Comments on Draft #2 of Indiana’s Future English Language Arts Standards:
A Report to Governor Michael Pence

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A month ago, Indiana Governor Michael Pence signed a bill requiring that: “Before July 1, 2014, the state board shall adopt Indiana college and career readiness educational standards, voiding the previously adopted set of educational standards. The educational standards must do the following:

1. Meet national and international benchmarks for college and career readiness standards and be aligned with postsecondary educational expectations.
2. Use the highest standards in the United States.
4. Prepare Indiana students for college and career success, including the proper preparation for nationally recognized college entrance examinations such as the ACT and SAT.
5. Maintain Indiana sovereignty.
6. Provide strict safeguards to protect the confidentiality of student data.”

This report responds to a request from Governor Pence to review a draft of English language arts (ELA) standards now being developed to address this bill by a committee of Indiana educators selected by the Indiana Department of Education. Before accepting the governor’s invitation to review a draft of the standards, I indicated that I would not review a set of standards that looked like Common Core’s ELA standards. I have criticized them steadily in various public venues since 2009. I have even testified twice about their deficiencies to Indiana legislators—in January 2013 and August 2013.

The standards for grades 6-12 in the draft sent to me on March 14, 2014 for review were not significantly different from the standards for grades 6-12 in the public comment draft (draft #1) that had been posted by the Indiana Department of Education in February 2014. Those standards (draft #1) received a great deal of public criticism for being mostly Common Core’s standards. But draft #2 was not much different. According to the department’s own analysis, 93% of the standards in grades 6-12 in draft #2 were identical to or slightly edited versions of Common Core’s standards in grades 6-12. The differences between draft #1 and draft #2 lay mainly in K-5, even though K-5 in draft #2 was, according to the department’s own analysis, also heavily repetitious of Common Core’s standards.

On March 17, I wrote to Governor Pence indicating that I would not review draft #2. But I did promise to solicit suggestions for improving draft #2 from literary scholars attending a conference in Bloomington, Indiana on April 4 and 5, and from local high school English teachers who responded to an invitation to attend the conference. John Briggs, Professor of English at the University of California, Riverside and current president of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers, scheduled two workshops for this purpose at the conference, one on April 4, the other on April 5 (see the attachment for the conference program). He also sent letters of invitation, through English department chairs, to English teachers in Indiana high schools to attend the conference and the workshops.

I was eager to solicit the comments of literature professors and high school English teachers in Indiana at these workshops because very few are on the standards-drafting committee and the
review panel consisting of faculty in higher education institutions in Indiana. Members of these two committees were chosen by the Indiana Department of Education. It is not clear why so few high school English teachers and college-level literary experts in Indiana were selected to be on these two committees. According to the official list I was sent by the Indiana Department of Education, only two current high school English teachers are on the standards-drafting committee, and it is not clear if either of them teaches grade 11 or 12 or Advanced Placement courses. Nor is it clear if any literature professors are on the panel.

Clearly, it is important for Governor Pence and for Indiana citizens to hear from a larger number of literary experts and high school English teachers than were involved in the development and validation of Common Core’s own ELA standards, adopted by the Indiana Board of Education in 2010. No high school English teachers were on Common Core’s own Standards Development Work Group for ELA, and only one high school English teacher was on its Validation Committee. The relative absence of high school English teachers and literary scholars in the development, review, and validation of Common Core’s ELA standards helps to explain the many deficiencies in Common Core’s standards. Indiana had an opportunity to rectify this serious omission, but barely did so with respect to committee membership.

In my view, it was necessary to compensate for the failure of the standards-drafting committee to move far beyond the low level of academic challenge implicit in Common Core’s own standards as this committee sought to develop an Indiana-oriented set of ELA standards that could meet Governor Pence’s own criteria. The involvement of literary experts from across the country and a wider range of high school English teachers in Indiana was clearly needed and justified.

Over 25 people participated in the two workshops at the Bloomington conference. Most were teaching faculty in English departments at colleges or universities around the country. Four were high school English teachers in Indiana, most of whom taught upper-level high school English courses. Also in attendance as observers were a retired high school English teacher and a member of the Indiana Board of Education.

This report presents first the comments of the participants on major problems they saw in draft #2 and then their suggestions for a final version of ELA standards for Indiana that would meet Governor Pence’s request for “uncommonly high standards written by Hoosiers for Hoosiers.”

Comments. (Although no votes were taken, it should be noted that there was no disagreement about any comment.)

1. The cognitive load does not visibly increase from grade to grade. The progression from grade 8 to grades 9/10 and then to grades 11/12, in the standards below, was pointed out as an example of “distinctions without a difference” and of “one” standard with contradictory ideas in it. (These standards in Indiana’s draft #2 were taken verbatim from Common Core’s ELA standards.)

<table>
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<th>Analyze the development of a theme or central idea over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.</th>
<th>Analyze in detail the development of two or more themes or central ideas over the course of the text, including how they emerge and are shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.</th>
<th>Compare and contrast the development of similar themes or central ideas across two or more texts and analyze how they emerge and are shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of each text.</th>
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<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>Grades 9/10</td>
<td>Grades 11/12</td>
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2. Too few if any real progressions through the grades.
3. Excessive repetition/paraphrase of the same expectation/objective, as in the above example.
4. Jargon-laden language is excessive throughout.
5. The language of the standards suggests they are for assessment, not curriculum, purposes.

Suggestions:
1. Create separate literature standards for each of the four grades from 9 to 12.
2. Create standards at each grade for each major genre (fiction, poetry, drama, nonfiction, and traditional/classical literature).
3. Embed sample titles or authors in each standard, selected by current English teachers in Indiana, to suggest the level of reading difficulty and complexity desired.
4. Create standards that show an increasing cognitive load (greater intellectual demand) at successive grade levels.
5. Put in summative comments at grade 12 for each strand or skill: How should this strand or skill look by grade 12?
6. Provide a list of recognized Indiana-born writers (e.g., James Whitcomb Riley, Booth Tarkington, Theodore Dreiser) whose works are to be taught in the secondary grades.
7. Create a standard for the study of British literature before and after Shakespeare.
8. Create a standard requiring study of historically significant literature (i.e., literature written before the 20th century).
9. Create a standard requiring study of literature from Anglophone countries.
10. List the different kinds of informational/nonfiction texts to be taught in an English class.
11. Define text complexity clearly and succinctly, and specify approximate length of major works to be read from grade to grade.
12. Draw on Bloom’s taxonomy for verbs where possible.
13. Provide examples for each level of performance in composition at each grade level, not just examples of the strongest and weakest writing as in Common Core.

Concluding Remarks:
One participant wrote: Any “uncommonly high” standards, written by Hoosiers for Hoosiers, must be written in a manner that is clearly understandable by all Hoosiers. It should be at a 12th grade level and be clear of “eduspeak” (educational jargon) so that parents can understand what is expected of their children. Where jargon is unavoidable, the term should be marked and defined in a glossary.”

Another participant wrote: “Indiana in the 21st century will need to have students who have developed the complex, critical thinking skills that are built out of an engagement with complex literary texts that speak to the human condition. Without specific examples, and a sense of clear progression from one level of thinking and reading to another, standards will not help to assure the necessary and desired outcome. Draft #2 standards were too obviously constructed for the purpose of assessment, and assessments based on them will inadequately capture these skills.”

It is clear from the language of the bill that Governor Pence signed that any set of proposed standards must meet international benchmarks. It is also clear from the comments and suggestions of the English professors and teachers at the Bloomington conference that a set of standards similar to Common Core’s ELA standards does not meet international benchmarks for college readiness or other requirements of the bill. Any revised set of standards for Hoosiers must go well beyond what Common Core-based high school standards imply, even as a floor.
Many participants, especially those from Indiana, recommended a return to the 2006 Indiana standards as the right “floor” on which to build an even stronger set of academic standards than the 2006 standards were. The Indiana teachers noted the extent to which the literature standards in the 2006 document reflected the work of the state’s own English teachers. The suggestions of the literary scholars and English teachers at the Bloomington conference point to the kind of changes that will address both the statutory requirements outlined in the bill Governor Pence just signed and his own charge as well.

The following people have reviewed this brief report and attest to its fidelity in reflecting the comments and suggestions of those who attended the workshops at the ALSCW conference in Bloomington, Indiana on April 4 and 5, 2014.

Karen S. Davis, English Department, Center Grove High School, Greenwood, Indiana, and ACP Adjunct, Indiana University

M. J. Fitzgerald, Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing, University of Minnesota

Jerry Maguire, English Department, Center Grove High School, Greenwood, Indiana

Joshua Surface, English Department, Center Grove High School, Greenwood, Indiana

Ann Taylor, Professor of English, Salem State University, Salem, Massachusetts

Lash Keith Vance, Director of Computer-Assisted Instruction, University Writing Program, University of California, Riverside

Nancy J. Wheeler, English Department, Cathedral High School, Indiana

Attachment: Program for the 20th meeting of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers in Bloomington, Indiana, April 3 to April 6.