

Testimony in Connecticut on HB 5078 and HB 5331

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March 12, 2014

I thank the House and Senate Education Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 5078, a bill seeking to delay implementation of Common Core's standards and the tests based on them until their effects on teaching and learning have been examined, and on HB 5331, a bill to revise guidelines for school districts' teacher evaluations. I begin with remarks on Common Core's Validation Committee, on which I served from 2009-2010. I indicate the deficiencies in Common Core's English language arts (ELA) standards and in tests developed by Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). I conclude with suggestions for changes in HB 5078 and HB 5331 based on the problems other states have encountered in attempts to extricate their schools and colleges from control by unelected officials in the US Department of Education.

In my testimony, I comment on:

- 1. the lack of relevant qualifications in the committees selected to draft and evaluate Common Core's standards;**
- 2. why Common Core's standards were not internationally benchmarked;**
- 3. how its English language arts and mathematics standards lack rigor;**
- 4. what deficiencies teachers have already found in SBAC tests; and**
- 5. how Connecticut legislators can strengthen language in HB 5078 and HB 5331 to better protect their teachers, administrators, and schoolchildren.**

Common Core's Developers, Writers, and Validation Committee

Common Core's K-12 standards, it is regularly claimed, emerged from a state-led process in which experts and educators were well represented. But it is by now well-known that three private organizations in Washington DC were in charge of the initiative—the National Governors Association (NGA), the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and Achieve, Inc.—all heavily funded by another private organization, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Nor did the people who wrote the standards represent the relevant stakeholders. Nor were they qualified by experience to draft standards in English language arts and mathematics. And the Validation Committee that was created to put the seal of approval on the drafters' work was useless if not misleading, both in its membership and in the procedures they had to follow.

Who were the standards writers and what were their qualifications? In the absence of official information to date from the three private organizations themselves, it seems likely that Achieve, Inc. and the Gates Foundation selected most of the key personnel to write the high school college-readiness standards. Most, it turned out, were on the staff of Achieve, Inc. and three other test/curriculum development companies—American College Testing (ACT), America's Choice (a for-profit project of the National Center on Education and the Economy, also known as NCEE), and the College Board (CB). The standards development group failed to include not only high school mathematics teachers but also English professors and high school English teachers. How could legitimate high school "college-readiness" standards in either subject be created without the very two groups of educators who know the most about what students should and could be learning in secondary mathematics and English classes? Because this group labored in secret, without open meetings, sunshine-law minutes of meetings, or accessible public comment, their reasons for making the decisions they did are lost to history.

The absence of relevant professional credentials in the grade-level standards-writing teams helps to explain the flaws in the two sets of standards these private organizations produced. The “lead” writers for the grade-level ELA standards, David Coleman and Susan Pimentel, have never taught reading or English in K-12 or at the college level. Neither majored as undergraduates in English; neither has a doctorate in English; neither has ever published serious work on K-12 curriculum and instruction; neither has a reputation for literary scholarship or research in education. At the time they were appointed, they were virtually unknown to English educators and higher education faculty in rhetoric, speech, composition, or literary study.

Two of the lead grade-level standards-writers in mathematics had no K-12 teaching experience but did have relevant academic credentials for the subject. Jason Zimba was a physics professor at Bennington College at the time, while William McCallum was (and remains) a mathematics professor at the University of Arizona. The only member of this three-person team with teaching experience, Phil Daro, had majored in English as an undergraduate; he was also on the staff of NCEE. None had ever developed K-12 mathematics standards before.

Who recommended these people as standards-writers and why, we still do not know. No state board or commissioner of education is on record for noting their lack of qualifications for the task they had been assigned or for showing concern about what college readiness means even though Common Core’s low level of expectations in mathematics was clear. At a meeting of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in March 2010, Zimba admitted that [Common Core’s document is] “not for STEM.” And that “the minimally college-ready student is a student who passed Algebra II.” The official video tape of the meeting provides the context for his statements.¹

In contrast, Coleman and Pimentel have never explained in public how they defined college and career readiness in ELA or how they would exemplify its practical meaning with respect to the level of reading difficulty or specific texts students would have to demonstrate they understand. While Appendix B in the Common Core ELA document offers a range of titles in grades 11/12 indicating the “quality and complexity” of texts that students should be able to read, the titles span such a wide range of reading levels that it is not clear what level constitutes college and career readiness. Titles in grades 11/12 include *Dreaming in Cuban*, a novel at a low middle school reading level, and Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*.

Who were members of the Validation Committee? The federal government could have funded an independent group of experts to evaluate the soundness, rigor, and validity of the standards it incentivized the states to adopt via Race to the Top (RttT). But it did not do so. Instead, NGA and CCSSO created their own Validation Committee (VC) in 2009 (25 members initially) to exercise this function. Some were *ex officio*, others were recommended by the governor or commissioner of education of an individual state. No more is known officially about the rationale for the individuals chosen for the VC. The VC contained no high school mathematics teachers. There was one mathematician on the VC—R. James Milgram—although there were many mathematics educators on it (people with doctorates in mathematics education, with appointments in an education school, and/or who worked chiefly in teacher education—people who usually do NOT teach mathematics courses in college). I was the only nationally recognized expert on English language arts standards by virtue of my work in Massachusetts and for Achieve, Inc.’s American Diploma Project high school exit standards for ELA and for Achieve’s backmapped ELA standards at earlier grade levels.

¹ <http://pioneerinstitute.org/news/video-common-core-lead-writer-jason-zimba/>

What was the purpose of the Validation Committee? Culmination of participation on the committee was reduced to signing a letter by the end of May 2010 asserting that the not-yet-finalized standards were, among other things:

1. Reflective of the core knowledge and skills in ELA and mathematics that students need to be college- and career-ready.
2. Appropriate in terms of their level of specificity and clarity.
3. Comparable to the expectations of other leading nations.
4. Informed by available research or evidence

Professor Milgram and I did not sign off on the standards. So far as we could determine, the Validation Committee was intended to function as a rubber stamp. Despite repeated requests, we did not get the names of any high-achieving countries whose standards were used as benchmarks for Common Core's. Nor did the standards writers offer any rationale for omitting high school mathematics standards leading to STEM careers, stressing writing over reading, reducing literary study, using an unproven approach to teaching Euclidean geometry, deferring completion of Algebra I to grade 9 or 10, encouraging opinion-based writing in the elementary grades, or using the English class for informational reading instruction. Nor did Common Core documents offer evidence that its standards meet entrance requirements for *most colleges and universities* in this country or elsewhere—or for a high school diploma in many states. Common Core's so-called college-readiness standards have yet to be validated by a group of higher education experts who *teach* undergraduate mathematics or humanities courses.

General Comments on Common Core's English Language Arts Standards

1. Most of Common Core's college-readiness and grade-level reading standards are content-free skills. Most of the statements that are presented as vocabulary, reading, and literature standards point to no particular level of reading difficulty, little cultural knowledge, and few intellectual objectives. These statements are best described as skills or strategies when they can be understood at all. They therefore cannot be described as rigorous standards. Here is one example. The Anchor Standard is: "Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text." The grades 11/12 standard "clarifying" this Anchor Standard is: "Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text." This is clearly a free-floating skill and can be applied to anything from "The Three Little Pigs" to *Moby-Dick*.

Skills training alone doesn't prepare students for college. Common Core's ELA standards (and its literacy standards for other subjects) do not specify the literary/historical knowledge that students need. The document provides no list of recommended authors or works, just examples of "quality and complexity." The standards require no British literature aside from Shakespeare. They require no authors from the ancient world or selected pieces from the Bible as literature so that students can learn about their influence on English and American literature. They do not require study of the history of the English language. Without requirements in these areas, students are unprepared for college coursework or a career (or active citizenship) in an English-speaking country.

2. Common Core's ELA standards stress writing more than reading at every grade level—to the detriment of every subject in the curriculum. There are more writing than reading standards at almost every grade level in Common Core, a serious imbalance. This is the opposite of what an academically sound reading/English curriculum should contain, as suggested by a large body of research on the development of reading and writing skills. The foundation for good writing is good reading. Students should spend far more time in and outside of school on reading than on writing to improve reading (and writing) in every subject of the curriculum.

3. Common Core’s writing standards are developmentally inappropriate at many grade levels. Adults have a much better idea of what "claims," "relevant evidence," and academic "arguments" are. Most elementary children have a limited understanding of these concepts and find it difficult to compose an argument with claims and evidence. It would be difficult for children to do so even if Common Core’s writing standards were linked to appropriate reading standards and prose models. But they are not. Worse yet, Common Core’s writing standards stress opinion-based writing in the elementary grades. This kind of writing establishes a very bad habit in very young children. There is no research evidence to support this kind of pedagogy.

4. Common Core expects English teachers to spend at least half of their reading instructional time at every grade level on informational texts—a percentage from which students cannot benefit intellectually. Common Core lists 10 reading standards for informational texts and 9 standards for literary texts at every grade level, thus reducing literary study in the English class to less than 50%. However, there is NO body of information that English teachers are responsible for teaching, unlike science teachers, for example, who are charged with teaching information about science. English teachers are trained to teach the major genres of literature (poetry, drama, fiction, and nonfiction) and the elements of rhetoric, not a large body of fragmented information on a variety of contemporary or historical topics.

5. Common Core reduces opportunities for students to develop critical thinking. Critical thinking is developed in the English class when teachers teach students how to read analytically, between the lines of complex literary works. Critical thinking is facilitated by the knowledge that students acquire in other ways and in other subjects because it cannot take place in an intellectual vacuum. Reducing literary study in the English class in order to increase informational reading not only reduces the opportunity for students to learn how to do analytical thinking but also, in effect, retards college readiness.

6. Common Core’s standards are not “fewer, clearer, and deeper.” They may appear to be fewer in number than those in many states because very different objectives or activities are often bundled incoherently into one “standard.” It is frequently the case that these bundled statements posing as standards are not easy to interpret and many are poorly written. For example, a literature standard for grades 9/10 asks students to: “determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.” This wretched sentence is a jumble of at least three different activities: determining a theme, analyzing its development, and summarizing a complete text.

Limitations of Tests by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium

The “next generation” tests being developed by the two consortia funded by the USDE require use of costly technology, and the test items in them are not under the control of the states that give them. Test items will not be released annually for public scrutiny, nor can parents, teachers, and higher education faculty in Connecticut vet them before the tests are given to their students. According to a principal and teacher union in Nashua, New Hampshire, the middle school teachers who took SBAC’s mathematics and ELA tests in December 2013 concluded that SBAC “is inappropriate for our students at this time.” The principal reported that his staff “collectively believes that the results from this test will not measure the academic achievement of our students,

but will be a test of computer skills and students' abilities to endure through a cumbersome task."²

Recommendations to Connecticut Legislators

1. Halt implementation of Common Core's standards and tests and set up a committee chaired by the academic deans of Connecticut's higher education institutions to develop a first-class set of college-readiness standards in ELA and mathematics for Connecticut students.

2. Use state assessments based on first-class standards. It would be a waste of taxpayers' money to base assessments on standards that badly need to be revised, if not abandoned.

3. Require an accelerated sequence of mathematics courses from grade 5 through grade 12 (to include a complete algebra II course, pre-calculus course, calculus course, year-long lab-based chemistry course, and year-long lab-based physics course) so that the pipeline to STEM work in college is increased. Require the state board to convene a committee of higher education teaching faculty in mathematics, science, and engineering to work with state high school mathematics and science teachers to develop the standards needed so that mathematically able students, regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender, are able to take this sequence from grade 5 on.

4. Require the state board to mandate the presence and funding of this sequence in every school district in the state.

5. Require mathematics, engineering, and science faculty in public universities to vet end-of-course tests for each year-long course in this STEM sequence.

6. Require departments of mathematics, engineering, and science in public universities to train under their auspices the teachers needed for this accelerated sequence of STEM-intended courses.

7. Restructure and reform teacher and administrator training programs in the state to ensure that graduates of the state's education schools have stronger academic credentials than they now have. All we know from high quality education research on teacher effectiveness is that effective teachers know the subject matter they teach. The academic bar needs to be raised for every prospective teacher and administrator admitted to a training program in an education school. HB 5331 seems to place accountability for student performance solely on the teachers in the schools—an unfair burden. Accountability must also be placed on the education schools in the state that trained them, and on the students themselves.

8. Change the language in HB 5078 to require an independent research organization outside of the state (e.g., Mathematica) to conduct a study on the impact of implementing Common Core's standards and SBAC on school districts in the state. It is inappropriate to ask the state's Department of Education to conduct such a study since it participated in developing Common Core's standard and SBAC

9. Change the language in HB 5078 to require the State Board of Education to consult not only with elementary and high school English and mathematics teachers, but also with organized groups of parents, local school boards, and higher education organizations for

² <http://www.nashuatelegraph.com/news/1027308-469/nashua-middle-school-principal-outlines-serious-concerns.html>

mathematicians, engineers, scientists, and literary scholars. These groups have been excluded from participation in the development and evaluation of Common Core's standards and tests. They should be asked to submit public comments on Common Core's standards and tests and indicate what improvements they recommend.

10. Add language to HB 5078 to allow parents to opt-out their children from all Common Core-aligned field tests or regular tests without penalty.

References

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