

**Invited Testimony for a Hearing in Michigan on
House Bill 4276
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I thank State Representative Tom McMillin for the invitation to testify in favor of House Bill 4276. House Bill 4276 requires school districts to provide students with a core academic curriculum for accreditation and prohibits the state board of education from adopting and implementing Common Core's standards or participating in the development of tests based on these non-rigorous standards. I explain why Common Core's English language arts standards will not develop "critical" thinking or college readiness, will reduce the quality of your teaching force, and cannot be changed unilaterally by Michigan educators no matter what legislators and parents are told.

My professional background: I was a senior associate commissioner in the Massachusetts Department of Education from 1999-2003 and, among other duties, was in charge of development or revision of the state's K-12 standards in all major subjects, licensing regulations for teachers and administrators, teacher licensure tests, and professional development criteria. I reviewed all states' English language arts standards for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in 1997, 2000, and 2005. I co-authored Achieve, Inc.'s American Diploma Project high school exit test standards for English in 2004. Finally, I served on Common Core's Validation Committee from 2009-2010.

I will speak briefly to the following points.

- 1. Why Common Core's non-rigorous English standards will reduce college readiness and the ability to do "critical" thinking.**
- 2. Why they lack a research base, international benchmarking, and qualified authors**
- 3. How the English class can prepare students for authentic college coursework**
- 4. Where Michigan can get ideas from for a first-class core academic curriculum**
- 5. What Michigan can do to increase student learning in all subjects**

- 1. Why Common Core's non-rigorous English language arts standards will reduce college readiness and the ability to do "critical" thinking.**

Common Core's college-readiness standards are chiefly empty skills. That is why they are not rigorous; skills training (e.g., how to use Google or find a main idea) alone cannot prepare students for college. High school students need to be taught how to understand

the content of difficult and complex literary texts in order to “read between the lines” and do analytical thinking. Unfortunately, Common Core expects English teachers to spend less than 50 percent of their reading instructional time on literary texts at every grade level. It sets forth 9 standards for literary texts and 10 reading standards for informational texts at every grade level, K-12. (An informational text conveys information about something, e.g., gravity, bicycles, World War II.)

Common Core’s 50/50 mandate decreases students’ opportunity to develop the analytical thinking once developed in just an elite group by the vocabulary, structure, style, ambiguity, point of view, figurative language, and irony in classic literary texts. It also reduces the quality of those who become English teachers. Most English teachers want to teach literature, a major reason they become English teachers.

Common Core reduces what English teachers are trained to teach: literary study and literary/historical knowledge. English teachers are not prepared as literature majors to teach informational texts. They are prepared to teach literature and literary/historical knowledge. But Common Core does not specify in its standards the literary/historical knowledge students need. It offers no criteria for selecting literary (or informational) texts for study. It provides no list of recommended authors, never mind works. It requires no British literature aside from Shakespeare.

Common Core’s middle school writing standards are an intellectual impossibility for average middle school students. Most children have a limited understanding of what “claims,” “relevant evidence,” and academic “arguments” are, and Common Core’s writing standards are not linked to appropriate reading standards and prose models to develop their understanding. Moreover, Common Core confounds the difference between an academic argument (explanatory writing) and persuasive writing.

It is not surprising that such deficient standards received a grade of B+ from the Fordham Institute and that the Fordham Institute claims Common Core’s standards are superior to those in most states. Fordham Institute received at least \$1,000,000 dollars from the Gates Foundation to promote Common Core’s standards. The top officials at the Fordham Institute changed the evaluation form (and grading scheme) it had used in earlier reviews of state ELA standards in order to claim that Common Core’s ELA standards were better than those in most states.

2. Common Core’s standards lack international benchmarking, a research base, and credible authors. Common Core’s Validation Committee, on which I served, was supposed to ensure that its standards were internationally benchmarked and supported by a body of research evidence. Even though several of us regularly asked for the names of the countries the standards were supposedly benchmarked to, we didn’t get them. Nor were we given citations for research evidence supporting the idea that an increase in instruction in informational reading in English or other classes will make students college-ready.

We did not get evidence on international benchmarking because Common Core is not about “rigor for all” but, in grades 6-12, about “rigor for none” or educational *rigor mortis*. Its high school mathematics standards do not aim to prepare a regularly increasing number of students for college freshman calculus courses. Jason Zimba, one of the mathematics standards-writers for Common Core, told the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education at a public meeting in March 2010 that college-readiness means readiness for admission to a non-selective community college.

Reading researchers acknowledge there is no research to support Common Core’s claim about the value of informational reading instruction in English or other classes for college-readiness. Not one of the organizations or individuals that developed these standards (CCSSO, NGA), promoted them (NASBE, PTA, Achieve, Inc.), or examined their validity (David Conley at the University of Oregon and William Schmidt at Michigan State University) offers evidence that Common Core’s standards meet current entrance requirements for most colleges and universities in this country or elsewhere. The Gates Foundation not only funded these scholars and organizations but also chose the chief writers of Common Core’s English language arts and mathematics standards (David Coleman and Jason Zimba). Neither has ever taught in K-12 or published anything on curriculum and instruction in K-12.

3. How the English class can prepare students for authentic college coursework. In the English class, the study of complex literature, not informational texts, leads to college readiness. Literary study was the focus of the Massachusetts 1997 and 2001 ELA standards, helping Bay State students to get to first place in grades 4 and 8 on NAEP’s reading tests in 2005 and to stay there.

Moreover, from about 1900—the beginning of uniform college entrance requirements via the college boards—until the 1950s, a challenging, literature-heavy English curriculum was understood to be precisely what pre-college students needed. The decline in readiness for college reading from the 1960s onward (acknowledged in the Common Core document) reflected in large part an increasingly incoherent, less challenging literature curriculum that was propelled by the fragmentation of the year-long English course into semester electives, the conversion of junior high schools into middle schools, and the assignment of easier, shorter, and contemporary texts—often but not always in the name of multiculturalism.

4. Where Michigan can get ideas from for a first-class core academic curriculum. The Core Knowledge Foundation spells out a coherent curriculum sequence for K-8. The Junior Great Books Foundation provides excellent discussion questions for both literary and non-literary texts. The English language arts curriculum framework available *at no charge* on my home page at the University of Arkansas provides a coherent sequence of standards and a list of suggested authors for K-12. http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2000/01/Stotsky-Optional_ELA_standards.pdf

5. Why Michigan’s own ELA Standards didn’t increase student learning enough: The fact that the Bay State’s standards have been more effective than those in other states can be attributed in large part to simultaneous changes in the academic requirements for teacher and administrator training programs, licensure tests, and professional development. *High quality in a state’s standards is not enough.* Raising the academic bar for admission to an education school and embedding the content of strong academic standards into all educator preparation programs, licensure tests, and professional development will over time lead to increases in achievement for all students in reading and mathematics, as it did in Massachusetts. Massachusetts also has an outstanding network of 26 regional career-technical high schools for grades 9-12, most with long waiting lists. Students in these schools must pass the same tests that students in other high schools do, and the opportunity to work simultaneously on occupational skills of their choice motivates them to pass state tests at a higher rate than students in other high schools do.

Final Comment

Let me repeat some basic facts first. (1) Common Core’s standards are NOT internationally benchmarked and will not make our students competitive. (2) Common Core’s standards are NOT rigorous. Would any state have adopted them if it weren’t told they were rigorous? (3) There is NO research to support Common Core’s stress on “informational” reading instruction in the English class or in any other high school subject. (4) Michigan does not need Common Core to find out how its students compare with Iowa students. It can use NAEP’s results to find out.

All state standards should be reviewed and revised if needed at least every 5 to 7 years by identified Michigan teachers, discipline-based experts in the arts and sciences, and parents. All state assessments should be reviewed by Michigan teachers and discipline-based experts in the arts and sciences before the tests are given. This can’t happen with Common Core’s standards and assessments. Michigan’s main task is simply to pay for their costs. The future costs for staying with Common Core will far outweigh the costs for leaving while leaving is still possible.