. The source of the problem is that these matters have not been taught clearly or well in education schools. It is vitally important for elementary teachers to understand the characteristics of informational texts, and to teach them in an order that makes sense pedagogically.

Below is what I said. I criticize Common Core and praise what was in the 2008 Georgia standards, even though informational reading standards weren't set forth grade by grade as well as they could be. Common Core muddles important concepts and in fact leaves out something as important as topic sentences. Georgia's old standards were much better in this area, though not worth a 4.

CC	<p>Rating: 2 The standards clearly ask for reading to understand and use information through the grades. However, they do not clearly distinguish modes of organization (e.g., chronology) from structural (or textual) elements of an expository text (e.g., introduction, conclusion), do not progressively develop informational reading skills from grade to grade, and omit such important concepts as topic sentences for paragraph development.</p>
GA	<p>Rating: 3 All of the above areas are covered in some way, but there is no progressive development of informational reading skills in K-8. By grade 6, most skills are mentioned accurately (e.g., "ELA6R1.2.a. Applies knowledge of common textual features (e.g., paragraphs, topic sentences, concluding sentences, glossary, index). ELA6R1.2.b. Applies knowledge of common graphic features (e.g., graphic organizers, diagrams, captions, illustrations, charts, tables, graphs). ELA6R1.2.c. Applies knowledge of common organizational structures and patterns (e.g., transitions, logical order, cause and effect, classification schemes)").</p>

The effective teaching of informational reading requires much more than I can say here. I would be happy to speak to the GaDOE at another occasion (free of charge) and explain why reading instruction for informational texts has been so poor in this country and how the GaDOE might better advise Georgia elementary teachers. The standards I suggest can be seen in the revised (2010) version of the Massachusetts ELA standards.³

8. The GaDOE criticizes me for saying: “The standards do not teach use of glossaries for discipline specific terms.” Yet, its answer does not show Common Core teaching use of glossaries for discipline-specific terms.
9. The GaDOE criticizes me for saying: “Most literature standards lack examples of authors, works, literary traditions, and literary periods and only sporadically address the major genres and their characteristics.” That is also what the Fordham Institute reviewers said. The GaDOE’s answer is about local control, which is irrelevant. Showing examples of lessons, texts, and reading levels is a major feature of the old Massachusetts ELA standards, which teachers wanted and were grateful for.
10. I’m afraid the GaDOE didn’t grasp my point about the muddle in Common Core on the differences between academic arguments and persuasive writing. I criticized Common Core’s emphasis on opinion writing in the elementary grades. This was also a criticism in the Fordham institute review. The GaDOE response in fact showed that opinion-based writing is a focus in Common Core: “**Grades K-5 -Students write opinion pieces, learning how to support opinions with reasons.**” Writing opinion pieces is a far cry from writing an academic argument citing references and what is in other texts. Moreover, the GaDOE misunderstands what Gerald Graff was saying about literary analysis. Its response to my criticism actually confirms my criticism.
11. On language progressions, the GaDOE asks a very good question. At what grade levels should written language conventions be taught and how would they be explained? In Massachusetts, we asked groups of teachers at each grade level. It’s hard to imagine Common Core’s ELA standards writers consulting classroom teachers for the grammar strand for Common Core. No grade 4 teacher in Massachusetts would have approved such a standard as: “Use modal auxiliaries to convey various conditions.”
12. The GaDOE seems to think that Massachusetts adopted Common Core’s standards **“because they recognized that they were an improvement of their already strong standards.”** It is common knowledge that the state board of education adopted Common Core because the state was promised (and received) \$250,000,000 in Race to the Top money.

³ **An English Language Arts Curriculum Framework for American Public Schools by Sandra Stotsky** <http://alscw.org/news/?p=524>